

NEON Festival makes colorful debut in Norfolk arts district



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A mural is seen on West Olney Road in Norfolk during the kickoff of the NEON Festival on Thursday, Oct. 15, 2015. (Thé N. Pham | The Virginian-Pilot)

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By [Katherine Hafner](#)

The Virginian-Pilot

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A patchwork of painted triangles and arrows pepper the sidewalks of Norfolk's arts district.

Head one way and you'll smell the enticing scents from food trucks lining the sidewalk and hear the clamor from open bars. Walk through the criss-crossed alleyways and you'll run into a series of colorful wall murals. Turn your head one way, and it's the clanging sound of an artist assembling an installation. Turn it the other way, and the lights from commissioned public art pieces pierce the night.

It's easy for your senses to be overwhelmed by the NEON Festival. But that's the point.

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"It's stimulating," said artist Ali Feeney, studio assistant at the Chrysler Museum of Art Glass Studio. "I love the concept of neon."

A barrage of colors lit up the arts district Thursday night, as Norfolk residents painted the town red - and pretty much every other color.

Described as a "celebration of energy and light" and a "coming out party for the new arts district," the festival is part of the city's visual arts week and continues from 5-10 tonight.

Efforts to revive the stretch of Granby Street north of Brambleton Avenue began in earnest with a Better Block event in April 2013. A Dallas-based planning firm by that name organized a block party aimed at spurring development on the dilapidated and mostly vacant stretch. Since then, businesses have moved in, buildings have been renovated, murals have popped up, and the area is hopping.

The first day of the NEON Festival began with the unveiling of Norfolk's newest public art piece, Cementiscope. Four commissioned artists worked for more than a year to conceptualize and carry out the piece, inspired by a cement truck combined with kaleidoscopic imagery.

"All great cities have public art and we were lacking," City Councilman Barclay Winn said at Cementiscope's dedication. "Art has the power to energize a public space."

Space was energized Thursday night for hours as The Plot, a courtyard area at Granby Street and Olney Road, was transformed into a bustling hub. Kids played with hula hoops and life-size chess and checkers sets, people set up booths selling clothing, jewelry and bags, members of the Virginia Stage Company performed, and a cellist played in the courtyard, among other activities.

Cynthia "Cindy Lou" Lewis had a booth set up for her bicycling-inspired photography. She takes a group through the Tidewater Bicycle Association on a community ride every Saturday, and this week she's taking them on a tour of the murals.

"I just think it's the coolest thing on Earth," Lewis said of the new arts district. "I just love Norfolk."

Teresa Fary, an instructor at the Art Institute of Virginia Beach, walked around with a group of students from her events and fashion shows class. She said she was especially interested in engaging students in the promotional and revitalization aspects.

"I like to take them to different things because a lot of them don't get out of their niche," Fary said. "It's such a neat idea that Norfolk is revitalizing the area... I thought they should see another side with a whole different feel."

In a makeshift gallery on Granby Street, Akin Ritchi and Jessie Ciccolella observed an inert gas exhibit with art pieces made with real neon. The works were made by a collective of

around 24 artists from Alfred University in New York, Ball State University in Indiana and the Chrysler Museum.

"It's good to see them opening to more experimental, eclectic art," Ritchi said. "The arts district is a crucial part of any city."

As night fell, groups with glow sticks shuffled between the central district and a rainbow-lit Chrysler Museum. The lights came on for the public art displays.

Keshia Tarpley of Virginia Beach, 28, said she liked the mural with pink-purple flowers and fangs on Olney Road by the 7-Eleven.

Said Tarpley: "It's kind of amazing someone can take a side of a wall and do that."

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