

## ECONOMY

# Arts, industry and commerce coexist at Roanoke's former Viscose property

*An art studio. A ballet theater. A furniture company. A coffee shop. The old American Viscose property in Roanoke, which is slated for redevelopment, already hosts a wide variety of tenants. Here are some of them.*



by **Randy Walker**

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The old power plant, housing Concrete Casting, "is beautiful in sort of a 'Mad Max' way," says Will Trinkle, whose firm manages the Roanoke Industrial Center. The center looks like a movie set to developer Ed Walker. All photos by Randy Walker unless specified.

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In a corner of Southeast Roanoke, where the Roanoke River turns toward the north, stands the old power plant, like a castle protected by a river bend. On clear mornings the tops of its towering smokestacks catch the rays of the rising sun before anything else nearby.

A new day is coming to Roanoke Industrial Center. On Tuesday, developer Ed Walker is scheduled to finalize the purchase of the center from Industrial Development and Investment Co., or IDICO. If Walker's \$60 million plan comes to fruition, the former factory site will be reborn as Riverdale, a mixed-use community with residential, industrial and commercial tenants.

This will be the third incarnation of the site that opened in 1917 as the Viscose Company, later American Viscose.

Viscose has been gone since 1958, and yet vibrant life goes on inside the skeleton of the industrial giant. That is not expected to change under Walker.

“For the most part we'd love to have tenants stay, and we want to keep it affordable,” he said. “As we begin to clean up and improve the park, I do intend to resolve all environmental questions, debris piles, miscellaneous garbage and the long-term storage of junked vehicles. It's an important place for Roanoke city's history and Southeast — it's not a junkyard.”

Not included in the sale to Walker are buildings owned by Hill-Bear LLC, housing Chris's Coffee & Custard and LAB Sports Performance, or the buildings owned by Chemsolv and Davis H. Elliot. Walker already owns a five-story building that he plans to turn into apartments.

Parts of the original 212-acre property have been sold off over the years. Approximately 75 acres will be sold to Walker, according to Will Trinkle, owner of C.W. Francis & Son, which manages RIC. Among the longest-tenured tenants is Willis Welding.

Here's a look at a few of the 120 or so tenants who call the RIC home.



Oases of green are scattered around the red brick and asphalt of the industrial center. Here, Pedro Szalay sits outside the Star City School of Ballet.

When a male dancer is lifting a ballerina, one thing he does not want to do is crack her head on the ceiling or on a ventilation or light fixture.

Pedro Szalay and Mark Shephard are owners of Star City School of Ballet.

“Will Trinkle called me one day when he realized I was looking for space,” said Szalay. “And he said, ‘Pedro, I have a perfect spot.’”

When Szalay saw the open rooms and high ceilings, he thought, “That is perfect. This is going to be our space, if we are able to afford it.”



Star City School of Ballet co-owner Pedro Szalay.

In its third year at the center, Star City School of Ballet rents 15,537 square feet on Industry Avenue. Facilities include storage for sets and costumes, and four studios, one of which doubles as a performance space. The for-profit dance school hosts the nonprofit Southwest Virginia Ballet, a pre-professional company.

Before the dancers moved in, a contractor suggested carpeting part of the space. Szalay told him, “‘Sir, I don’t want carpet.’ The construction company, they were trying to give us ideas, but we want to keep the feel of the industrial [design].”

Szalay said he and Shephard “are very excited for the transformation of our industrial center and we are to stay for a long time.”



Ralph Eaton built the Art Rat as a float for the Marginal Arts Festival parade. It now welcomes visitors outside Art Rat Studios.

Visitors who thread their way through narrow Resource Avenue into the heart of the industrial center will find a jolly 8-foot rat mounted on a platform on wheelchair wheels. The Art Rat (Rat being a playful anagram of Art) welcomes visitors to the studios of Ralph Eaton and Brian Counihan.

Eaton sculpted it as a float for the Marginal Arts Festival parade that he ran from 2009 to 2014. Counihan was the director of the festival. “Now it sort of serves as our signage out there,” Eaton said.

The two artists have been tenants for 12 years. “We have loved it, it’s been a great space,” Eaton said. “The rent, it’s like the best deal in town for us. The management has been really good with us, trying to take care of things. The roof is an ongoing problem.”

Eaton started school at the San Francisco Art Institute and finished at VCU. He primarily creates assemblage-style sculpture made of fabric and stuffed animals.

Counihan grew up in Ireland and also lived in Chicago and New York. Trained as a painter and printmaker, he now primarily makes parade art sculptures and figures from papier-mâché. He is the Roanoke Arts Commission 2022-23 artist in residence for Southeast Roanoke. Counihan said the commission is funding his Daisy Art Parade, scheduled for April 15.

“Wear something wacky, carry something funny. Express yourself in any way you want,” he said. It’s called Daisy because it’s designed to encourage arts organizations to daisy-chain together for mutual support.

The Art Rat space is also a performance venue for “one-night-stand events,” Eaton said. “A touring performer will contact me about doing a show here. So that sets the date and then I add a couple of locals to it. We have had touring performers from all over the world. I like to book stuff that nobody else in town will book ... radical performance art, experimental music, free improv jazz, noise, psychedelic noise.”

If artists were organized in an army, painters and sculptors whose work appears in museums, galleries and corporate lobbies would be the regular infantry and Art Rat the guerillas.

“Weird art in layman’s terms,” Eaton said, some of which might not even be considered art by some people. “Like somebody banging on a bunch of pots and pans with lights flashing and stuff, like, ‘Oh, that doesn’t compute.’ It’s still a valid expression from a lot of people. So I feel like I’m inviting those people to come here which sort of fills the gap that’s been left over from a lot of the other players in town.”



Captions, from top left: 1) Ralph Eaton built the Art Rat as a float for the Marginal Arts Festival parade. It now welcomes visitors outside Art Rat Studios. 2) Brian Counihan with a sculpted head of Roanoke educator Lucy Addison. 3) A death’s head sculpture by Counihan. 4) Ralph Eaton with some of his soft sculpture assemblages. 5) Ralph Eaton and Brian Counihan in front of a banner for “The Amalgamated Society of Marginalized Art & Artists.” 6) Counihan’s “Word Made Flesh” is made from shredded student essays. 7) Counihan and Eaton.

“It’s about artists expressing their ideas, rather than coming up with a business plan,” Counihan said. “It’s not a business plan, it’s just for the love of it. And it’s very inspiring to see what people do because they just want to make their art.”

To find out what’s happening, go to the Art Rat Studios [Facebook page](#). Performance videos are also available on Eaton’s YouTube channel, [sacredeyecon](#).



Airsoft gun and pellet ammunition.

On Service Avenue, around the corner from Art Rat, is the Roanoke Airsoft retail store. Airsoft is a realistic war-gaming and training sport that employs plastic pellets.

“It is a small little plastic BB that [was] initially used for training for police in Japan,” said owner John Davis. “Now it’s kind of like paintball, but more realistic, more long distance. Same tactics the military uses, police use. So it’s a lot of fun for people that want to dress up and go have some fun.”

Spencer Phillips, who was behind the counter on a recent Saturday, said an Airsoft hit “hurts more than paintball but goes away almost instantly.” The store is stocked with rifles, pistols, machine guns and other gear.

The 41-acre battlefield, in Moneta, “has 10 villages on it, and 3 and a half miles of road and boats and planes and all kinds of crazy stuff,” said Davis. “It’s not necessarily war. The neat thing about Airsoft is it’s an honest sport. You don’t get splattered with anything. So you have to call your hit when you get hit. So it’s very much about honesty, integrity and character building, the whole thing, which I don’t think most people realize.

“We’ve been in business 11 years, maybe 12 years, and we’ve seen little boys grow into grown men, and come back and thank us for being social with them, helping them out. Teach them tactics, honesty, build character. So it’s kind of nice, we’ve seen some guys go into really great professions, and we’ve seen them go into the military as well and do really well at it.”

Davis got into Airsoft because his son was addicted to Xbox and his phone and stopped going outside. The plan worked. His son is now a lance corporal in the Marines, he said; he's in Nagasaki, Japan, working on helicopters. "He's doing well."



John Davis shows storage space in back of a camper.

John Davis wears another hat at the Roanoke Industrial Center as the owner of Silver Tears Campers.



John Davis with a Silver Tears camper.

A designer and fabricator of furniture and vehicles, Davis needed a camper to take his kids four-wheeling. Not content with available models, he looked at classic teardrop designs of the 1940s and '50s and decided to build his own high-end version. Davis still makes campers but now sells more tailgaters, food-and-drink trailers that, among other uses, host pregame parties at football stadiums. His work has been featured in Vogue, Playboy and Architectural Digest.







Amber Horton, Txtur's marketing and administrative director.

A subsidiary of commercial furniture manufacturer Frank Chervan, Txtur creates made-to-order furniture for sale direct to consumers.

"Our lead time is about six weeks because we make it all locally," said Amber Horton, Txtur's marketing and administrative director. "So even though it's custom made to order, our lead times are a lot better than some of the big-box companies that make their furniture overseas."

Most of Txtur's manufacturing happens at Chervan's factory on Greenbrier Avenue in Southeast Roanoke, but part of it happens at the RIC. The Txtur headquarters on Ninth Street is also Chervan's warehouse and shipping/receiving center.

Txtur's custom dining chairs range from \$300 to \$750. A plush lounge chair goes for \$1,200; sofas start around \$1,400.

"We have a good relationship with Ed Walker," Horton said. "He has bought furniture from us for other commercial projects in the past. And thankfully, he has said that he is very interested in having Txtur furniture specifically in these new developments that he's thinking about. But further, we've been told that it won't affect our shipping and receiving warehouse or foam fabrication setup back there. But we're also very excited because it's a good opportunity for us, B2B [business to business]-wise as far as commercial sales go."



Virginia Fire Museum co-founder Darryl Thompson with a restored 1952 Chevrolet fire truck.

Occupying some 140,000 square feet, the nonprofit Virginia Fire Museum houses more than 110 fire trucks, many of them antique. It's the largest collection of fire trucks on the East Coast and possibly in the country, said Darryl Thompson, one of the founders.

The museum "is a creation of many years of people talking about wanting a fire museum in Roanoke, because Roanoke [was] the home of the first fire truck manufacturer of the South which was the Oren Company. Somewhere had to be the repository of its history."

At RIC since 2022, the museum has no paid employees. The space is mainly used for storage and restoration work. Thompson said he's looking forward to the upcoming transformation of RIC and would like to add space for display.

Among the museum's showpieces is a 1952 Chevrolet fire truck, the product of a \$150,000 restoration. Museum members "up and down the Eastern Seaboard" paid for it, said Thompson, who has worked as a volunteer firefighter and personally owns 52 trucks. Other trucks have been donated by fire departments, mostly in Virginia. Volunteer crews perform 95% of the cosmetic and mechanical work.

The museum is open to the public by appointment only. A tour can be requested through the museum's [Facebook page](#).

An open house for first responders last year attracted more than 700 people. An open house for the public is planned for July. Thompson is expecting 5,000 to 8,000 visitors.



A spur from the Norfolk Southern tracks connects the National Railway Historical Society's Roanoke Chapter to the national rail network. The chapter's open-air collection, located at RIC since 1980, consists of around 20 rail cars in

various states of restoration. Some are owned by the chapter, others privately. Most came from Norfolk Southern, Norfolk & Western or the Virginian Railway.

“We started as a chapter in 1968 and started off with three passenger cars ... that were donated by Southern Railway,” said Gary Gray, its vice president.



Gary Gray, vice president of Roanoke chapter of National Railway Historical Society, with a Norfolk & Western caboose.



Cameron Tracey, a Roanoke College business major, is restoring this caboose.

On a typical Saturday, 10 to 20 volunteers show up to work on the cars. Some, but not all, are current or former Norfolk Southern employees. Cameron Tracey, a Roanoke College senior in business administration, is restoring a Virginian Railway 1947 caboose. In addition to its work at RIC, the chapter restored the Virginian Railway station in Roanoke and has run excursion trips for the Virginia Transportation Museum.

## Chris's Coffee & Custard



Beth Woodrum outside Chris's Coffee & Custard.

Beth Woodrum started Chris's Coffee & Custard with input from her son, Chris, who has Down syndrome. The goal is not only to offer hot drinks, sandwiches, desserts and baked goods, but to provide opportunities for employment and socialization to individuals with physical and developmental disabilities. The shop's parent corporation is the nonprofit LoveABLE Services Inc.

Although Chris's is not included in the impending sale, "the purchase of the whole area here is very exciting for us," Woodrum said. "It's going to be bringing in a lot of condos and apartments ... coffee and custard customers. We're looking forward to it."



The Viscose plant was a town within a city, sprawling across 212 acres. Its more than 5,000 employees ate in company dining halls and exercised in a company gymnasium. Some even lived in company housing.

World War II brought continued prosperity as the plant shifted to parachutes and paratrooper suits. But boom times did not last. The industrial giant was felled by competition with other synthetic fabrics, and in 1958 the machinery ground to a halt.

In 1961 the complex was sold to a consortium of investors, Industrial Development and Investment Co., which changed the name to Roanoke Industrial Center and began to lease parts of the complex to an assortment of tenants.

At its peak in the 1920s, American Viscose was one of the world's largest rayon factories, producing 35% of the country's rayon.



**Captions, from left to right:** 1) The old power plant. Ed Walker wants to get rid of junked cars all across the old Viscose property. 2) Building 5 seen from the intersection of Technical Avenue and Service Avenue. 3) A brick building in the corner of the Roanoke Industrial Center. 4) Burial vaults behind a building on Service Avenue. 5) A scene inside the National Railway Historical Society's storage area.

Will Trinkle is the fourth-generation owner of C.W. Francis and Son, which manages the center. His family has been involved in RIC since the days of his grandfather, C.W. Francis Jr.

"I was 4 years old when he and a group of investors bought in," Trinkle said. "They razed a smokestack once, when I was probably 4 or 5. We all came and they brought a picnic. My grandmother, mother, father and my little brother and I, and we parked the car. And they had drinks, no doubt, and the thing fell the wrong way. And I remember we all dove into the car and he pushed us in. Bricks fell like within a couple feet of all of us, but it was great fun, and we all laughed, and it was just a great, great memory.

"They had tricycles with big boxes on the back that the Viscose plant used to use to ride in those tunnels between buildings to deliver things in between the buildings. They also had little roadways. We got one of those tricycles. It was way too big for a kid to ride but it was super fun. A big part of my life."

Those tunnels still exist, although some of them are flooded and the center does not allow visitors. "There are about a million square feet underground," Trinkle said.

There's plenty to look at above ground. The former power plant, in its broken and rusting grandeur, is "beautiful in sort of a 'Mad Max' way," Trinkle said.



**Captions, left to right:** 1) A dinosaur outside the Virginia Fire Museum belongs to Center in the Square. 2) A woolly mammoth and dinosaur stored inside the Virginia Fire Museum. 3) A mosaic by Roanoke artist Steven Paul combines images of dancers, train cars and smokestacks.

"It's a little like a bee hive, a ghost town and a secret workshop," Ed Walker said.

"It's sort of like a Dickensian world," Trinkle said. "It takes you back to another century when you drive through there."



A visual encapsulation of Roanoke Industrial Center's combination of art, industry and history is found in the women's bathroom, where the brick wall is exposed and parts of the original tile floor have been stenciled with mandala-type floral paintings.

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