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DELTA URBAN

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■ HISTORIC POWER STATION ADDS MAJESTY TO NIAGARA'S WEALTH OF TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

POWERING ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Marc Mitanis

The formerly dormant Canadian Niagara Power Generating Station has come back to life following a significant preservation and restoration project that has repositioned the historic hydroelectric power plant as a major tourist attraction. The century-old facility is expected to serve as a new economic driver to support the recovery of the Niagara Falls tourism sector, which has been hard-hit by pandemic-related restrictions.

The 1905-built Canadian Niagara Power Generating Station reopened its doors as the Niagara Parks Power Station on July 30, 15 years after its decommissioning in 2006. The facility is the only fully intact decommissioned hydroelectric plant of its period remaining in the world. The adaptive reuse of the stone-clad building perched on the west side of the Niagara River just steps from the Horseshoe Falls encompasses over 75 unique

reconditioning projects that were awarded to nearly 50 companies—including Rankin Construction, Newman Bros. Limited, Merit Contractors Niagara, and Brook Restoration—employing over 400 people. Attraction design company FORREC and cultural planning consultants Lord Cultural Resources worked closely with property owner Niagara Parks Commission (Niagara Parks) on developing a conceptual master design plan and interpretive plan for the landmark property.

Niagara Parks owns three decommissioned hydroelectric power plants along the Niagara River. The other two—the Toronto Power Generating Station and the Ontario Power Company Generating Station—require major rehabilitation, and are each missing critical internal station infrastructure that has been carefully preserved at the Niagara Parks Power Station site.

“Hydroelectric power generation is a huge part of the history of the Niagara River, Niagara Parks, and the City of

Niagara Falls,” Niagara Parks Commission chief executive officer David Adames told *NRU*. “What’s unique about the Niagara Parks Power Station is everything was left intact, so we could actually do adaptive reuse for the public good, and we can tell that important story.”

Having worked for Niagara Parks as a teenager at the surface parking lot adjacent to the facility, Niagara Falls mayor Jim Diodati said that the plant was something people took for granted because it was so embedded into the history of the city.

“Niagara Falls is the birthplace of the harvesting of hydroelectric energy,” Diodati told *NRU*. “All of the schools will be bringing their classrooms here to get educated

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Photo showing part of the tunnel infrastructure underneath the Niagara Parks Power Station. The 600-metre-long tunnel is expected to open to the public in the summer of 2022.

SOURCE: NIAGARA PARKS COMMISSION

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and brought up to speed on the heritage and history of the facility, it's going to bring lots of tourists into the city, and it's going to bring more revenue into the coffers. It takes an old abandoned asset and turns it into something living and producing and contributing to society. I think it's a great way to resurrect something with a very rich past and give it an opportunity to present a very great future."

Gracing the front entrance of the facility are massive copper doors, through which guests enter into the main generator hall experiencing what Adames describes as a "moment of awe." Visitors are guided through a series of repurposed artifacts, interactive exhibits, and interpretive installations that demonstrate how the station—the first major power plant on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls—harnessed the immense energy of the Horseshoe Falls to generate electricity.

"We worked alongside Niagara Parks in determining what the vision for the overall project was, and we began to test those [ideas] within the facility, and look at how the facility could also evolve over time," FORREC senior creative director **James Anderson** told *NRU*. "We worked with Niagara

Parks to establish the narratives and storylines that were going to resonate with guests, so we worked on the overall narrative, as well as programming and the guest experience, and we put all of those together into a cohesive package."

A strategic conservation plan prepared by **Stantec Consulting** for Niagara Parks provided direction for the preservation of key elements

of the facility, including its surviving machinery and equipment.

Niagara Parks senior director of engineering, parking, and transportation **Marcelo Grusso** told *NRU* that the intention was to preserve as many of the original components of the facility as possible.

"In the main generator hall, we kept everything intact, so people can appreciate what one of these plants looks like [inside] and what the equipment looks like," Grusso told *NRU*. "In the forebay area, which is where the water comes in, we kept a 100-foot section

of the water, and then on either side of that feature, we have some suspended floors, and we have our washrooms and retail. That was the decision that came through the strategic conservation plan, and then, anything that was moved out of that area for safety reasons, was actually repurposed elsewhere."

Five of the extant generators in the main hall date back to the building's opening 116 years ago, and the other six were added to the station up until 1924. As part of the rehabilitation of the facility, the generators were polished and repainted their original blue colour. Planning for the adaptive reuse of the building began in 2017, and the majority of the construction work took place in 2020 and 2021.

Despite its opening last month, work on the facility is not yet finished. An immersive light and sound show created by design and production

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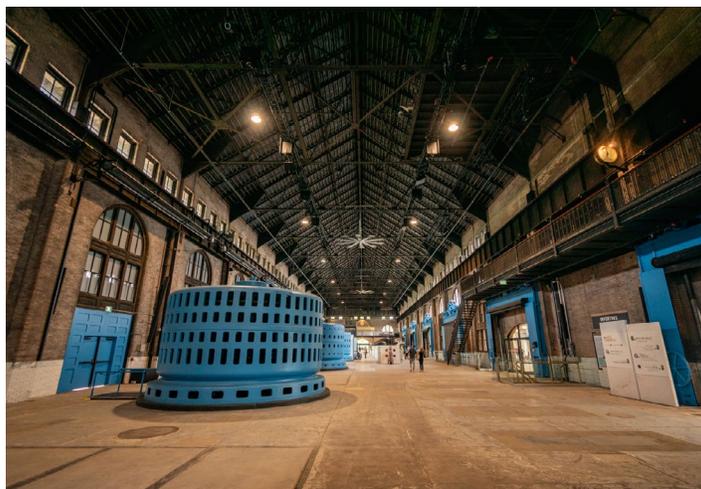


Photo of the front entrance to the Niagara Parks Power Station, which opened to the public on July 30. Built in 1905 and decommissioned in 2006, the former hydroelectric power plant underwent a major adaptive reuse reconstruction in 2020 and 2021 involving nearly 50 companies and employing over 400 people.

SOURCE: MARC MITANIS

Photo showing the interior generator hall of the Niagara Parks Power Station. The facility is the only fully intact decommissioned hydroelectric plant of its period remaining in the world. The original equipment in the generator hall, including the 11 blue-painted generators themselves, have been retained and carefully polished.

SOURCE: MARC MITANIS

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firm **Thinkwell** will be launched on September 3, and next summer, the second phase of the attraction will provide visitors with access to the station's expansive underground infrastructure, including a 600-metre-long tailrace tunnel which empties into the base of the Horseshoe Falls.

"Everyone calls the building the 'iceberg,' because it's immensely grand already, and almost feels like a cathedral, and then there are all of these layers that happen below," Anderson told *NRU*.

There's also an incredible layer of authenticity to the building, said Anderson, whose team took inspiration by the facility's sustainable method of producing power from flowing water.

"The history, beauty, and

sustainability of the building are all narratives that really

come together in one succinct attraction," Anderson told *NRU*.

Likening Niagara Falls to a "buffet of fun and excitement" with something for everybody to enjoy, Mayor Diodati said the Niagara Parks Power Station gives people another

reason to visit and explore the city.

"Niagara Falls is all about the attractions and we do get a lot of repeat traffic." Diodati told *NRU*. "There's a greater appreciation for the Falls when you realize all the great things

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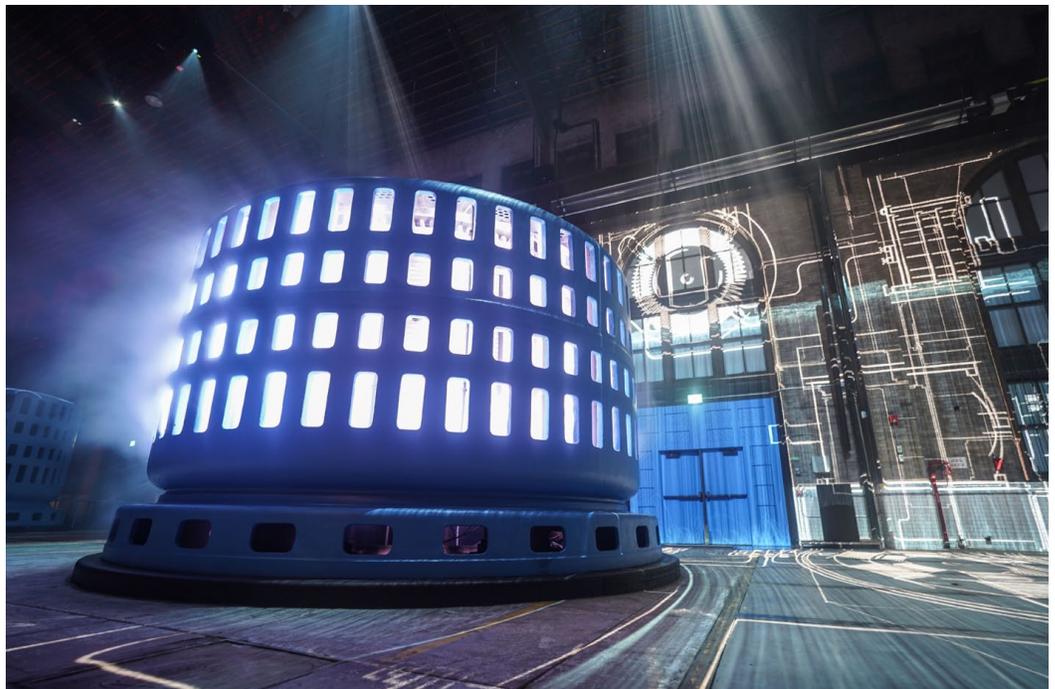


Photo showing the generator hall inside the Niagara Parks Power Station. The conversion of the property from an abandoned power generating station to a tourist attraction was made possible through a \$25 million investment from the Ontario government.

SOURCE: MARC MITANIS

Photo showcasing the testing of an upcoming immersive night show called 'Currents: Niagara's Power Transformed'. The show, created by design and production firm Thinkwell, will debut in September.

SOURCE: NIAGARA PARKS COMMISSION

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it gives us: tourism, beauty, hydroelectric energy, natural resources in terms of the fish and the game in the area. Having this great attraction is going to do so much to continue that buffet.”

Adames said the Niagara Parks Power Station serves as a “demand-generator” that will bring new incremental tourism to the region, which is desperately needed as compounding pandemic-related closures and restrictions have weakened Niagara’s tourism industry.

“You can’t find this experience anywhere else,” Adames told *NRU*. “Adding the immersive sound and light show for the evening will

extend guests’ stays and will bring the power station alive in a whole new way. And with the tunnel experience in 2022, we’re phasing and building [the facility] out and making this a year-round attraction, which is a part of our tourism mandate. Then, you lay on COVID-19, and it’s then about how we can support tourism recovery in Niagara and in Ontario.”

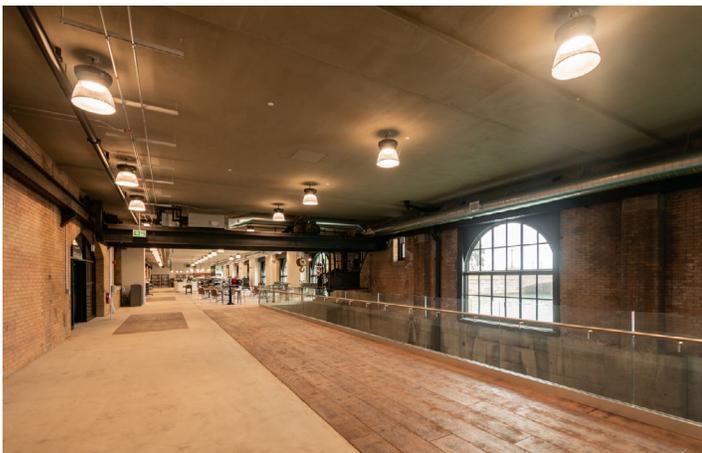
Approximately 12 million people visit Niagara Falls every year, and about 40,000 people work in the region’s tourism industry. The closure of the border of the United States combined with lockdowns and capacity restrictions have resulted in mass layoffs at many Niagara Falls attractions and tourism-dependent businesses. The summer months are typically Niagara Falls’ busiest, with eighty per cent of the city’s

annual tourism revenue being collected from July through Labour Day. That revenue helps sustain hospitality and tourism operators through the slower winter months. As public health-related restrictions ease, Diodati said it’s critical that the city promote its tourist attractions.

“When you have 40,000 people that count on tourism to feed their family, they’re expecting us to come up with ideas and attractions that are going to bring people back to the city,” Diodati told *NRU*. “Things like the Niagara Parks Power Station are great reasons for people to return to Niagara Falls and help with COVID recovery.” 🌻

Photo showing the preserved 100-foot forebay section (right) of the Niagara Parks Power Station and a gift shop area just beyond.

SOURCE: MARC MITANIS



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