

## Member Profile

### Daimian S. Hines in Conversation With Tiffany Xu



Left: Daimian S. Hines. Above and following: Images of Jamaica Houses of Parliament proposal. Courtesy Hines Architecture + Design.

**TX** You were raised in Jamaica and Detroit and have worked in firms in Chicago, Detroit, and Southeast Asia. You now live and have your own practice, Hines Architecture + Design (HINESAD), here in Houston. Can you speak about your experience and formation as a designer?

**DH** My curiosity with the profession started as a child in Jamaica. My grandfather had many jobs, one of which was a shoemaker. In his workshop, I enjoyed the process of watching him convert raw materials into unique objects. One such object included my first pair of shoes. My grandmother had many jobs also, one of which was a seamstress. I was amazed by the process of transforming templates into wearable goods. While living in Detroit, my formal introduction to architecture was through a favorite grade school science teacher. His neighbor, African American architect Mark English, was gracious enough to allow a curious mind to shadow him at his practice.

In college, I admired the work of Le Corbusier, which drove me to further study French to access more literature on his work. Studying abroad in India, I had the fantastic opportunity to visit Le Corbusier's works, including the Mill Owners' Building in Ahmedabad and the government campus at Chandigarh.

Working in Chicago immersed me in a city that celebrates architecture, architects, and the built environment. It also offered an opportunity to be a part of a design community that is truly global. At the time, an abundance of international projects offered designers major opportunities to practice and experiment. It was a time when architectural practice became global, which meant its collaborations were also global. Technology became a significant equalizer in the ability to work on projects in Asia, the Middle East, or South America.

This experience led me to understand design as an intensely collaborative act. At HINESAD, we consistently seek inputs from direct or indirect sources such as historians, artists, community organizers, writers, local and international talent. This approach is essential to how we work. I firmly believe that there are so many resources out there that we typically don't approach or explore for collaborative design opportunities.

On occasion and while reflecting, it is hard not to notice when I am the only Black design architect in the room. I have never been discouraged by this reality and the headwinds it may present. I am still guided and reassured by the words of my immigrant parents, who told me: "You can be whatever you choose." Perhaps this optimistic outlook comes from our formative years in a majority-Black African diaspora Caribbean nation.

**TX** In 2019, HINESAD's entry for the Government of Jamaica Houses of Parliament, of which you were lead

designer along with executive architect Evan Williams, JIA, from Design Collaborative, was the selected winner for the competition People's Choice award. Can you speak about the role of such a civic space in Kingston today?

**DH** Jamaica is the largest English-speaking nation in the Caribbean. The island was subject to British rule from the 1600s until it gained full independence in 1962. The slave trade was outlawed in 1807. Kingston, the country's capital, has heavily invested in technology and has a mission to be a major urban center to attract hoteliers and other commercial developments. In the past, the north coast previously garnered all attention due to the prosperous tourism industry. But with a growing awareness of sustainable urbanization, the citizens of Kingston know that it's important to develop civic and cultural spaces in the city.

It is important to note that Kingston has a series of ephemeral civic spaces, such as the busy intersection known as Half Way Tree. This space is recognized by the world every four years or so when the nation is highlighted for track and field during the Olympics. However, the space remains severely underdeveloped although the opportunity for this location to be a transformational catalyst is apparent.

About a decade ago, Kingston and St. Andrews Municipal Corporation (KSAMC) invested in the redevelopment of Emancipation Park in uptown Kingston to much political and social opposition, but the local government entity pushed forward the creation of this urban and civic space. This civic space is now one of the most celebrated and activated civic spaces in the city. Kanye West recently led a "Sunday Service" performance there. Civic spaces matter.

The selection of our project by both the jurors and the people's choice was significant. Our team was awarded the responsibility of redeveloping one of the most recognizable civic spaces in Kingston. The successful redevelopment of such an important space can fundamentally transform the adjacent communities, instigate opportunities for multi-modal transit, continue to inspire private development, create jobs, contribute to the government's goal to make downtown Kingston the central business district again, and even offer an alternative cultural destination for the country's national treasure, reggae music.

I believe civic spaces have a transformational value beyond the physical boundaries of the site. They can serve as a social, cultural, and economic asset that spur development.

**TX** The decision to require that the design lead be a Jamaican citizen was made after local Jamaican designers and planners expressed concern when a Chinese firm was initially selected for the project. With respect to our continued globalizing world and Jamaica's complex

history of imported labor, what are your thoughts on the Urban Development Corporation's decision to turn to working with local architects and designers?

**DH** The Urban Development Corporation (UDC) is the development arm of the Jamaican government. This think tank and asset management group has guided the rationalization and development of many projects across the nation. The current government has made this particular development a significant component of their vision. In my view, the UDC is a progressive organization exemplified by its embrace of public inputs and dialogue.

A project like this is sensitive, ambitious, culturally important, and challenging. UDC's decision to tap local architects and architects of the Jamaican diaspora was a recognition that the design talent existed. The question then became, how to evaluate it, and the competition facilitated this exercise. Many significant projects include a design competition, so the process was a familiar one. I think the talent and the collective will exists to see this project through completion. We are optimistic and humbled to be trusted with this monumental vision.

It was generally understood that a permanent home for the country's government has always been mandated by the Constitution. The George William Gordon House, initially constructed for the KSAMC prior to Jamaica's full independence, has been the temporary home of the Jamaican parliament since independence. One could easily miss this inconspicuous building along Duke Street. It has served the country well, but the government requires a modern and functional workplace and an iconic structure that is easily identifiable as the center of its operation.

**TX** What was the design process for conceptualizing a monumental form for democratic governance in the immediate context of National Heroes Park?

**DH** The overall site area is approximately fifty acres in size. It has a storied history. The site was once a British-era horse racing track, hence its shape and adjacent ring road. The competition brief noted that many government ministries would be relocated to land surrounding the park, hence the creation of a new government oval.

We wanted the project to have a formal expression as viewed from all directions. This would provide an equitable approach to the master planned development of future ministries planned around National Heroes Park.

The Constitution of Jamaica actually stipulates the site location and size of a new Parliament building and grounds. The competition brief identified the prescribed site within the overall National Heroes Park. The southern portion of the site has a significant area of reverence known as the Shrine; this area within and extending beyond its boundaries houses the entombed remains of Jamaican Governor



Generals (the Queen's symbolic head of state), former prime ministers, and national heroes.

The northern portion of the site hosts temporal and ephemeral activities within Kingston. It often transforms to host sporting events for neighboring schools, kite festivals, and national and local celebrations. The competition committee also noted this in the selection of the parliament site within the park.

After discussions with the design team regarding the history of the site and further reflection on our own early memories, we settled on the country's motto as our design directive: "Out of many, one people."

For us, it was also important to understand the overall history of Jamaica's population and to catalogue the Jamaican commonwealth parliamentary process. It was important to consider the interconnected relationship between citizens who vote and their elected representatives who undertake a process known as Parliament, which then creates the laws and policies that govern the nation.

How do we then symbolically translate that system of governance into architectural form-making? At this point, I thought our monumental form should be circular and offset from the center of the site to allow prevailing directional relationships to continue. The X-shaped columns in the façade system form an arcade—a typical and familiar downtown Kingston typology—and represents the interconnected relationship of people and government forming a structure, which is representative of Parliament. Each compound column contains two primary members: a member that serves as a buttress and angles outward. The other segment of the column is a diagonal member that tilts forward, representing a progressive Jamaica that leans north towards the future and the visible mountain range that defines Kingston.

It was also important to articulate the site as a landscape in addition to the building. National Heroes Park is one of the most significant public spaces in Kingston, and it is important that the park be transformed into an enhanced urban space for the surrounding communities and its residents. Hence, there was consideration given to the social sensitivity of the park and allowing existing nearby communities to maintain a sense of ownership while introducing amenities for all visitors.

It was important for us to design moments with familiar typologies yet put forward an overall design that is bold, memorable, and clear in articulation. The site is an urban park, so it was important to formalize some of the existing informal programs and functions. At the same time, we added new and thoughtful elements, such as layering the proposed park continuous walking trail with spaces that disseminate cultural information and knowledge of Jamaica's history.

Design can assist and amplify a sense of the collective. Individuality, multiplicity,

and identity can be collectively celebrated through space and placemaking. Projects like the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. and, locally, the recently completed Houston Holocaust Museum, are contemporary places that support a collective connection to our history.

*TX Freedmen's Town in Houston's Fourth Ward is in the process of being designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. During the Reconstruction period, recently freed former slaves built their homes at this site, and a number of historic row houses remain. Can you speak a bit about HINESAD's engagement with Freedmen's Town and about its history and community?*

*DH In 2016 I worked with a developer who was passionate about undertaking a development in Greenwood, Tulsa, Oklahoma. I am embarrassed to say that this was my introduction to the tragic history of Black Wall Street and the violence that took place there.*

Through HINESAD's involvement in Greenwood, I then became involved here in Houston and eventually chaired a committee whose mission is to evaluate the merits of UNESCO recognition of Freedmen's Town as a cultural heritage site. At the time I was unfamiliar with the history of Freedmen's Town in Houston. It embodies the history of the urbanization of formerly enslaved Africans in America, after the Emancipation Proclamation, who then created a thriving community in Fourth Ward. Few of the community's non-renewable historic structures and brick streets exist today.

Many similar communities across the United States during the Reconstruction Era existed in part because of the US military's Freedmen's Bureau. These communities offered former enslaved Africans, who were still not citizens, the opportunity to create stable families, successful businesses, pioneering music, and emerging art—all of which significantly contributed to American Black culture. These communities also created many educated Black business leaders, lawyers, doctors, and creatives. A social study of the socioeconomic rise, fall, and now crisis of this often-forgotten part of pre-Civil Rights Era American history is worth knowing and sharing.

There are about sixty remaining and non-renewable contributing structures in Freedmen's Town. This is a considerable reduction from the recorded 600 structures in 1994 when the area knew a National Historic Landmark. Unfortunately, this designation offered no significant protection. Many communities and local government entities are stepping forward now in order to preserve the remaining structures and brick-paved streets.

I am now involved with Freedmen's Town as a volunteer and board member of the Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy. Separately, HINESAD has been contracted by the Fourth

Redevelopment Authority to re-imagine the several historic shotgun houses. HINESAD was able to offer its design consultancy services to create a conceptual master plan framework for preserving, infilling, and enhancing Freedmen's Town so that our local community feels a sense of pride and that visitors have a memorable experience as they explore the physical history of the place. I am honored to participate as a volunteering individual and as a commissioned architect in the preservation of Freedmen's Town.

*TX In recent years there has been attention around the removal of monuments to Confederate generals; this works a bit more like a positive assertion, to preserve and honor instances of historic contributions and marks of agency in our built environment. Would you say this project to recognize historic built environments from the Reconstruction Era is indicative of a larger effort happening in the American South?*

*DH The American South has a long way to go in authentically shaping the narrative of African American history during and after Reconstruction.*

In recent years we've had the realization that preserving all of our history is imperative. Many southern cities have struggled with what to do with Confederate statues. Others have suggested those who are offended to construct their own monuments in recognition of their stories.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall; the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama; and the new International African American Museum in Charleston are all examples of large-scale initiatives to formalize the history of Africans in the Americas. These examples are only a few of the many community, local, and regional government initiatives across the South.

Harris County created a committee to identify sites of memory that recognize Blacks who were lynched here. I am honored to be a part of that committee's working group.

We know many other examples, such as the story of the Sugarland 95. We must acknowledge, preserve, and memorialize these histories in order to prevent such atrocities from reoccurring.

These places of cultural importance matter. They are worth preserving and celebrating as foundational assets within our urban communities. Here in Houston, our Freedmen's Town is a critical link to the history of the African diaspora. We owe it to the generations that preceded us as well as the generations to come to protect our cultural assets.

*Daimian S. Hines, AIA, LEED AP BD+C, is Principal of Hines Architecture + Design. Hines has been an RDA member since 2018 and currently serves on its Board of Directors.*