

Artsy, Avishay "Destination Crenshaw pays tribute to Black creativity and history in Los Angeles," *UCLA Newsroom*, 8 February 2022.

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Newsroom

Destination Crenshaw pays tribute to Black creativity and history in Los Angeles

UCLA faculty and alumni contributed ideas, expertise and artworks to the \$100 million revitalization project



Overhead view of Destination Crenshaw's Sankofa Park featuring designs for works by Maren Hassinger, Kehinde Wiley and Charles Dickson. Rendering: Perkins&Will

A cultural and economic corridor that celebrates the contributions of Southern California's Black community is coming to South Los Angeles. Destination Crenshaw is a \$100 million revitalization project that will bring public art, pocket parks and small business investment to 1.3 miles of Crenshaw Boulevard.

Helping bring this project to life? UCLA faculty and alumni.

Crenshaw is a neighborhood in transition. Construction of a light rail line connecting Crenshaw and LAX airport and the opening of SoFi Stadium in nearby Inglewood have boosted home values and brought in new businesses, while accelerating gentrification and displacement. Destination Crenshaw was incorporated as a non-profit in November 2017 to draw attention to the area's Black history and culture.

"It was a way to kind of lay an anchor and say that this is a Black community, and we want to show that through our cultural heritage," said Darnell Hunt, dean of social sciences in the UCLA College, and a member of the Chancellor's Council on the Arts. Since 2017, Hunt has served as an advisor to the project at the invitation of city councilmember Marqueece Harris-Dawson, who is spearheading the initiative.

Members of Harris-Dawson's staff had read "Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities," a book that Hunt had co-edited with Ana-Christina Ramón at the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA and published in 2010.

In his role as advisor, Hunt recommended key moments and figures in Black L.A. history to include. Marcus Hunter, a professor of sociology and the inaugural chair of the department of African American studies at UCLA, also became an advisor.

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"UCLA was kind of the scholarly anchor," Hunt said. "We were the place that was trying to make sure that they were staying true to the history."

The community partners working on Destination Crenshaw include artist Judith Baca, distinguished professor emeritus in the departments of Chicana and Chicano and Central American studies and world arts and cultures/dance, and a long list of UCLA alumni: arts educator and independent filmmaker Ben Caldwell, educator Mandla Kayise, curator Naima Keith, community organizers Karen Mack and Alberto Retana, and art advisor Joy Simmons.

Rendering by Perkins&Will, courtesy of Destination Crenshaw

Kehinde Wiley's "Rumors of War" figure in the location of his planned Destination Crenshaw sculpture, which will be a bookend to "Rumors of War" and feature a female figure.

Turning insult into opportunity

Destination Crenshaw took shape after the Metropolitan Transportation Authority announced plans to build the portion of the Crenshaw/LAX line between Hyde Park and Leimert Park at-grade, rather than underground. Area residents fumed at how building the line at-grade would bisect Crenshaw Boulevard in two, making it less walkable and thereby reducing the foot traffic vital to small businesses and a connected community.

Locals vowed to turn an insult into an opportunity, launching an ambitious project to upgrade infrastructure, build community gathering places and parks, add more than 800 trees, invest in small businesses on the boulevard, and install public artworks by local Black artists.

In meeting with Harris-Dawson's office, Hunter, a Leimert Park resident, heard city council staff members talk about Crenshaw/LAX rail passengers "passing through" the area.

"Then it became a discussion about like, what does it mean to pass through?" Hunter said. "You want to invite people to get off, but also you want people to have some kind of experience or awareness of what they're passing through on their way to downtown or wherever they're going on the train."

Rendering by Perkins&Will, courtesy of Destination Crenshaw

Artis Lane's sculpture "Emerging First Man" in Sankofa Park.

Creating a showcase space for public art

Destination Crenshaw, which spans Crenshaw Boulevard from 48th to 60th streets, will include a new "Afrocentric streetscape" design and six new pocket parks. More than 100 public artworks and exhibits, including monuments, statues, murals and augmented reality storytelling, are set to be included. In October 2021, the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Commission approved plans for seven permanent outdoor sculptures along the route. Destination Crenshaw commissioned work from seven prominent Black artists with local ties, including Kehinde Wiley and Alison Saar. Artists Maren Hassinger and Brenna Youngblood, both UCLA alumna, have also been commissioned to create work.

Hassinger, who was born in Los Angeles in 1947, recalls childhood visits to the May Company department store at the corner of Crenshaw and Santa Barbara (now Martin Luther King Jr.) boulevards. She graduated from Bennington College in Vermont with a bachelor's in sculpture in 1969, and from UCLA with an M.F.A. in 1973. Her work often incorporates unconventional materials such as plastic bags, leaves and branches, wire, rope and found trash.

For the Destination Crenshaw project, "I knew right away that I wanted to do something that I hadn't done before," Hassinger said, "but I somehow wanted it to reflect on an L.A. experience. When I think of L.A., I think of bright and sunny and shiny and warm and loud and busy, and for some reason, I started seeing this pink sphere in my head."

Hassinger's sculpture will be installed on a grassy area at the center of Sankofa Park, an elevated outdoor plaza that Destination Crenshaw is building at 46th Street. "An Object of Curiosity, Radiating Love" is a large fiberglass orb, hot pink and six feet in diameter.

As people approach the orb, sensors will trigger it to light up and emit a soft pink glow. This sensation of a dialogue with passers-by is meant to evoke the community-minded spirit of a neighborhood in the midst of a dramatic and unsettling transition.

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"So, it's as if this warm hot pink thing said hello, or winked, or nodded. I want you to know, as a person walking by, that you're noticed. You exist," Hassinger said.



Rendering by Perkins&Will, courtesy of Destination Crenshaw
Sankofa Park featuring design for Maren Hassinger's sculpture "An Object of Curiosity, Radiating Love."

Destination Crenshaw moves ahead

Construction on Destination Crenshaw slowed during the height of the pandemic, but work is now moving apace, and organizers expect the project to be completed by spring of 2023, and to debut the seven permanent artworks before next fall. Fundraising now stands at about \$72 million, and the Getty Foundation has provided \$3 million to commission and fabricate the first seven sculptures, as well as plan for their conservation. The project, which aims to include more than 100 works of art by Black artists, will continue to commission new works in order to create what's billed as "the nation's largest art and cultural celebration of African American contribution to world culture."

"The intention is to enshrine in a proper, meaningful way what Black people have contributed and that they were here, even if you're not seeing them now, that they were here and they contributed," Hunter said.

And while the new streetscaping, pocket parks and large-scale sculptures may lure passengers off the train, the project is largely aimed at boosting local businesses and catering to those who live in the district, not just pass through it.

"It's definitely for the Black community. It's about staking claim to our history, our culture, and making sure that those stories are remembered," Hunt said. But, he added, Destination Crenshaw can also raise awareness that "this is a signature Black community that has a history and is connected to a broader history in L.A."