

Norfolk art district goes neon

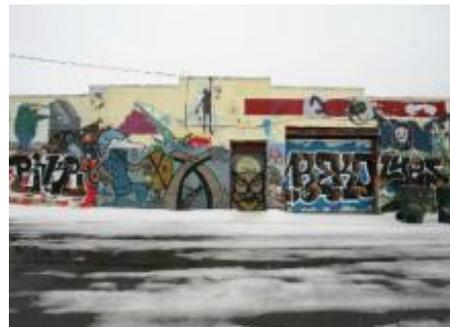
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By Derek Page
Correspondent

The Norfolk arts district is taking shape and is poised to assume a new identity.

The New Energy of Norfolk - or NEON - District branding launch coincides with the April 3 opening exhibition of Work | Release, a multipurpose art, exhibition and event space on the first floor of the former Texaco building on the corner of Granby Street and Olney Road.



The venue's first show, titled ALGLOW, will focus on the sculptural and conceptual side of neon, according to the Rutter Family Art Foundation.

"As we created criteria and parameters for choosing the name it became really clear to a few of us that 'art district' in our name was contrived and not very inclusive of other creative neighborhoods," said Charles Rasputin, creative director of Alchemy NFK, an arts cooperative at 806 Granby St. in the arts district.

"Making a point to show love to all the other amazing neighborhoods in the city that are thriving and reinventing themselves is key."

The name came to Rasputin under a neon sculpture that his friend, artist Alex Brannin, installed in the rafters of Alchemy NFK, which also acts as an incubator for artists.

"It seemed a fitting tribute to our city as a whole and a shout to the people that work hard to make Norfolk great," Rasputin said. "Everyone just knew it was right."

Jarrett Beeler of Sway Creative Labs in downtown Norfolk volunteered to help guide the discussion on branding.

"Jarrett and his team took the concept and ran with it to create the logos and treatments that we then chose from and voted on," Rasputin said. "Sway really took it up a notch and made the idea come to life."

The spirit of inclusiveness and collaboration with each other and the community is strong among the "anchors" of the NEON District, the section of Granby north of Brambleton to Virginia Beach Boulevard. Collaboration, Rasputin said, has allowed the concept of the arts district to thrive.

"The real goal of an arts district should be to show anyone that a creative neighborhood rests in the hands of its citizens," Rasputin said. "Engaging emotional investment is the true collaboration that helps patch our brain drain woes and helps make Norfolk a competitor in attracting and keeping young, talented, creative people."

Brain drain, the exodus of well-educated and highly trained young people, is a concern in Hampton

Roads.

Jesse Scaccia, editor of AltDaily, a Pilot Media Co. publication, is chair of the arts district's public art committee and a member of Norfolk's Public Art Commission. He began sharing his vision of an arts district in the summer of 2012.

"Perceptions of Norfolk are definitely evolving in positive ways," Scaccia said. "Having a thriving art scene at both the institutional and emerging levels, as we do, is an incredible economic development advantage."

Entrepreneurs are creative by nature and want to be surrounded by other creators, he said, adding that an arts district brings a quality of life to the city that appeals to large employers like Norfolk Southern and Dominion Enterprises.

"It's easier to attract and retain high-level talent when you can offer them an inspired after-work life too," Scaccia said.

The NEON District seeks redevelopment, but wants to remain affordable to retain the creative community it is intended to serve. The Rutter Family Art Foundation, founded by C. Arthur "Brother" Rutter III, a partner with the law offices of Rutter Mills, and his wife, Meredith, hopes the foundation will serve as a bulwark against a gentrification of the area.

Rutter, his wife, and his law partner Robert Mills, purchased the former Texaco building for \$850,000 on April 25 after a lengthy search for a property that could support the arts community, and also serve as a private residence that will accommodate a portion of their growing contemporary art collection.

Built in 1917, the 15,000-square-foot historic building will "stay true to the bones and historic vibe" while incorporating some modern elements, said Careyanne Weinberg, Work | Release venue director.

Work | Release will have a small kitchen and bar to cater its programs. The menu will be small and rotate to complement what's happening in the space.

"You're not going to find frozen french fries and chicken fingers. I can promise you that," she said.

The second floor will have seven 500- to 700-square-foot apartments for artists. Rates haven't been determined, but Weinberg said "they'll be priced below anything comparable for sure."

The third floor will be the Rutters' loft, a portion of which may be used for small meetings and visiting artists.

Weinberg, who is also the president of Alchemy NFK, has been working with Rutter since last summer. She said the medium-sized venue will bring local and national art exhibitions, as well as music, theater and other art forms.

"We'll make sure the programming reaches a wide audience and we invite the community to come to us with their ideas for concepts that they'd love to execute but maybe don't have the resources to do so," Weinberg said.

Work | Release will partner with local organizations for events that differ from its typical programming and it hopes to have a curatorial fellowship and artist-in-residence program by 2016.

"I guess, in a way, you can say that Work | Release will be able to accommodate the types of public programming that we hoped to bring to Alchemy from the beginning, in a more polished concept," Weinberg said.

No one is stepping on any toes, though. Weinberg said the "anchors" of the arts district have a symbiotic relationship.

"With each new addition, our audience grows, economic possibilities increase," said Cheryl White, director of Glass Wheel Studios, which is expected to open in the fall. "The partnerships between arts district businesses and organizations are designed to reach a unified goal - creating a vibrant arts district."

"We all gain from each other's successes," Scaccia said.

Glass Wheel Studios will have a first-floor gallery and retail space, with at least a dozen studios renting for \$150 a month on the second and third floors, according to White.

With Work | Release hosting the larger programs in the NEON District, Alchemy NFK will continue with the smaller events and DIY exhibitions. Alchemy also plans to open an urban clothing store in the space.

"I think spring will mark an important milestone for the district, one where the identity becomes much more concrete and tangible," Rasputin said. "The full vision isn't very far off. A ton of cool things are just on the other side of winter and a lot of key properties are in the process of being activated by folks with vision."

The Hurrah Players purchased the building directly behind Work | Release at 112-116 Wilson Ave. The Hugh R. Copeland Center, named after the theater company's founder, will be a 12,000-square-foot, one-story space used for classes and rehearsals, as well as set design and construction. A grand opening is expected this summer.

Zeke's Beans & Bowls, a Virginia Beach-based business boasting Hawaiian-style poke bowls, acai bowls, baked goods, juices and café beverages, will occupy 800 Granby St.

The Public Art Commission is sponsoring a \$60,000 public art piece in the vicinity of the NEON District, and a partnership among the Downtown Norfolk Council, Virginia Arts Festival, Chrysler Museum and AltDaily will present the Neon Dawn NFK Festival Oct. 15-16.

During the public art festival, multiple large-scale public art projects will be created, an undertaking that will "artfully add a little cohesion to the neighborhood," according to Scaccia.

He said the festival will aim to catalyze one of the original visions of the arts district: to "unify the fabric" of the city between downtown and Ghent, so that people will walk and bike from the Town Point Virginia Wine Festival, for instance, through the NEON District and then to the Stockley Gardens Arts Festival.

"Maybe the coolest part of all this is watching the collaboration, which is really sort of unparalleled from what I've seen," Scaccia said.

"That's a lot of groups that have come together behind a shared vision. It's a great example of how all these creative people being in and caring about the same space can help transform a neighborhood."

