

# The Big Dome

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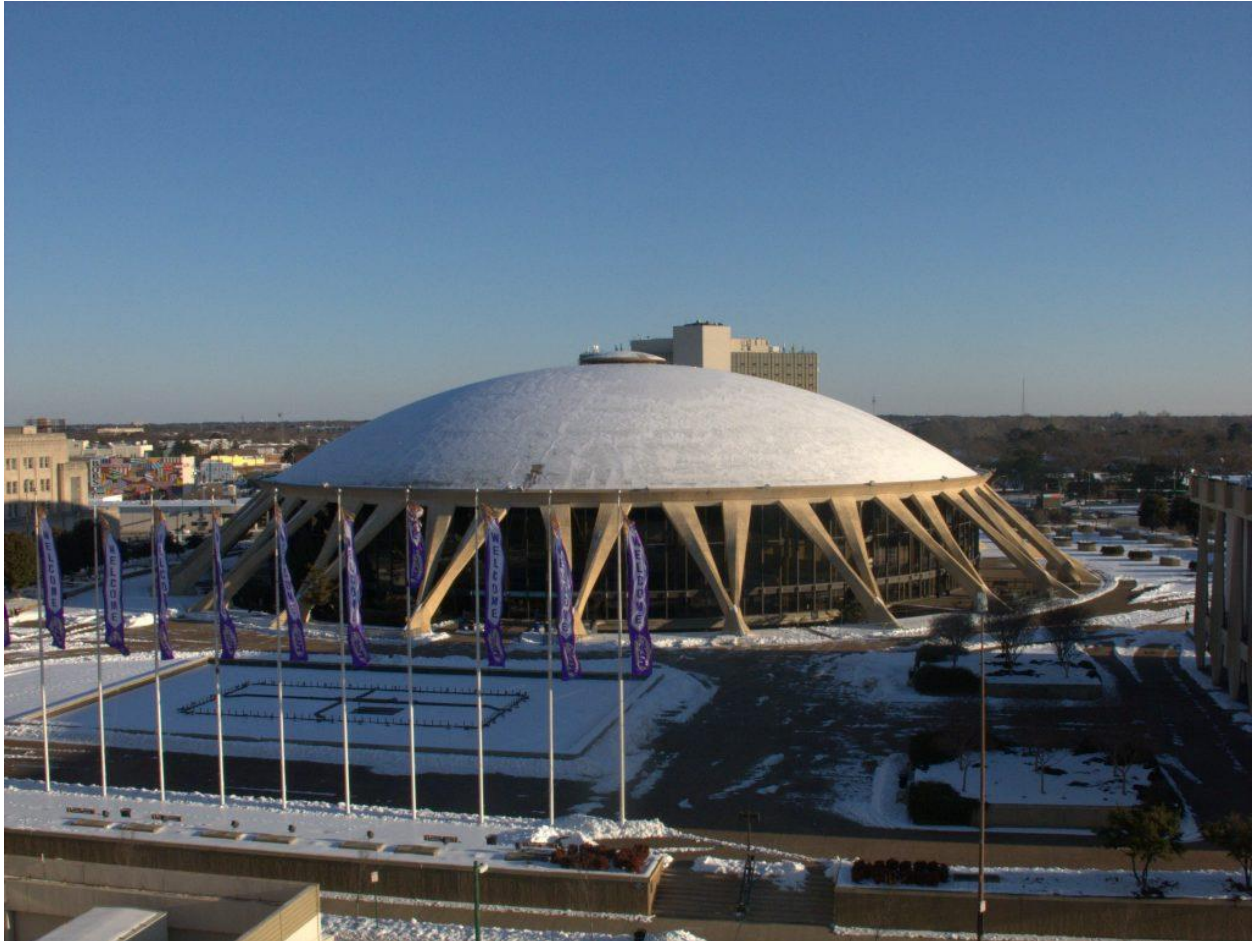


**Words by Penny Neef**  
**Photos by David Sullivan**  
**Featured Image Courtesy of The Norfolk Housing and Redevelopment Authority**

Scope Arena is a landmark in downtown Norfolk. It's hard to miss that big dome of concrete and the 24 midcentury modern flying buttresses that surround it and support it. There have been many impressive arenas built around the world, but Scope remains the world's largest thin-shell concrete domed building. The world's largest, right here in Hampton Roads.

Scope Arena was designed as just one part of Norfolk Cultural and Convention Center, which also includes Chrysler Hall, the plaza that connects the two buildings, a below grade Exhibition Hall and an underground parking garage.

Construction began in 1968 on the north edge of downtown Norfolk. This massive project was conceived as a post-WW II revitalization of Norfolk. City leaders wanted to “step up” Norfolk’s cultural footprint, and attract sports teams, bigger acts and bigger crowds to Hampton Roads.



The city leaders, led by Lawrence Cox, Executive Director of Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority (NRHA), were willing to go cutting edge on design and construction. They wanted to build something “iconic” that would attract attention (and visitors) to Hampton Roads. This led them to Pier Luigi Nervi, an Italian architect known best for his expertise in using reinforced concrete to create curving forms and domed structures.

Nervi designed [Pallazetto dello Sport](#) for the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome. Basketball was played there. Americans could see the impressive structure from their televisions.

Nervi worked with Norfolk firm Williams and Tazewell & Associates to use the latest design and construction techniques to make a “superblock of reinforced concrete and glass.” Scope Arena is a premier example of mid-twentieth century Neo-Expressionist

architecture. Neo Expressionism is all about the curves. It is architecture as sculpture – beauty, form and function.

David Sullivan was 17 years old on November 23, 1971 when he attended the first sporting event at Scope. It was an American Basketball Association game between the Virginia Squires and the Carolina Cougars. The Squires lost, but David kept his “Charter Spectator Award” certificate.



Sullivan was a senior at Kempsville High School when he started taking photos with a Kodak 110 film camera. Quite a few years, and a few cameras later, Sullivan is a self-pronounced “camera geek.” I first met David when he was the Executive Director of the new Slover Library in 2015. I have been following his photography on Instagram ever since at: [dsullivan32](#).

Scope Arena is one of Sullivan’s favorite subjects. Sullivan loves the history of the building. He remembers seeing the Scope under construction. Sullivan and his then girlfriend, now wife, Cindy, got to listen to some of the great 70’s bands at Scope, like Chicago, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Rare Earth and Guess Who. He’s always “been in

awe of the Scope Arena and its interior dome ceiling, the way it opens up to a massive space when you walk in from the concourse.”



#### Norfolk's Scope Arena Sunrise

Sullivan is a “fanboy” of architecture and architects. He has been taking “thoughtful” photos of Scope for the past 15 years. He comes by morning, afternoon and night, in all seasons, to capture the beauty of Scope. There are the “curves, the geometry, the textures and the details present when you take time to look close the way photographing something commands your focus and attention.”

Pre-pandemic aka life before Covid, the city of Norfolk was talking about a new arena. The 10,000 seat Scope Arena is now considered too small to attract the major sporting events and conventions the city wants. Feasibility studies show that the almost 50-year-old arena has no room to expand. Of course, all talk of a new arena is on hold right now, along with many other things. Sullivan wishes that Norfolk could find a way to “invest in Scope and make it last another 50 years.” I couldn't agree more. Scope is beautiful, unique and historically significant.

Scope, by the way, was not named after a person or the mouthwash. Scope is short for Kaleidoscope. The Scope Inaugural Souvenir Magazine of 1971 says the name was

chosen to “convey the myriad of activities which will be taking place under the coliseum’s domed cover.” Take another look at Scope. Clean up that dome and those gorgeous flying buttresses and it’s still a beauty.



Norfolk's Scope Arena lamppost