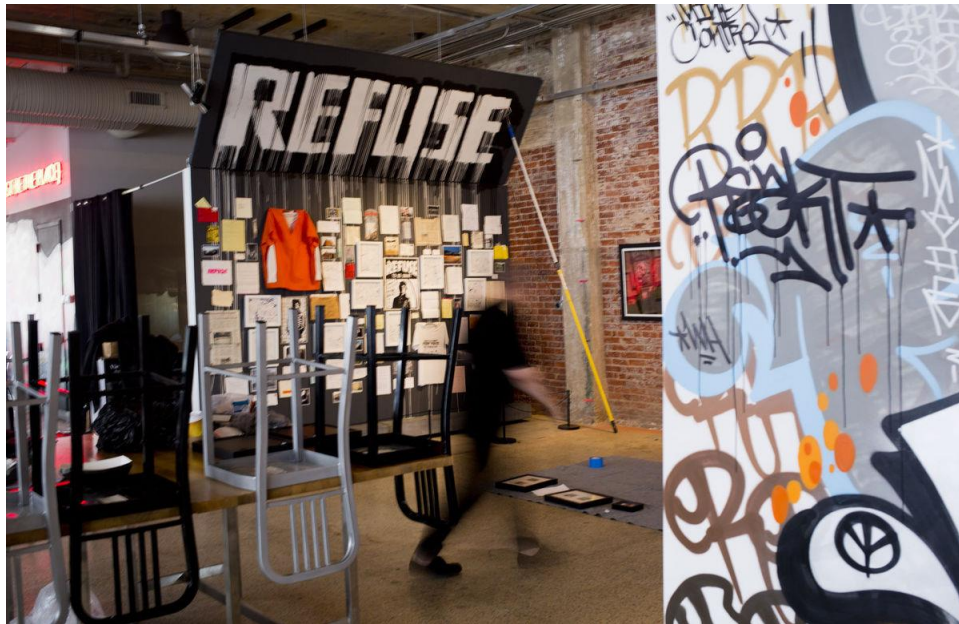


# Rehabbed old Norfolk building now a thriving arts district hot spot

- Rashod Ollison  
The Virginian-Pilot
- Jan 15, 2016



- Brianna Soukup | The Virginian-Pilot

Charles Rasputin, curator of graffiti art exhibit "Nobody Writes Letters Anymore," puts the show together hours before opening night at Work | Release in downtown Norfolk June 5, 2015.



- Mort Fryman | The Virginian-Pilot

The vacant three-story Texaco building at the corner of Granby and Olney streets before it was auctioned off June 23, 2005.



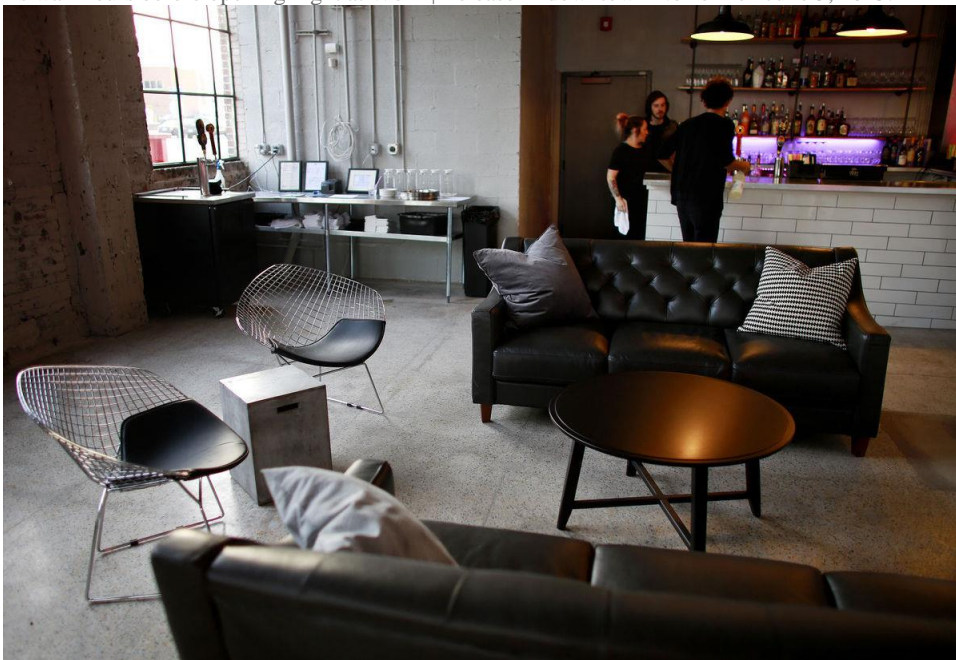
- Stephen M. Katz | The Virginian-Pilot

Work by artist George Vidas is among the pieces featured in AGLOW, the inaugural exhibition opening April 3 at the new Work | Release in the historic Texaco building in downtown Norfolk.



- Brianna Soukup | The Virginian-Pilot

Mickael Broth, also known as Refuse, an artist in the group graffiti exhibit "Nobody Writes Letters Anymore," puts the finishing touches on his wall hours before opening night at Work | Release in downtown Norfolk on June 5, 2015.



- Stephen M. Katz | The Virginian-Pilot

Staff prepare Thursday, April 2, 2015 for the opening of AGLOW, the inaugural exhibition opening April 3 at the new Work | Release in the historic Texaco building.





- Brianna Soukup | Virginian-Pilot

"Nobody Writes Letters Anymore," a graffiti art exhibit at Work | Release in downtown Norfolk on June 5, 2015.



- Brianna Soukup | Virginian-Pilot

Charles Rasputin, curator of graffiti art exhibit "Nobody Writes Letters Anymore," hours before opening night at Work | Release in downtown Norfolk on June 5, 2015.



- Stephen M. Katz | The Virginian-Pilot

Work by artists Hiromi Takizawa, front, and Clay McGlamory, back, are among the pieces featured in AGLOW, the inaugural exhibition opening April 3, 2015 at the new Work | Release in the historic Texaco building in downtown Norfolk.

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As his vision coalesced in the midst of flying dust and the roar of power drills, Brother Rutter's enthusiasm was irrepressible.

Last spring, the successful attorney and part of the Rutter Mills law firm strolled around the old 15,000-square-foot Texaco building in downtown Norfolk surveying what would become Work | Release.

Eight months later, Rutter springs from his seat in his well-appointed office as he talks about the multipurpose art venue that has become one of the hottest spots in the NEON arts district.

“At eight months, we’re where I expected it to be in three years,” Rutter says.

As city plans for the art district were germinating, Rutter bought the building with wife Meredith and law partner Robert Mills for \$850,000. Almost twice that much was spent to restore it. The concept behind Work | Release, to provide a sleek space for exhibitions and other arts-related events, was a solid one.

But as the art district tried to find an identity, who would come?

“The concern is that the cultural dividend that people enjoy from some of the major arts institutions is not necessarily widely shared,” Rutter says. “Hopefully, through Work | Release, that cultural dividend gets shared throughout the population that may not get exposed to art that often.”

Millennials, those between the ages of 18 and 34, are the coveted target audience. Work | Release has become an outlet for other arts organizations to gauge the community. Its space – exposed brick and movable white walls – has been used for events by the Chrysler Museum of Art. The “Fringe Festival,” a partnership with the Virginia Arts Festival in April, will bring four days of shows in and around Work | Release.

Both arts institutions generally draw a much older crowd. Even though one of the main goals of Work | Release is to encourage a multigenerational experience on the Hampton Roads arts scene, most of the events at Work | Release have skewed to the millennial



crowd, the segment generally left out of the “cultural dividend” in Hampton Roads’ established arts community.

“Nobody Writes Letters Anymore,” a graffiti exhibition that linked local street artists with early hip-hop, was among the first events at Work | Release after it opened in April. It drew about 10,000 people, Rutter says. In between shows, Work | Release, with its bar and small-plates menu items, also has been a hip nightspot, drawing crowds that wrap around the building as DJs spin pulsating beats inside.

The splashy appeal of the place owes much to the behind-the-scenes efforts of its venue director, Careyann Weinberg, and her partner, Charles Rasputin. As founders of Alchemy, the Norfolk-based creative cooperative, they were responsible for generating the buzz around Work | Release and giving the place its edgy identity.

“Our initial involvement with the Rutters was exactly this: helping create a community dialogue around what their Texaco Building project could be like and how it could function as an art space and cultural hub for the NEON District,” Weinberg says.

In 2014, Rutter and his wife asked Weinberg to help pull together a group of stakeholders and a cross section of people connected to the arts community. Alchemy put together a brainstorming session, “The Texaco Talk-It-Out,” at the Alchemy location just across the street from what became Work | Release. Alchemy was soon contracted to assist with the concept, curation, marketing and execution of the ideas that came from the brainstorming session. Soon after Work | Release opened, Alchemy moved its offices into the old Texaco building, where Weinberg, Rasputin and other Alchemy associates oversee a variety of arts programming with a “fun, raw, underground element,” Weinberg says.

“The relationship with Alchemy and Work | Release creates a polished blend of creative culture and academic art that is important to democratizing the art space experience for all people,” Weinberg says.



The involvement of the Downtown Norfolk Council also was paramount to making Work | Release happen.

Mary Miller, president of Downtown Norfolk Council, said: “The arts district falls within the boundaries of the downtown improvement district, so we provide clean and safe services and marketing support for the area. We actively try to match tenants to available spaces.”

The DNC has been instrumental in the beautification efforts around Work | Release, providing a facade improvement grant to the building for the renovation and a \$10,000 vibrant spaces grant for its new outdoor dining area. Last year, the DNC funded three murals in the district and leased a vacant parcel of the Plot, a temporary park at the intersection of Granby Street and Olney Road. This also was the epicenter of First Friday events during the spring and summer.

The City Council recently appropriated \$200,000 for public infrastructure improvements in the arts district.

“DNC staff and representatives from the arts district committee will work with city staff on how best to expend the funds based on the priorities in the Arts District Revitalization Strategy and constituent input,” Miller says.

**But as Work | Release has drawn** massive crowds, the Parlor, the eclectic restaurant and, for a time, a popular hangout spot two doors down on Granby, closed in November. The reasons for the closure have not been divulged by its proprietor, hair stylist Quincy Brown, who also owns The Beauty Parlor By Q, the salon next door.

Rutter recognizes the Parlor for paving the way for Work | Release.

“The Parlor was a great pioneer,” Rutter says. “The difficulty there was that they were too early in the revitalization, but they should get credit for bringing attention to the arts district.”

In the meantime, the area immediately around Work | Release expands. Located across a small parking lot behind it, the Glass Wheel Studio opened in January. The new home for the Hurrah Players will be in a building facing the parking lot of Work | Release. Just blocks away, the D'Art Center recently relocated to the first two floors of the Duke Grace building at 740 Duke St.

“Work | Release is the experimental ground, the proving ground,” Rutter says. “We’re trying to make the Norfolk arts district a place where arts organizations can come together. Too many times, arts organizations end up like little silos. Each one has its own board, its own supporters and its own programs. If you’re not careful, they end up being insular and competitive. But what’s been the main contribution of the arts district is that it’s a place where all of that competition goes away. Everybody is there with the right purpose: to advance culture in Hampton Roads.”

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