

# DISTINCTION



CULTURE,  
DINING & STYLE

## Downtown Norfolk

November 16, 2015 By Jennifer Fenner [3 Comments](#)

# IS DOWNTOWN NORFOLK HAVING ITS MOMENT?



**5,600 residents crosses a threshold, and the place is jumping.**

*by* ELISABETH HULETTE    *photography by* KEITH LANPHER    *illustration by* WES WATSON

Ian Watt made the desk in his apartment from distressed wood and found industrial parts. It holds an Apple monitor, to stream shows over the Internet. A bicycle is stylishly stored on a bedroom wall, and in the kitchen a diffuser spritzes the scent of cinnamon and cloves.

Watt and his wife, Anina, are 20 and 21. He works for Grow, a digital marketing company two blocks away. She wants to open a shop of local, handmade goods.

They're as millennial as millennials get, but their wide window doesn't look over Los Angeles, where they courted, or New York City, where they got engaged.

It overlooks downtown Norfolk.

The Watts live in the Wainwright, one of several beautifully renovated apartment buildings drawing the young and hip – and some empty nesters – away from neighboring Ghent and other regional hot spots. They're pouring into Norfolk's city center by the hundreds, and bringing a transformation with them.

"There's a real energy of innovation; that's a real draw," says Ian Watt, who grew up in Virginia Beach. "I love the walkable nature of our downtown, and I'm excited about the fact that it is growing and improving. That's major for me."



After years of striving for a comeback, the city's downtown may finally be having its moment. The number of people living downtown has topped 5,000, which a study years ago pegged as the critical mass needed to sustain retail and restaurants in the city's core. Figures today put the population at about 5,600.

In the past three years, more than 15 restaurants and bars have opened – or are in the process of opening – on Granby Street alone. Some are a product of turnover, and more are planned.

The main corridor now boasts an impressive array of businesses, including a vinyl record store and a 1920s-themed cocktail and piano bar. Saint Germain makes creative, high-dollar cocktails. Field Guide serves rice bowls at long communal tables, and the Barrel Room serves local craft beers.

The city has built several tiny urban parks in parking spaces scattered through the area. In the evenings, dog walkers fill the sidewalks, and on weekends, visitors bounce from taproom to shop to pub.

This level of activity is expected in hipster-laden Ghent, but not on the city streets next door.

“We’re making downtown sexy again,” says George Homewood, Norfolk’s planning director. “Some of it’s what the city’s doing, a lot of it is what the private market’s doing, but more of it is recognizing there’s a new generation.”





Downtown Norfolk in the 1950s and '60s enjoyed a thriving shopping district, notes Peggy Haile McPhillips, president of the Norfolk Historical Society. Big department stores lured women with lunchtime fashion shows, while movie theaters beckoned with some of the city's first air conditioning. Neon signs advertised bars and tattoo parlors to sailors.

But the rise of suburbs and their shopping malls drew crowds away, and city leaders have been trying to bring them back ever since. In the '70s they turned Granby Street into a pedestrian district, only to reverse that decision in the '80s. They brought in MacArthur mall, Tidewater Community College and one festival after another, but a true renaissance – with the diners, shoppers and residents to match – always remained just out of reach. Norfolk just didn't have the bustle and spirit of a thriving downtown.

What finally worked? A lot of fingers point to one person: developer Buddy Gadams, a familiar face in Norfolk and at times a controversial one. His Marathon Development

Group made a go at condos during the 2000s, but few people – especially among the younger set – were buying after the housing crisis. In 2007, a \$180 million tower he planned for the corner of Brambleton Avenue and Granby Street fell through, partly, he says, because the federal government took the land. Marathon spent years snarled in legal battles but finally emerged the victor in two major suits. Gadams turned to apartments.



In September 2013, he opened the renovated Wainwright in a 1925 railway company building. Gadams preserved historical details like the original brass elevator doors, and added new ones, like a lush rooftop lounge with a 360-degree view of the city. His management team regularly throws free cocktail parties and wine tastings there for residents, who can also borrow the lounge for private parties.

About a year later, Gadams opened Metro on Granby, then The James in the old James Madison Hotel, and then the Law Building down the street from the new Slover Library. They are all almost full.

The apartments are small but posh, with quartz countertops and designer lighting – a far cry from the standard Ghent apartment's aging appliances and layers of cream-colored paint. Rent ranges from \$800 for a studio to \$1,800 for a high-end two-bedroom, Gadams said.

Raffaele Allen with Drucker & Falk Real Estate, which manages the properties, says the apartments are just what young professionals are looking for – unique and historical, with impressive lobbies and amenities like courtyards and billiard rooms. They don't need a lot of space because, like New Yorkers, they'll spend most of their time out in downtown.



“Our friends say, ‘I’m so jealous of your apartment,’ ” says Can Liang, 22, a Navy petty officer who lives in the Law Building with his partner and a French bulldog-Boston terrier



puppy. “We fell in love with the kitchen, the high ceilings, the windows with natural light. The building sold us.”

Gadams says his 900 new apartments have brought in some 1,200 residents, about 70 percent of them between 22 and 35; the tenants are split evenly men to women. They seem to represent most of the residential influx. The 2010 Census estimated 3,930 people lived in the area, but the Downtown Norfolk Council says that number has grown to about 5,600 now.

“You can feel it on the street, the number of people walking, jogging, shopping, going to the restaurants,” says Mayor Paul Fraim. “It seems to be growing every day.”



But downtown still lacks some major amenities, most notably a grocery store. A Farm Fresh, opened in 2007 on Boush Street, closed in 2011. And while Granby Street often bustles, its side streets still feel empty.

Gadams has four more apartment buildings in the works, including opulent renovations of The Virginia (across Granby from The Law Building) and the old Navy YMCA building – the old Union Mission – preserving historical features like ironwork and murals. A new



burger and beer joint is opening in the spot that once housed Mo & O'Malley's Irish Pub, and a huge Starbucks is coming soon.

A lush hotel conference center called The Main is expected to bring glamour to the corner of Granby and Main next year, although it has drawn criticism for the city's sizable financial contribution. Homewood, the city planning director, says the city is next focusing on adding green space downtown, and making the area better for walking and biking.



Then there's the Vibrant Spaces initiative by the Downtown Norfolk Council. Drew Ungvarsky, owner of Grow, where Ian Watt works, is heading it up. The idea is to draw new businesses with \$20,000 grants and half-price rent for their first two years downtown. The winners should create vibrancy, bringing energy and new ideas.

Ungvarsky said the response was overwhelming – 85 people applied for just six grants, and 12 more applied for grants to boost existing businesses. He said he couldn't divulge

the winners, but some of the applicants picked up on things downtown needs, like a unique ice cream shop, a pet supplies store and a market.

“There’s evolution,” he says. “As you think about the next few years and months, I’m personally incredibly excited about what that’s going to look like.”



Ungvarsky graduated from Old Dominion University in 2002 and built Grow from the ground up. The company moved around to several locations, but eventually landed downtown, where Ungvarsky said he likes the culture and feel of city life.

Grow competes for talent with companies in the hottest cities across the country. What Norfolk offers, he says, is potential. It’s a small city surging forward, and anyone who comes to live, work and play can be part of that reinvention.

“Especially when you think of millennials who want to be part of something bigger, creating something, they don’t want to do that in some place that’s already done,” he



says. "There's a great audience that wants to create the culture around us. Norfolk is ripe to have that culture."

## GRANBY AREA ACTIVITY IN THE PAST THREE YEARS



### RESTAURANTS AND BARS

JACK BROWN'S BEER & BURGER JOINT  
(under construction): 131 Granby Street

HOKKAIDO SUSHI BAR (2013):  
233 Granby Street

BRICK ANCHOR BREW HOUSE  
(under construction): 241 Granby Street

TAP IT LOCAL (under construction):  
244 Granby Street

LUCE (2014): 245 Granby Street

SAINT GERMAIN (2015): 255 Granby Street

EMPIRE LITTLE BAR BISTRO (2013):  
257 Granby Street

BONCHON CHICKEN (under construction):  
273 Granby Street

YA YA ASIAN GOURMET HOUSE (2014):  
109 College Place

FM RESTAURANT (2014): 320 Granby Street

GERSHWIN'S (2014): 332 Granby Street

THE GRILLED CHEESE BISTRO (2015):  
345 Granby Street

SWEET TEAS (2015): 411 Granby Street

FIELD GUIDE (2013): 429 Granby Street

THE BARREL ROOM (2015): 437 Granby Street

LEONE'S ITALIAN CUISINE & ROOFTOP  
DINING: (under construction): 455 Granby Street

THE PARLOR ON GRANBY (2014):  
765 Granby Street

ZEKE'S BEANS & BOWLS (2015):  
800 Granby Street

### APARTMENTS

THE VIRGINIA BUILDING (under construction):  
131 Granby Street

THE LAW BUILDING (2015): 145 Granby Street

THE ROCKEFELLER NORFOLK (2015):  
130 Brooke Avenue

THE LORRAINE (formerly Tazewell Hotel; under  
construction): 245 Granby Street

THE JAMES (2014): 345 Granby Street

METRO ON GRANBY (2014): 401 Granby Street

THE WAINWRIGHT DOWNTOWN (2013):  
229 West Bute Street

### OTHER

THE SLOVER LIBRARY (2015):  
235 East Plume Street

THE MAIN (under construction):  
100 East Main Street

THE GROVE RECORD SHOP (2014):  
401 Granby Street

WORK | RELEASE (2015): 759 Granby Street

PUSH COMEDY THEATER (2014):  
763 Granby Street