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ALAN HOWELL | MBJ

Juan Self and Jimmie Tucker will move their firm into renovated space in Universal Life building.

## Architects rescue Universal Life

### Self Tucker to renovate, lease space in landmark building

BY JOHN SCRUGGS

Self Tucker Architects, Inc.  
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Self Tucker Architects, Inc., plans to renovate the Universal Life Building at Danny Thomas and Linden in a move that will add 20,000 square feet of available office space Downtown.

Self Tucker bought the building at 480 Linden for \$500,000 in January and will move into a 4,500-square-foot office on the second floor.

The Universal Life Building, constructed in 1949, has about 28,000 square feet of net space.

Jimmie Tucker says he and partner Juan Self plan to lease the remaining 20,000 square feet of office space with

the help of an outside real estate firm.

"We were attracted to the project by the building's unique architecture," Tucker says. "It's one of two Egyptian revival buildings in the city."

Tucker says the Universal Life Building is in good condition. He hopes they can keep total project costs, including the price of the acquisition, at around \$2.5 million.

Realizing the challenges of building under budget with rising material costs, Self Tucker is getting some solid consulting advice from Caroma Construction during the design process.

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# Self Tucker: Architects revive landmark

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"It's our hope that by working with them and our subcontractors on the front end, we will be able to avoid any design changes after the project is under way," Tucker says. "We're also focusing on major cost items like the HVAC system."

Caroma Construction president Don Jones says his company is trying to be creative to utilize any existing structures or systems in the building to keep project costs in check.

"We've known them (Self Tucker) for a long time, so we're helping them as consultants on this project," Jones says. "The building is in very good shape and it doesn't appear to have had many tenants, because it's not chopped up."

In addition to preserving an aesthetically pleasing historic building in Downtown, Tucker says Universal Life's history and role in the community are equally important.

"It's amazing some of the comments we get from people whose parents may have worked in the building for Universal Life," he says. "It was a real social hub at a time when Memphis was segregated."

Universal Life Insurance, founded

by J.E. Walker in 1923, was one of the nation's pre-eminent black-owned businesses.

"The building has economic significance in history as well as a civic and social significance," Tucker says.

"We've received a lot of positive support for the project so far."

The Universal Life Building was designed and built by McKissack & McKissack Architects, a black-owned architecture and construction firm in Memphis.

Self, principal in Self Tucker, worked for McKissack & McKissack early in his career.

"It's a limestone building with brick cladding, but it's a concrete structure," Self says. "It's very solid."

Self says he and Tucker have always been interested in development, so this project is an opportunity for them to fulfill a long-time goal.

"The neighborhood has great potential, being located in the sports and entertainment district that has already seen some redevelopment," he says. "We hope this project is a part of that continued progress."

