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First building in Norfolk office campus gathering tenants, looks at spring opening

By TREVOR METCALFE

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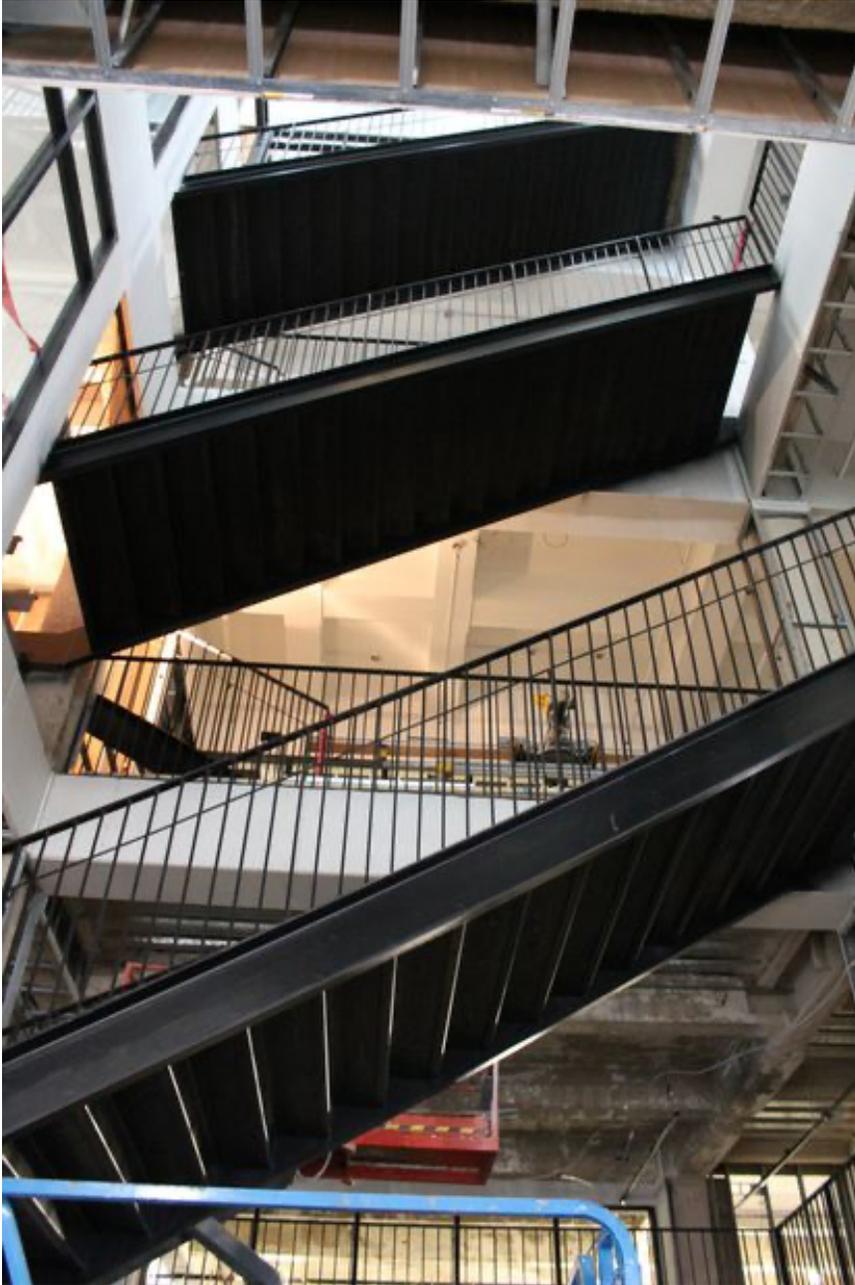
Grow CEO Drew Ungvarsky gestures while leading a tour of the Assembly office building on Granby Street on Tuesday, February 2, 2021. More than 80% of the new space has been leased. (Trevor Metcalfe / The Virginian-Pilot)

When the Assembly office building opens in just a few months in downtown Norfolk, it will be almost fully leased with Hampton Roads companies and nonprofits.

The four-story building has leased more than 80% of its office space, according to digital creative agency Grow, which has spearheaded the project. Only 5,000 square feet remains available to lease.

For Grow CEO Drew Ungvarsky, it's the culmination of one of the longtime goals of the project. When prospective employees would be scouted or interviewed by Grow, Ungvarsky said they would be impressed with the company and the region's amenities. Still, the interviewees would ask: Where are all the other startups? Ungvarsky wants Assembly to become a flagship and a haven those for innovative and creative companies.

"There's so many amazing companies doing world-class products and services out of this region, but we're geographically scattered," Ungvarsky said. "As a result, sometimes companies within the region don't know about each other."



A central stairway lit by a skylight cuts through the center of Assembly, the new office building in downtown Norfolk. (Trevor Metcalfe / The Virginian-Pilot)

On a cold, windy Tuesday in early February, dozens of construction workers scurried around inside Assembly, working on walls, flooring and other finishing touches. The building, which was once the Ames & Brownley department

store, is anchored by a central stairwell that is built in the space of the original staircase. Natural light floods through the building from a top floor skylight.

Along with the stairwell, the building will feature other nods to its past. A back stairway features part of a mural from when the building was Rice's Fashion Corner. Finally, the building's largest boardroom will feature pieces of the former department store's fur vault, including the vault door.

The four-story office building is one of three sandwiched into a block of Freemason Street between Granby Street and Monticello Avenue. During the second phase of the Assembly project, the remaining buildings will be renovated and become commercial office space after Norfolk moves its city office — which currently occupy the space — in 2023.

Assembly has scooped up several new office tenants in the past few months, including:

- Lynch Mykins, a Raleigh, North Carolina-based structural engineering firm that is one of the largest woman-owned companies of its kind in the country.
- RISE, the Norfolk nonprofit working to create economic development opportunities for startups combating the effects of climate change in Hampton Roads, including sea level rise.
- Istorica, a Norfolk digital marketing agency focused on video, photos and web design.

Other announced tenants include Grow, Work Program Architects, 757 Startup Studios, Norfolk startup Ario and the Have a Good Day branding studio (formerly Simon Studios). Ungvarsky said Assembly is also close to securing a tenant for the ground-level corner retail space.

Peppered among the offices and common areas at Assembly are the beginnings of some unique office space amenities. On the first floor, a bike storage and repair area is close to some showers, so bike commuters have a dedicated space. On another floor is a soundproofed podcast studio where any tenant can record a show or voiceovers for a project. Ungvarsky plans to move Grow’s communal library into another space at Assembly and encourage other tenants to share their books.



A birdseye view of the completed Assembly project. Grow plans to renovate the second and third buildings on the block beginning in 2023. (Work Program Architects)

All of the quirky perks have a place in Ungvarsky’s vision — he sees them as recruitment and retention tools as Grow competes with the office spaces of the West Coast and Austin, Texas, tech giants.

“You are your talent,” Ungvarsky said.

The coronavirus pandemic has had a minimal impact on the project and probably only delayed construction by a few months, Ungvarsky said. The building is scheduled to be ready for tenants in mid-April.

The Assembly project was announced in March 2019 when [Grow offered to buy and renovate the building](#) from Norfolk, which was using the space for city offices.