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81C: Artistic Event Space Ready for Grand Opening

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St. Thomas has a new member to add to its artistic directory, 81C, a pop-up event space, art gallery, Airbnb and artist residency created by local entrepreneur Zack Zook.

It is located in downtown Charlotte Amalie at 81C Kronprindsens Gade, on Strand Gade between the waterfront and Main Street, halfway down the block toward Market Square.

81C will hold its grand opening with an inaugural event scheduled from 6 to 9 p.m., Friday, Oct. 30. The event features an art exhibition, with works on display by Shansi Miller, and is “in celebration with the St. Thomas Historical Trust.”

With the launch of this location, Zook said he aims to create a platform for creative event rental and artist/entrepreneur networking. The pop-up event space can accommodate group meetings, public/private parties and creative events of all kinds.

“It’s my hope that by opening 81C we create relationships that inspire activity and production for relative gatherings, community and commercial endeavors,” he said.

The organization is currently run by Zook, Augustine Holder and Joseph Hewes, all three of whom are entrenched and established in the local art scene.



The 81C team, from left, Zack Zook, Joseph Hewes and Augustine Holder (Photo provided by Zack Zook/81C)

“I met Joseph Hewes and Augustin Holder through our collective involvement with sevenminusseven, and we became friends. We first discussed the concept of opening the

space together in early 2020. Our partnership has been organic and the support and ideas that they have presented has been absolutely essential in this project coming to fruition," Zook said.

Holder reflected on his years in the local art scene.

"I have been a part of our art community since moving back in 2006. I've shown my work at VICA and sevenminuseven. I am very pleased and thrilled to see another art gallery opening up downtown. This venture will not only help with the revitalization and commerce, but art enriched life. I see growth and enchantment of the quality of life in the historic downtown area."



Zook takes a breather outside 81C. (Photo by Chantel Hoheb)

Zook, who owns and operates the local construction firm Zook Industries, is a former director of the art space Alternative Art Alliance, also known as sevenminuseven, where he worked as a curator of art exhibitions alongside organization founder and artist Clay Jones, whom he calls a mentor. He managed events and development in the literary arts industry in Brooklyn for a decade, conducting up to 20 events per week. He was voted one of the "100 most influential people in Brooklyn culture" in 2014. He believes he can "apply my 10 years of NYC event concept experience to this endeavor."

He has a long and eclectic history on the island. He first moved to the Virgin Islands in 2003 and worked in the catering service industry at the St. Peter Mountain Greathouse for Chef Damaris James, Judy Grogan and Bill Grogan. He has also worked with the St. Thomas artisan coffee company Virgin Islands Coffee Roasters. Since 2017, he has conducted a St. Thomas-based job and trade skill training program for international college-aged individuals interested in travel and learning construction skills.

81C is his latest project. Originally built in 1810 as a rum warehouse and residence, he privately financed the complete renovation and restoration of the historic, two-story building. The project was originally called Fallen Angel, intended as an homage to a nightclub that had been located in the building mid-century.

Zook bought the building in January 2017, “because I wanted to invest in the town. I was in love with the architectural aesthetic, and I wanted to contribute to bringing back what town was once regarded as, socially, economically and otherwise. The potential for Virgin Islanders to champion a functioning world-class historical district is very real, and I was incentivized by the downtown revitalization plans by the V.I. government that we are now seeing take place.”

“The idea for the pop-up event space came from my experience with running events and also suspecting there would be a communal need for spaces of this nature, where individuals and entities can hold functions without long-term rental commitment,” Zook said. “I also consulted with people in that field. This space specifically opens opportunities for young local entrepreneurs especially, which is something that I identify with and which excites me. That element along with curating events is what excited me the most.”

Yet, the best-laid plans of mice and men ...

The event space at 81C (Photo provided by Zack Zook/81C)

The rehabilitation project suffered several setbacks. After escaping the 2017 hurricanes relatively unscathed, experiencing a little flooding in the lower level before construction, the building fell victim to a fire in 2019, soon after construction began in late 2018. It destroyed all of the work that had been completed to that point.

“It was an enormous financial and psychological challenge,” he said. “I didn’t have insurance and to this day I’m still waiting on federal officials to release a cause and determination of how the fire started. After that incident, we switched gears and worked to complete our lower level over the next 1.5-year period. The logistics of working a construction project in town are challenging due to the busy nature of the area, and the materials we have incorporated are exotic, so the investment was more substantial than originally anticipated.”

But the struggle was worth it, he said, and his original optimism remains.

“Restoring a 200-year-old building anywhere comes with unique challenges, but I think most projects of this nature stand to thrive once completed. The feedback we are getting

now is electric. I am happy we have endured any setbacks as we now focus on our launch.”

Zook noted that discussions relating to the utilization of the space have begun with artists, educators, community leaders and business entities.

“It comes naturally for me to see that this venture is about connecting people and interests that intuitively ask to be connected, like anything, and evaluating what solutions and results come from those connections. We want to curate and host exhibitions regularly and present other events that we tailor in-house, but I think opening the concept of the space up to a pop-up event platform is going to add a level of community curiosity and engagement that will be really wholesome and valued. I designed the space to be warm and timeless, and I believe that aesthetic will translate to the functions that are held and to the attendees. ... It is my hope that others will be inspired to open dynamic businesses in the historic district. If you look at what Arc Vodka have done, that’s a good example of an inspiring model. Salt of the Earth Tattoo also. I think a renaissance of creative, independent concepts in the area will greatly enhance the district and bring more local traffic to the area.”

Grand Opening Friday

The inaugural event kicks off with local artist Shansi Miller, who was born and raised on St. Thomas. The daughter of adventurous travelers who settled in the Virgin Islands in the 1960s, Miller is a rich brocade of West Indian culture and classical western heritage. At the age of 16, she began her formal studies with artist and teacher Tom Saint Vincent. Later, she studied at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., before returning to the islands and continuing her studies with Saint Vincent. Miller has traveled extensively in Europe, Asia and the Caribbean, broadening her artistic scope as her skills grew.

Miller’s work embodies her sharp vision of her home and its people, culture, nature, animals and daily life. She opens a door to this seldom-seen world of the Virgin Islands.

The inaugural event is open to the public. Cocktails and hors d’oeuvres will be served. COVID-19-related health safety measures will be practiced, and event attendees will be required to wear masks. Capacity regulations will be observed.

Historical Trust membership opportunities and information will be available for attendees. Extended gallery hours for viewings of Miller’s works will run through Nov. 8.

Miller’s display is the first of what Zook hopes is an “unlimited” number of events hosted by 81C, as the downtown revitalization and restoration comes into its own around it.

The next event, “Halloween Ink” is private and scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 31. The Airbnb rental and artist residency are set to launch in January. Details about upcoming events are available online.

On December 6, 81C will host VI Surfing Federation partner group Skatethomas, a community-based collective whose members keep the youth of St. Thomas “Pushing

Forward” by teaching self-growth through the art of skateboarding.

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