

AT THE INTERSECTION OF HOSPITALITY AND SERVICE

Sean Cummings and the rebuilding of the NoLa waterfront

Across the country there's hardly a waterfront along a river, bay or harbor that doesn't scream out its potential. In city after city, complex projects are breathing new life into tired, forgotten real estate. Usually, it takes a stadium or a major mixed-use project to jumpstart the process. In New Orleans, it took Hurricane Katrina to break the 40-year deadlock between the city and its port administrators. Re-

developing the languishing six-mile-long "Crescent" lies somewhere between huge and monumental on the development complexity meter, but such is the mission that fell to New Orleans hotelier Sean Cummings when Mayor Ray Nagin tapped him as CEO of the New Orleans Building Corporation.

Considering the project won't be complete until the city's 300th anniversary in 2018, the choice of Cummings to head the venture is highly strategic. Just about everything the 43-year-old Cummings does, professionally and personally, has the betterment of his city in mind. Such inclinations are deep seated. Looking back, Cummings describes being born in a joyous culture, the oldest of eight kids, enough for

four-on-four basketball, a sport that continues to shape him. "I learned a lot about life, teamwork and leadership from basketball—perhaps the best sport ever invented," Cummings says.

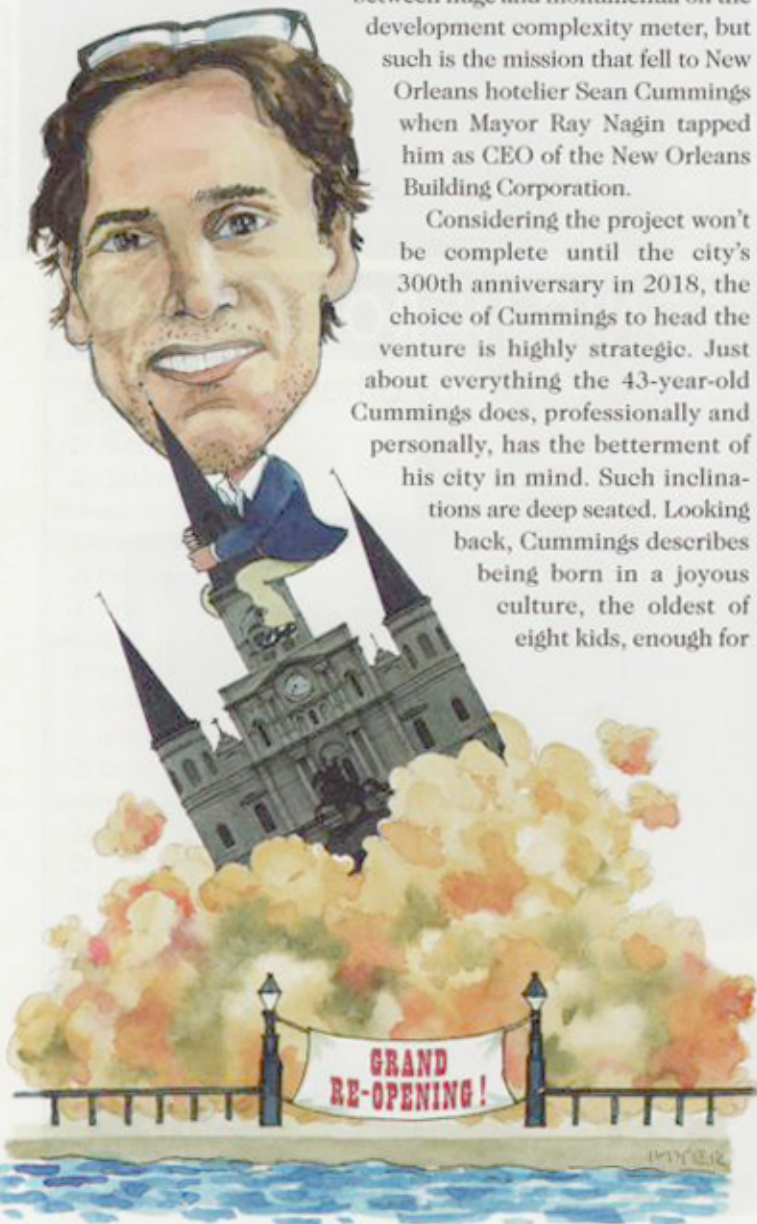
But, it was travel while in college that led him to real estate development and hospitality. "I decided to design and develop beautiful buildings after visiting Rome when I was 20," he says. "Great cities offer an exquisite mosaic of people, sights, sounds, smells, and a terrific sense of community and belonging."

Over a 10-year period after graduating from college in 1988, Cummings developed 13 SoHo-style loft buildings in downtown New Orleans. His first hotel, International House, was originally meant to be an apartment building in the style of the Dakota in New York City.

"But I decided it should be more iconic and reassert itself as a local institution and international destination, he says of the building that housed the first world trade center in the New World. "As this city's premier hotel in this space, I think we achieved that goal really well." His next hotel, Loft 523, carries on in the loft theme, taking its inspiration from New York's celebrity magnet, the Mercer Hotel. As much as he has come to like hotels, Cummings does not foresee developing others until the city recovers more fully from Katrina's devastation.

That's an outcome to which he will contribute significantly through his work on redeveloping the Mississippi riverfront. Next month, his agency will present the final form of its plan, which will detail the timing, sequence of development, governance and fiscal strategy of the undertaking. A design competition brought the world-class architectural team of Alex Krieger, Enrique Norten, George Hargreaves and Allen Eskey. With their skill and experience, Cummings hopes to achieve creative and original architecture—not "fake history," as he phrases it.

A partial list of projects includes restoring the natural ecology of the river and its famous piers, building a performance venue and removing barriers that prevented public access to the waterfront. Plans call for expanding the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts, Tulane-Xavier's RiverSphere, cruise ship terminals, walking and bicycling trails, a hotel and condominiums.



■ CLOSE UP ■

- Title:** Managing Owner, International House, CEO of the New Orleans Building Corporation
- Residence:** New Orleans
- Education:** Brown University, Urban Studies and Economics
- Family:** Single, oldest of eight kids
- Philosophy:** 100 percent quality, real service, unique design, style—these are the product values that deliver the human values which never change: love, pride, joy, the family, self-esteem.
- Most Recent Movie Seen:** *Mindwalk*
- Activities:** I love film, work out a lot, and am learning to play the piano.