

architecture

## NEW ORLEANS BELIEVER

SEAN CUMMINGS ENVISIONS A SLEEKLY REVAMPED WATERFRONT  
THAT WILL MAKE THE CRESCENT CITY A DESIGN BEACON  
AND A GLOBAL DESTINATION by elizabeth pochoda



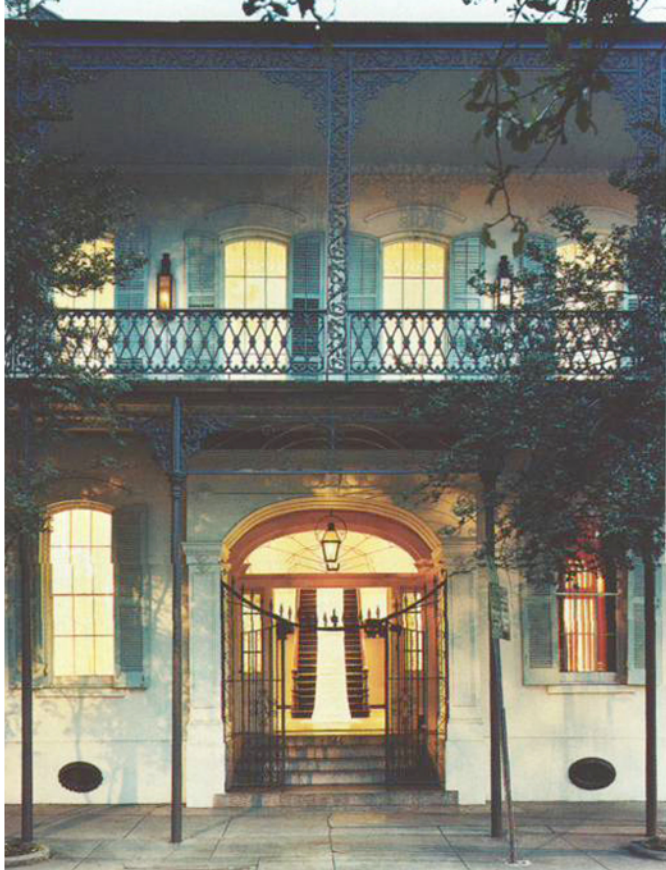


PHOTOGRAPHED BY RAIMUND KOCH

Cummings, opposite page, on the New Orleans waterfront. His plan to transform a four-and-a-half-mile stretch from the Lower Garden District to the Lower Ninth Ward includes a possible culinary institute, a performance space, a hotel, and bike and pedestrian paths, among other things. The city's streets would also be opened to the river in several key places.







Although Cummings wants to bring 21st-century style to New Orleans, he respects the city's past and lives in a historic French Quarter house, left, where he has installed a dramatic Swarovski chandelier, below. ■ The developer with some of the team from Reinventing the Crescent, bottom: from left, Cummings, Enrique Norten, Allen Eskew, and Alex Krieger.

## In New Orleans,

where trust is as scarce as hope, Sean Cummings is asking for a major leap of faith. He wants people to believe that Reinventing the Crescent, a bold scheme to transform four and a half miles of riverfront, will be the cart that drags their city out of the mud. Astonish Me architecture as distinctive as London's Millennium Bridge! Sleek, modernist landscape design! Urban planning that will open the city to its waterfront instead of using it as a dumpy backyard! How did a 42-year-old developer get so far with a plan that doesn't directly address such urgent matters as the city's schools and hospitals and the rebuilding of affordable housing?

Cummings is an unlikely pitchman. He is a visionary for sure, but he is a quiet, soulful one whose passion for his city is bound to impress even the most skeptical observer. He has used his appointment by Mayor Ray Nagin as executive director of the New Orleans Building Corporation to fund a competition among world-class architects and planners for a riverfront project meant to make New Orleans a world-class destination. Teams centered around such



stars as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, and Daniel Libeskind submitted their concepts. The winning group included Enrique Norten, who seems poised to be architecture's next superstar, urban planner Alex Krieger, who has done an impressive list of waterfront projects, landscape architect George Hargreaves, and New Orleans architect Allen Eskew.

"We wanted something transcendent," Cummings says, explaining the Norten team's success. "We got a bold vision capable of inspiring a city and making it proud once again." And in a rare moment of euphoria he adds, "If we pull this off, it will be the most important physical contribution to New Orleans since the French Quarter."

And now? After public review, and, one assumes, the help of powerful allies, including recovery czar Edward Blakely, the plan in some form should be adopted. Then each project along this bracelet of open spaces and built moments—walking and bike paths, chapel, performance space, culinary institute, Tulane and Xavier's RiverSphere, cruise ship terminals, hotel, and condominiums—will have to be reviewed separately. Global Green will advise on environmental issues; other architects and designers will create some parts, while Norten and his group will presumably do others. Cummings likes the mix: "It can't look like we bought the living room set off the showroom floor. Barcelona and Valencia may be examples to emulate."

But will it happen? In a city where the public oscillates on a narrow emotional beam between resignation, depression, and suspicion, it's hard for people to believe that anything will happen. And remember, this is not a preservation project; resistance to the future, especially in the



form of glass and steel, is almost palpable here. "People want what they lost," says Carol Reese, a professor of architecture at Tulane, explaining the local aversion to modernism. And Ari Kelman, author of *A River and Its City*, a profound study of New Orleans and its landscape, worries whether Cummings "has the juice to make the endlessly nostalgic preservationists look forward." Even a detractor who doubts that the neighborhoods abutting the river will have enough of a say about Reinventing the Crescent still endorses the arrival of quality architecture and urban planning in a city that has long had a "frustrating lack of capacity for dramatic new ideas."

To be fair, the experience of the new in New Orleans has not often been a beautiful one. Between the Superdome and the Convention Center, the city needs only Donald Trump's proposed finger in the sky (the tallest building in Louisiana!) to complete a tri-*fecta* of gigantesque architectural crapola.

Cummings promises something finer, and he has been trying to lead by example for several years. His two hotels, International House and Loft 523, brought boutique luxury with a New Orleans accent to the city; both show a commitment to taking local traditions into the twenty-first century. So too with his favorite restaurant, Stella!, where familiar dishes and ingredients have cosmopolitan dash, and his favorite musician, Troy Andrews, a.k.a. Trombone Shorty, who joins jazz to reggae-ton, hip-hop, and a host of other influences. New Orleans "is less cosmopolitan than it was eighty years ago," Cummings says, but he is convinced it can again be a crucible of creativity in food, architecture, and music. Thus Reinventing the Crescent, where international ambition meets local talent.

The only trouble with all this is that no one knows how a community cooks up a culture, and even if New Orleans becomes a bigger draw than Bilbao, that's no assurance that the people who used to set the cultural heartbeat of the city and



Cummings's hotels, Loft 523, top, and International House, above, were damaged by Hurricane Katrina. In reopening, he continues to update New Orleans style with touches such as the daybed by Glen Armand, top, and the Marlow lamp, above, by Trebor/Nevets, both made in Louisiana.

now live elsewhere can be replaced by others as vibrant. But it could work. Kelman says that non-elites in New Orleans have always turned the riverfront to their purposes, using it in creative ways that no one anticipated. Certainly no one else has offered anything nearly as inspiring as what Cummings dreams of. But there are other issues. Will Cummings, who owns property near the waterfront, make money? Probably. Is there a board of ethics to make sure that he won't benefit more than other property owners? Yes. Will there still be suspicion? Probably. Does the project suggest that the economy of what may remain a smaller, whiter New Orleans will rest primarily on tourism? Could be.

In addition to private investment, federal, state, and city money will be crucial. This is a huge project. If it comes at the expense of rebuilding, says the Norton team's Krieger, "it will be a failure, but a city can't move ahead on one agenda alone." Chicago has invested in Millennium Park *and* in its school system. Can New Orleans, with many more challenges, move ahead on more than one front, too? Reinventing the Crescent is not the only path forward, but it is a promising one. Katrina is not to blame for everything that ails New Orleans, by a long shot, and Reinventing the Crescent should not have to be the only solution. □