



INTERNATIONAL HOUSE

### **Sean Cummings**

*Developer of real estate, commerce, the arts, and New Orleans' future*

He introduced contemporary residential style to New Orleans, and gave the city its first truly boutique hotel. He helps his employees buy their own homes. A visionary entrepreneur, he works to attract other young idea-folk to town. When his hometown was nearly destroyed by the forces of wind and water, he spearheaded the movement to develop an architecturally important presence on the banks of the Mississippi River. And he shoots hoops with inner city youth on a regular basis.

The man in question is **Sean Cummings**, president of **ekistics, inc.**, a real estate development company whose name means "of settlements" or, he says, "the study of where and why people live where they do in an urban setting."

For this developer, understanding the where and why of urban life is not just an interest, it's a passion. He has been described by his peers as someone making an unprecedented impact on contemporary New Orleans. He has been called "arguably the most brilliant developer of his generation;" and "the simple Buddhist real estate developer," recognized for his innate combination of a contagious entrepreneurial spirit and an abiding social conscience.

Sean Cummings graduated from Brown University, and studied at the London School of Economics. Returning home to New Orleans, he developed his simple and practical approach to reviving historic buildings: creating low over-head projects that married the need for upscale habitat with the promise to make only the barest modifications. **ekistics, inc.** took off running in the Central Business District and the industrial neighborhood known as the Warehouse District, developing desirable Soho-style lofts in an area without all the trimmings and grandiose character of the Garden District.

"I just love cities, the energy of great cities," says Cummings, "and in these historic buildings I think that somehow we all find comfort in a sense of human 'connection' with those who have come before us, those here today and those who will come after us. Our approach is much like Wright's notion of 'organic architecture' designed to rise naturally and appropriately from the time, place, and people it is intended to serve; or Rossi's similar idea of the 'urban artifact,' which brings in far more than the physical building via a connection to general human life. People respond to the buildings because in them they discover authentic and imaginatively designed spaces that celebrate life. It is a spiritual practice for us, and I think that people respond to it."

Cummings' creation of the legendary **International House** hotel from a grand Beaux-Arts building that was the country's first world trade center reveals the clarity and authority of his imagination. He is nothing short of a perfectionist and taskmaster when it comes to exacting design standards. And as a result of this singular focus, when **International House** opened its doors to the public in September 1998, it was the most intriguing hotel of its kind in New Orleans, if not all of North America. The 119-room boutique hotel harnessed the creativity and expertise of the New Orleans and Louisiana arts communities, from furniture makers, artisans,

and vendors to partners and advisors in interior decoration. Magazines such as *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Metropolitan Home*, *Food & Wine*, *Travel Holiday*, and *Travel & Leisure* immediately took notice of the brilliant interpretation of native New Orleans style. "International House celebrates the soulful essence of New Orleans," says Cummings. But beyond that, the hotel is a romantic testimony to one man's affection for his native city.

In March, 2002, Cummings opened the first all-loft hotel, **Loft 523**, around the corner from **International House** in the Central Business District. Housed in an old carriage and dry-goods warehouse, the space was converted into 18 lofts (3 of which are penthouses) with soaring ceilings, walls of windows, and intriguing architectural details kept from the original structure. At the same time, a high-tech state-of-the-art conference center was opened across the street from **International House**, serving both hotels.

Cummings co-founded **Start-Up New Orleans**, a web-based information sharing operation that connects entrepreneurs with each other and with local resources they need to grow their ideas. When he realized that the edgy Warehouse District needed a place that would both accommodate and inspire the influx of sharp young businesspeople increasingly drawn to the city, he created **Entrepreneurs' Row**, a lively haven for the progressive new business ventures that are reinventing the New Orleans economy. The complex of offices and studios is far more than the sum of its industrial-hip parts, offering a key connection to like-minded creatives, as well as a roof over their heads.

As the government-appointed CEO of the New Orleans Building Corporation from 2002-2010, Cummings expanded his expertise into the public sphere, spearheading the city's \$289 million "Reinventing the Crescent" plan. This ambitious project harnessed the talents of a dream-team of architects and landscape architects to envision and launch into reality the transformation of six miles of underutilized city-owned wharves into a productive and internationally prominent river front.

In September 2011, also along the Mississippi River front, Cummings introduced **The National Rice Mill Lofts**, a remarkable residential space resulting from the intense collaboration of artists and architects, designers, developers, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The sixty-nine lofts, studios and townhouses occupy what was once the country's largest rice mill, and capitalize on its bright airy spaces and captivating view of the mighty river. From its healthful environmental best practices to its fine amenities, this is a rental community for the truly enlightened urbanite. The complex is anchored by chef Ian Schnoebelen's **Mariza**, opened in January 2013, bringing a wholly unexpected level of casual elegance to the neighborhood's dining options, with honest, unfussy Italian cuisine.

As Cummings reflects, "it seems obvious to me that a life of service, in whatever form, is the life we are each meant to live. In creating a unique and enriching built environment, or teaching someone to shoot a better jump shot, I try to model this belief and help, if only in a small way, to make New Orleans a better place in which to live." His commitment to his community is evident in his record of civic service: he has served on the board of the Neighborhood Development Foundation since 1987; as a Council Member of the Xavier University President's Council since 2004; and on the Advisory Board of the Tulane University School of Architecture since 2006. Cummings has been a Big Brother since 1987.