

The Hue Collective

Radical and Liberatory Spaces

By Michael Grant



Shaw Strothers, Alphonso Jordan, Tiffany Ricks, Eddie Opara, Jacinda Walker, Randall Wilson
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In response to a lack of physical space for black creatives; and out of a need for representation and support in industries of design, **The HUE Collective** was born.

In 2016, they started out as just a few creatives of color converged into a digital space. Through the prism of design they began to discover the many bonds that tied them together. They shared work experiences, interests outside of the workplace, and the paths they each took to arrive where they were in their careers.

Founding members Randall Wilson, Tiffany Ricks, and Alphonso Jordan shared a bold vision: to gather and serve Black designers from all disciplines.

The three strongly felt the need to create an alternative to establishment design conferences where, by their measure, black designers are and have historically been underrepresented, under-invested and under-served.

Their desire to solve this problem led the three to ideate and develop an intervention for the disenfranchisement of black creative talent.

As they thought deeply about the potential of a conference-like experience by and for the black creative, they traded, shared and built on ideas large and small.

Welcome Dinner, 2019



With an emphasis on space, an integral sense of community, inclusion and an environment of learning, their vision began to take shape.

In 2017, the three labeled themselves The HUE Collective. Their first project, HUE Design Summit was set in motion the same year.

Building An “Unconference”

Being able to discuss topics with a familiar shorthand rarely enjoyed on the job caught on. Soon after, the opportunity to translate the feeling of that digital space into a physical realm showed real potential.

The HUE Collective set out to create an “un-conference” that welcomed black designers from all disciplines into a comfortable, safe space optimized for fellowship, learning, networking and professional development; they knew it was important to make the space feel welcoming.

The founding team believed a conference experience for the black designer should be devoid of the awkward feelings of angst that black creatives often experience as attendees at large establishment conferences where professionalism and respectability is predicated by white ideals.

The **HUE Design Summit** should create space where black creatives can bring their entire black identity along with their wonderful creativity.

To this end, they sought to provide an outlet for new and established designers coming from predominantly white workplaces, and could be who they are without reservation.

Emphasis was intentionally placed on casual experiences that the HUE team believed were integral to establishing a strong sense of community.

The experience also needed to be an authentic reflection of black life and common communal pastimes often found in their very own communities. At a HUE Design Summit, it's not uncommon to overhear conversations such as debates about Beyonce, be extended an offer to join a spades tournament or participate in karaoke, or enjoy cuttin' it up with drinks and friends new and old.

There is also a good argument to be made about how community might drive creativity. The HUE Collective believes that people are better able to create if they are closely connected —almost familial relationships —by existing harmoniously in the same physical space.

They found a gorgeous estate in a downtown Atlanta neighborhood called The Howard House which would serve the dual purpose of daily communal activities and rest. To begin the day with positive attitudes and spirits, they sourced a yoga instructor to stimulate mind and body.

Creating a unifying theme also drove the retreat. We wanted a purpose to tie the weekend together, to have something that attendees could take back, build upon and contribute to. A theme that couldn't be solved for over 3 days, but could be supported by breakout sessions and interactions throughout the time we spent together that could answer that overall question, "Why are we here?" With that in mind, we searched for venues, brainstormed activities, and reached out to design leaders that we thought would bring that vibe and purpose to life.

The goal: to challenge their thinking and provide commentary for attendees to leave the retreat with and ponder fueling the continued exchange of ideas within their own circle of designers, colleagues and friends.

For designers, observing the doodles and sketches of a peer could be motivation enough to inspire and explore new ideas. But while organic moments between creatives is a big part of the mission of creating community, the team also set its sights on growth and professional development as key components of the experience.

Education and professional development

With emphasis on providing educational content for designers of all (or at least most) disciplines, The HUE Collective made variety core to the mission of professional development. Rather than a conference focused on one area of design, the HUE Design Summit highlights the three design fields where most black designers can be found. Those include visual design, industrial design, and digital UX/UI and technological design.

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Gail Anderson, 2018

While emerging trends across disciplines are an important part of the conversation and learning, The HUE Collective has decidedly taken a historical approach to summit programming. To them, it's not just about the latest trends and techniques of today. Programming is intended to draw connections between the modern arts and past breakthroughs.

To date, every conference has featured one keynote speaker who has paved the way for contemporary designers.

Keynote speakers include Gail Anderson, an award-winning New York-based designer, writer, and educator. Anderson is a partner, with Joe Newton, at Anderson Newton Design, and teaches in the School of Visual Arts

MFA, undergraduate, and high school design programs. She shared some 30 years of her illustrious career including creative leadership roles at SpotCo, a New York City advertising agency that creates artwork for Broadway and institutional theater stints, Rolling Stone magazine, The Boston Globe Sunday Magazine and Vintage Books (Random House).

London born Eddie Opara joined Pentagram's New York office as partner in 2010. His projects have included the design of brand identity, publications, packaging, environments, exhibitions, interactive installations, websites, user interfaces and software, with many of his projects ranging across multiple media and clients including; lululemon, Samsung, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, and Nike. Opara is also a senior critic at the Yale University School of Art. He was named one of Adweek Creative 100 in 2018, one of Fast Company's 100 Most Creative People in Business in 2012 and 2014, and was featured in Ebony Magazine's Power 100 list.

Cheryl D. Holmes Miller holds the Master of Science-Communications Design degree from the Pratt Institute, N.Y. and the Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Maryland Institute College of Art. She is a former business owner of Cheryl D. Miller Design, Inc., a New York based design agency that serviced corporate communications to Fortune 500 clientele including IBM, American Express, McDonald's, and Time Inc. Cheryl's writings called on the need for diversity in the design industry in the 1980s, and were published in AIGA and Print Magazine. Miller's professional papers and legacy portfolio are preserved at, "The Cheryl D. Miller Collection at Stanford University." Her corporate posters are further collected at the Poster Museum, New York and the Design Museum, The Hague, Netherlands.

Behind the scenes, The HUE Collective team worked tirelessly to secure leading industry thought leaders of African descent. The collective prides itself in welcoming such leaders into an intimate setting—literally under the roof of a single house—for intimate conversations about the craft, and sharing the most inspiring moments of their incredible break-through careers.

Dian Holton, Eddie Opara, Dr. Dori Tunstall



The meaning of physical space

For decades, two issues persistently loom over black designers: a lack of blacks occupying space in design disciplines, and negative experiences in design disciplines.

Bobby C. Martin Jr., co-founder of Champions Design was interviewed by Print Magazine. He shared an article titled “The Black Experience in Graphic Design, 1968” left a lasting impression on him. “It is hard to believe that this article was written in 1968,” he said. “More than 50 years later, very little has changed. According to the 2019 design census created by AIGA and Google, Black men and women make up just 3% of the design industry. We are 13% of the total U.S. population. The failure to close that gap is a failure of our educational institutions, our industry organizations, and the design profession as a whole.”

An article titled, 39 Creatives Talk Being Black in the Design Industry—and What Needs to Change appeared in *House Beautiful* online in June, 2020.

Nina Brair, the Principal and Creative Director of NinaBDesign in New York City is quoted saying, “I live and work in TriBeCa and have on occasion been mistaken for either cleaning staff or a nanny whilst visiting job sites (to the extent of once being handed a baby). But always I have to somehow maintain my professionalism so as

not to perpetuate the stereotype and simply get the work done. I've had to compromise on negotiating rates in the past; I felt at times that people often don't see my worth as equal with white designers. When I express myself and demand high standards, I've been told I'm being aggressive or difficult, because people so easily default to the angry Black woman stereotype in a way they'd never do with a white designer, who'd just has 'high standards.'"

The AIGA survey data and Blair's comments illustrate the difficult professional world we as Blacks must navigate in all creative industries. Experiences like Blair's align perfectly with the motivations of The HUE Collective to develop an intervention.

As The HUE Collective leadership team slowly expands, so does the shared belief in the need for radical change in an industry that still struggles to be more diverse and inclusive.

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Kyra O'Kelley, is an illustrator and graphic designer who double-majored in Visual Arts and Marketing at Emory University. O'Kelley is a new member of the leadership team and considers the design industry status quo as problematic for Blacks. "We, as black people, can not claim freedom if we solely operate within the confines of what is acceptable to white, or even non-black, people," said O'Kelley.

The HUE Design Summit places the experience of black designers at the center. "HUE radically rejects the notion of whiteness being invited to the table," O'Kelley explained. As radical an idea it may seem to those outside of the black experience, for attendees, it feels more like liberation.

Founding member Alphonso Jordan added, "If you've ever worked in a corporate setting, you know what it's like to step outside, huddle by the water cooler to have a "safe conversation". This is what the summit did for us. But the entire house was that water cooler where everyone was welcomed to share."

Their choice in specifically supporting Blacks wasn't without deliberation about the implications for how the group might be perceived and the potential of deterring funders. The collective

raised important questions: Is it easier to pitch an un-conference that targets more broadly people of color or specifically black designers?

How valuable would engaging and sponsoring a black design summit be to the very places that struggle with hiring black designers?

To focus on designers of color more broadly, they felt, ran counter to HUE's true mission: to elevate and create equity for Black designers.

Shawn Harris, Special Projects Lead of the HUE leadership team explained the importance of controlling the methods by which corporations and funders interact with the group. "We are very intentional about how we allow non-black people to access HUE and the community we serve," Harris said. "We are not a DEI organization. We approach our relationships with corporate organizations being mindful that we do not put our community of black designers into spaces to feel exploited or on a stage for white audiences."

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A space where opportunities are born

James Howard, a software engineer at Mailchimp and one of the earliest members of the leadership team knows the benefits of the community the HUE team has built from the ground up. "The summit is such an enjoyable experience where you can share inspiration, resources, your story and lots of smiles and laughter with several black creatives," Howard says.

He's right. In that powerful combination of elements James described is a spirit of serendipity the HUE Summit has come to be known for among it's loyal following to measurable benefit. Since its inception in 2016, HUE's impact has led to opportunities large and small among summit attendees.

When the community was posed the question of particular connections and collaborations borne of the summit through the years, many weighed in.

Britt Davis, a Senior Graphic Designer at AMB Sports + Entertainment and Co-Founder of LCKR ROOM creative group, made a connection at the 2020 Summit. It was through this medium that she met Mike Nicholls, founder of Umber Magazine, a publication that deems itself “the creative thinker’s graphic journal from the Black and Brown perspective by visual artist and designer.”

Britt Davis saw Umber as the perfect outlet for her visual thesis, “Nostalgia in Sports Design,” completed at the Savannah College of Art and Design. The theses planned a commemorative campaign celebrating the 1924 Colored World Series. The project was published in Umber Magazine.

Some attendees become speakers, like the founders BlackBird Revolt—an organization promoting social change through conscious creativity, art and design.

Kai Frazier is an educator turned EdTech entrepreneur and founder and CEO of Kai XR. Frazier is also a past speaker at the Summit and attracted the planning team with her progressive approach to inclusive & accessible 360°(VR) —most notable for removing barriers for kids from under-served communities to “explore, dream, & create” in this emerging space.

At the HUE Design Summit, Frazier made a connection with Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall, a design anthropologist, public intellectual, and design advocate who works at the intersections of critical theory, culture, and design. Tunstall is Dean of Design at Ontario College of Art and Design University and she is the first black and black female dean of a faculty of design.

Frazier and Tunstall collaborated on a VR project for students to create new brand imagery.

Other serendipitous moments include two attendees meeting an educator and now mentor her design students. One designer got connected to Capital One’s hiring network. A leadership team member was commissioned for illustrations by AAGD.

Oen Hammonds of IBM connected with Omari Souza as a speaker at the State of Black in Design event. Many of the panelists were HUE Design Summit attendees through the years.

Renee Reid was a Summit host and connected with the legendary Eddie Opara for a “Wrap Queen” interview.

Brook Smith, partnerships lead at Hexagon, connected with Regine Gilbert to host their first book club meeting with Inclusive Design for a Digital World. They met at Hue Design Summit 2020.

Dr. Lesley Noel hosted a design thinking workshop at IBM in fall/winter 2020 with Oen Hammonds’ design team. They met during summit 2020. The post-Summit anecdotes are positive signals. The testimonials go on and on. With service, representation and opportunity in mind, the HUE leadership team believes they are on the right track in producing the sorts of outcomes they had targeted. It’s an indication that what they have built is working.

The future of HUE

With the nation challenged by a pandemic, and compounded by four years of a divisive presidency, the U.S. at large is still reckoning with race, equity and fair representation. From the expansive reach of the Black Lives Matter movement to the sticky question of “Where Are the Black Designers?” that fueled the deeper conversations of representation in the arts, The HUE Collective continues to ask itself, what role should HUE play?

There is an increasing number of black design organizations seeking to rectify issues endemic to the design community, and the leadership team welcomes any and all efforts to make the industries where we work more inclusive.

Here’s what they know: the HUE Design Summit has become the house for those black designers who are seeking refuge, acceptance, support, feedback, connection, inspiration and nurturing. But they also believe there is more work to be done.

The long term vision of The HUE Collective is to grow into a hub for connecting passionate organizations who wish to do the work of radically changing the design industry into a more habitable place. They wish to focus on improving

Oen Hammonds, 2019



the ecosystem of Black designers where organizations can communicate and collaborate in service of the greater good: revolutionizing the field of black design and boosting equity for black designers.

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The HUE Collective believes the continuous creation of equitable space can yield the greatest impact. And for the foreseeable future, the HUE Design Summit will continue to be a home for black designers. After all, they have found success building a foundational home.

“We walk into a home, some of us strangers, and leave as a family of Black designers,” said founding member Tiffany Ricks. “The bonds built over a weekend somehow transcend the experience itself. That motivates us to go back to the whiteboard and create something better than we did the year before.”

Yet the team seeks ways to support the larger community (i.e. the neighborhood) where the entire community lives and works.