

The Virginian-Pilot

# Walking tours offer look at Norfolk's history, art and culture

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Walkers on the free tour of Norfolk's NEON District on June 25 survey a mural by Esteban del Valle. David Macaulay/freelance

On a recent June evening, tour guide Joshua Weinstein stood in front of Solomon Isekeije's iconic mural on Moseley Lane, describing its distinctive hues to a tour group.

"It's a color palette unlike any other in the district," he said, explaining how the oranges, greens and blues represent the "geography of the African continent" and its way of life.

The free tour of Norfolk's NEON District on June 25 was organized by the Norfolk Tour Company in partnership with the Downtown Norfolk Council. It was one of a series of city tours that are being offered through Dec. 11.

Weinstein started Norfolk Tour Company in 2018 because he always loved "playing tour guide."

During the tour, he explained the first works of public art appeared in the area north of West Brambleton Avenue and east and west of Granby Street in 2014. Since then, artists have installed 110 murals and other works of art. The tour took in about a dozen of them.

Weinstein told the tour group the NEON District is always changing. "Public art, in general, is meant to be temporary, especially paintings," he said. "Public murals are meant to melt away eventually."

Norfolk's NEON District was less colorful a decade ago before the muralists and other artists moved in.

Weinstein said many of the older people who attend the tours had never walked through the NEON District before.

"In their prime, this area was pretty dilapidated," he said.

"Many of us remember this area before it was the NEON District, and it wasn't the place you came to on a Friday evening," said Edrie Pfeiffer, a bankruptcy lawyer from Virginia Beach who was one of about 25 people on the tour.

Linda Irving said the area was nondescript when she lived in Norfolk from 1970 to 2010. "It's quite different. There was no public art here then," said Irving, who returned to the city two months ago.

Weinstein said the district was a hub of the automobile industry in the 1970s but fell into decay when the repair shops moved out.

“Now it has come back with most of the rest of the town,” he said. It became an arts district in 2013.

Another iconic mural on the itinerary was “We Can Create What We Can Imagine,” the work of famous New York street painter Esteban del Valle. It features LED lights and includes Norfolk themes such as the NorVa and the Norfolk Yacht Club.

Weinstein lists Isekeije’s “Symbiotic Nuances” and “Ancient Freedom” by Cedric Douglas as his favorite murals.

Douglas is a Boston-based artist. Many of his works, including the mural in Norfolk, depict the future of race relations. Isekeije is the director of fine arts at Norfolk State University.

Norfolk Tour Company’s series of 21 walking tours includes houses of worship in Norfolk, historic houses, the Granby Street corridor, and the Elizabeth River Waterfront.

“All of our tours tie into the three big strengths that I think the city of Norfolk and Hampton Roads have; that is our food, our history and our art,”

Weinstein said.

The tour company hosts other tours around Norfolk, taking in the historic Freemason District, the Elizabeth River Trail and food itineraries. Weinstein also recently set up a partnership with the city of Suffolk to run tours in historic areas such as Cedar Hill Cemetery and the historic downtown.

The tour schedule is as follows:

**NEON District walking tours**

July 23, 6:30 p.m.

Aug. 27, 6:30 p.m.

Sept. 17, 6 p.m.

Oct. 21: Two tours during the NEON Festival (time TBD)

Oct. 22: Two tours during the NEON Festival (time TBD)

Nov. 13, 2:30 p.m.

Dec. 11, 2:30 p.m.

**Downtown Norfolk walking tours**

Historic theaters: **Sept. 24, 6 p.m.**

Elizabeth River waterfront: **Oct. 1, 5:30 p.m.**

Urban design: **Nov. 6, 2:30 p.m.**

Houses of worship: **Nov. 20, 6 p.m.**

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