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Community Spirit: The Winners of the 2020 Richard H. Driehaus Foundation National Preservation Awards

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By:
Chris Warren

The winners of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation National Preservation Awards [Link: /awards] for 2020 inhabit three very different cities—Memphis, Tennessee; New York; and Boston. The winning projects, though, share a common goal: to make their neighborhoods stronger and more responsive to the needs of the people who live and work there. One houses a city agency devoted to helping small businesses, another provides essential health care services to the public, and a third creates job opportunities and access to healthy food.

The Driehaus Awards, which honor the nation's most outstanding and forward-thinking historic preservation and adaptive reuse projects, are sponsored by the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation and presented by the National Trust. This year's jurors [Link: /2020-richard-h-driehaus-foundation-national-preservation-awards-jury-announced] were Carl Elefante, principal emeritus of Quinn Evans Architects; Anthea Hartig, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History; and Justin Moore,

executive director of the New York City Public Design Commission. Read on to learn more about this year's winners.

Universal Life Insurance Building—Memphis, Tennessee

The Universal Life Insurance Company building, located on the edge of downtown Memphis, is at once a symbol of progress against adversity, a showpiece designed to celebrate Black history, and an engine for future economic and cultural progress. It's also a testament to the patience, persistence, and innovation of architects Juan Self and Jimmie Tucker, who purchased the deteriorating building in 2006. They spent more than a decade putting together the financing to renovate it for a new life, which began in earnest after its grand reopening in 2019.

Designed by influential African American architects Moses and Calvin McKissack, the building opened in 1949 as the headquarters of the Universal Life Insurance Company. Founded in 1923 by Joseph Edison Walker and a few partners, the company's original mission was to serve African Americans who were turned away from white-owned banks and financial services companies. With an avowed mission of "improving the economic condition of people of color," Universal Life Insurance Company offered mortgages, insurance, job opportunities, and scholarships to African Americans in and around Memphis.

Turns out, serving the Black community and helping to finance its dreams and progress was good business, despite the challenges of racial injustice. "It was an incredible accomplishment that team was able to make as African Americans in 1923, starting a business and growing it to be one of the largest insurance companies in the Southeast and having offices around the country, including on the West Coast," says Self. "I'm still in awe of everything they were able to do, particularly in that era."

Trey Clark

The original 1940s window frames were filled with energy-efficient double-pane glass, helping the project achieve LEED Gold certification.

The building itself was a visible and very intentional exclamation point on the company's success. Its architecture relied heavily on Egyptian Revival imagery, including reed-like front columns, that proudly celebrates African history. Terrazzo floors graced the interior and Tennessee

marble wainscoting was used liberally throughout the common areas. Gold leaf stenciling announced the names of office occupants in the 33,000-square-foot structure. And it wasn't just a hub for commerce. The Memphis branch of the NAACP made its home there, and a basement cafeteria became a locus for community gatherings during the Civil Rights era.

Though the Universal Life Insurance Company became one of the largest Black-owned businesses in Memphis by 1973, the company later wound up its operations and closed in 2002. Tucker and Self purchased the building in 2006 and worked with the National Park Service to get it listed on the National Register of Historic Places by 2007. "We began to put together a development plan and by the time we had it ready, 2008 hit, and the financial crisis blew it out of the water," recalls Self. "But we had so much skin in the game; we had to win."

It took another seven years to gather financing—a mix of federal historic tax credits and grants and, eventually, energy conservation bonds that made it possible to move into the construction phase. One critical step to securing rehabilitation funding was getting the City of Memphis to sign on as the major tenant. "That was incredibly significant because we talked to a lot of banks, and many times they questioned the mix of tenants being small businesses—even when they were law firms and engineering companies that were well established," says Tucker.

Today, the city's Entrepreneurs Network Center, which aids small businesses, occupies the building, along with the office of Self+Tucker Architects. Both Tucker and Self want to see the space once again become an engine of economic and community activity. Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation developed a public exhibit about the building and company's unique history that is housed on the first floor. Tucker and Self have been examining the possibility of bringing in a restaurant.

Their mission sounds like a 21st-century version of the building's original mission. "Our focus from the start was to become a hub of entrepreneurs, and in some respects the city office there helps to propagate that," says Self. "It's attracting entrepreneurs and creatives and creating a different vibe that is focused on economic development and business development so our community can grow and prosper."

Chelsea District Health Center—New York

When then-Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and other New York City officials made the groundbreaking decision to construct a network of public health facilities for low-income citizens in the 1930s, they took the buildings' design seriously. "The high quality of architecture was meant to communicate that they valued public health," says architect Stephen Yablon, whose firm recently transformed one of these buildings, the Art Deco–style Chelsea District Health Center.

Built in 1937 and located on Manhattan's Chelsea Park, the health center served its original purpose for decades. But by the early 2000s it and most of the city's other public health buildings were showing their age. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene developed a plan to reimagine some of them to become cutting-edge treatment centers for combatting sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV and AIDS.

After the city government commissioned Yablon to repurpose the Chelsea District Health Center, he found that the building no longer reflected the high level of care doctors and physician assistants were providing patients. "The doctors and caregivers are great people and dedicated to what they are doing. But the environment had a defensive look, like the patients were people to be defended against," he says. "You walked in the lobby and there was a security desk behind glass, and it's off-putting as soon as you enter. You would never do that in a private clinic."

Michael Moran

The original Art Deco exterior detailing has been conserved.

There were also functional obstacles. The existing building was not designed to accommodate modern medical equipment and infrastructure. Yablon's challenge was to come up with a design that served the needs of the professionals who work there while also creating an enticing interior that removed any hesitation patients might have about seeking care. "You want to communicate that there is no stigma to getting care and that you get the same level of care as somebody who has more income," says Yablon. "People need to know their self-worth is the same."

That meant reimagining both the exterior and the interior of the 26,128-square-foot building. The original exterior featured a black stone base, black casement windows that had been replaced over time, orange bricks, and cast stone accents. Years of use and exposure to the weather led to cracks in the masonry, and ugly window air conditioning units and ground-floor security grates provided more visual barriers.

Crews repaired the brick and stone while removing the grates in favor of security windows. A layer of insulation was added inside the exterior wall, and the existing non-historic windows were replaced with high-performance ones. (These and other energy efficiency upgrades earned the building LEED Gold certification.) On the rear elevation, Yablon and his team added a new, glass-enclosed stairway.

The Chelsea District Health Center reopened in 2018 as the Leona Baumgartner District Health Center (after the city's first female health commissioner) and is also now known as the Chelsea Sexual Health

Center. In the interior clinical spaces, undulating ceilings are made of wood slats, which both contributes to a natural, stress-free environment and creates the space required for new HVAC equipment. "The curved ceiling accommodates extra infrastructure, and that's how we put the ducts in. But when the ceiling goes back up, you get more of a sense of height, which is important in older buildings with low floor-to-floor height," says Yablon.

Since the building opened, the $23 million rehabilitation has received just the sort of reaction he wanted. Patients have posted on Yelp that going to an appointment is as pleasant as visiting a museum. "We know that the staff likes working there, and the department is proud of the facility," says Yablon. "To us, it's a model of what a public clinic can be."

Fowler Clark Epstein Farm—Boston

As a child growing up in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester, Patricia Spence used to ride her bike past a dilapidated old farmhouse in neighboring Mattapan. "It was the creepy house," recalls Spence. "I've known that property all my life."

Today, Spence spends a big chunk of her life at the property that once frightened her. That's because the 18th-century Fowler Clark Epstein Farm has become the headquarters for the Urban Farming Institute of Boston [Link: http://urbanfarminginstitute.org/] (UFI), the nonprofit she runs. Its mission is to promote urban farming as a vehicle to increase access to healthy food in disadvantaged neighborhoods, catalyze economic activity, and train people to become capable farmers and entrepreneurs. UFI manages seven farms in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, and earns income by selling its produce to local restaurants and food trucks as well as through farm stands and community supported agriculture programs.

But the idea that the Fowler Clark Epstein Farm would be a suitable headquarters for anything was highly unlikely just a few years ago. Once a part of a 330-acre tract of agricultural land owned by the Fowler family since 1636, the property gained a Federal–style farmhouse in 1786. In the 1860s the farm's new owners, the Clark family, added a carriage barn to the estate. (See the Winter 2019 issue of Preservation for a larger story [Link: /a-revitalized-historic-farm-thrives-in-one-of-bostons-oldest-neighborhoods] on the property's past and present.)

Over time, the original 330 acres dwindled to about three-quarters of an acre containing the farmhouse and barn. Jorge Epstein, a local jeweler and collector of weathervanes, doors, turrets, and other architectural pieces, purchased that smaller property in 1941. The onetime farm became known for his salvage business, Old Mansions Company, which gave interior designers and home rehabbers access to his vast collection. After Epstein died in 1998, the property quickly fell into disrepair.

In 2005 the Boston Landmarks Commission learned of plans to demolish the historic buildings and stepped in to designate them as landmarks, which meant they couldn't be knocked down. A decade later the nonprofit preservation group Historic Boston Inc. (HBI) purchased the abandoned and much diminished property.

Kathy Kottaridis, HBI's executive director, says the motivation to purchase the farm wasn't just to save the farmhouse and barn; rather, it was that the property had the potential to benefit the surrounding neighborhood. "One of the criteria we have for evaluating properties before we take them on is whether transforming them would result in something bigger," she says. "It's as much about respecting architecture and history as doing it in a way that answers questions about whether they can stand on their own in a modern economy and how they can do that."

Eventually, UFI and HBI connected. Years of work went into assembling $3.8 million in financing to fund the rehabilitation of the farm, a package that consisted of state and federal historic tax credits, funding from nonprofits such as the Trust for Public Land, individual donations, and more traditional debt and equity financing.

Once the money was available, rehabilitation work began, overseen by architecture firm Perkins and Will. The barn and house's exteriors remained intact, and the interiors were adapted into offices, storage space, food prep areas, community meeting space, and a demonstration

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kitchen. UFI moved into the property in 2018.

COVID-19 has forced UFI to suspend one farm stand as well as in-person instruction for staff farmers and classes for local residents. But these programs have moved online, and the organization is finding other ways to engage the community, including constructing and distributing "grow boxes" that locals can use to cultivate their own produce. Though UFI has been renting the farm from HBI, it is now raising money to buy the property outright. It has also added a greenhouse so it can more easily grow produce year-round.

When the initial plans for re-purposing the farm were in their infancy, Spence knew it was important to reach out to the community to elicit its support. "People were skeptical at first," she remembers. By the time the farm reopened in 2018, local citizens had become ardent supporters.

"The community was so happy something was being done with the farm," says Spence. "The fact that we were growing food, and the people doing the work looked like them, made all the difference."

Chris Warren is the former editor in chief of Photon Magazine, a solar industry trade publication. His work has appeared in Los Angeles Magazine, the Los Angeles Times, National Geographic Traveler, and the Oxford American Magazine.