

JIMMIE TUCKER

MANAGING PRINCIPAL, SELF + TUCKER ARCHITECTS

interview by Terre Gorham • photo by Isaac Singleton

I was born in 1954 in South Memphis. At that time, it was a solid, all-black, middle-class neighborhood of teachers, postal workers, school principals, ministers — all professional people. We lived down the street from our elementary school, Walker Elementary, which is now the Ida B. Wells Academy.

I'm the oldest; my sister is one year younger, and my brother is six years younger. My mother still lives in the same house that we grew up in. There were a lot of other children in the neighborhood, and we'd play outside with them. We shot marbles, rode bikes, and played basketball in our backyard. WDIA had a baseball league in Bellevue Park. Back then, it was OK to go around the neighborhood by yourself and play all day — something, in these times, I wouldn't let my 15-year-old daughter do growing up.

My father was not a college-educated man, but he was very intelligent and read a lot, and he strongly supported and valued education. He worked for more than 20 years as a chauffeur and messenger for L.T. Barringer and Co. on Cotton Row. He was a personable, resourceful, and thoughtful individual, and he interacted well with people. He always treated others with respect, and he wanted to be respected, as well.

My mother was a registered nurse at John Gaston Hospital. Mom was more of the disciplinarian. She was very religious, very compassionate, and very nurturing — and she is still that way today at almost 90 years old. She also had a strong work ethic and, like my father, was a positive person. Both of them tried to see the upside and potential in challenging situations.

She and my father juggled their work schedules so that one of them — if not both — was always involved with the kids. Mom even served as PTA president. Dad took us to baseball games, and he taught us about his coin collection. The five of us always had dinner together as a family.

Despite the racial inequalities of the time, my parents were always very encouraging and made us aware that if we worked hard and got a good education, we could do anything we wanted to do in life. In short, I grew up in a very good home environment.

I started delivering the *Press-Scimitar* every day after school when I was about 12. My father helped me at first. He would start at one end of my route, I would start at the other end, and we'd meet in the middle. I learned how to collect payments, keep records, behave diplomatically — it was good training for how to be a successful businessperson.

One of my favorite hobbies was putting together model-car kits, painting them, and accessorizing them. It taught me how to take a two-dimensional "floor plan" and figure out how to make a three-dimensional object from it — while also having the flexibility to determine what the final outcome would look like. I put together a lot of those kits.

In 7th grade, I took a mandatory drafting class, and that's where my first spark of interest in architecture fired. I liked that you had to think about two-dimensional drawings in three-dimensional outcomes. I learned how to draw plans, and I found that I enjoyed drawing. I also liked the drafting tools we used: T-square rulers, protractors, triangles, and compasses. Drafting connected with me.



The *Press-Scimitar* and *Commercial Appeal* offered college preparatory school scholarships, and my district manager encouraged me to apply. I did and was accepted to The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey — about five miles from Princeton University. It was a whole different world up there, and my world expanded exponentially. I do commend my parents for letting me leave Memphis and travel a thousand miles away when I was only 14 years old.

A classmate's father was an architect — the first architect I ever knew. He helped my classmate build a very intricate balsa-wood model of a cathedral. I was fascinated watching them build this model over a period of time, and that experience stuck with me. During my time at Lawrenceville, I decided I wanted to be an architect.

I graduated five years later and stayed in New Jersey to attend Princeton, where I graduated with a B.A. in architecture and urban planning. I came back to Memphis and worked for a year with Clair Jones, Walk Jones, Francis Mah, and Harold Thompson.

Education called to me again, and I went to Washington University in St. Louis to earn my master's in architecture. I stayed in St. Louis and worked for a firm there. In 1989, the firm sent me to direct their New York office and manage the projects there. I remained in New York until 1995.

Around that time, I started thinking about opening my own firm, and I came back to Memphis to explore the idea further. A friend, Cheryl McKissack, encouraged me to meet an associate of hers, Juan Self, who was managing the Memphis office of the family-owned firm, McKissack and McKissack Architects. She said Juan could help me get a feel for the business environment and architectural community in Memphis. I had nothing to lose and everything to gain, so I arranged a meeting.

At some point during our talks, Juan said he was interested in going out on his own, too. Instead of opening two competing firms, it made sense to us to open one firm together. We opened Self and Associates in September 1995, in a room we leased from Toles & Associates.

When I became registered as an architect in Tennessee in 1996, we changed the firm name to Self Tucker Architects.

I've been fortunate to be able to do something that I love every day. I gain a lot of satisfaction from making an impact on my community. I grew up here, and I've watched the changes. The challenges are rewarding, and I feel good about our firm's accomplishments — and we have so many aspirations ahead of us.

Primarily, an architect is responsible for ...

successfully helping clients achieve their vision and aspirations for a building and associated exterior space.

In architecture, "good design" is ...

relevant, responsive, engaging, and inspiring.

My first architectural project in Memphis ...

was a proposed new building, Reynolds Hall, for LeMoyné-Owen College.

The public's biggest misperception about architects ...

I think architects are often seen as somewhat elitist and inaccessible. To counteract that, we work with organizations such as Memphis City Schools to connect architecture to young people so they can see architecture as a possible career choice.

One of the key responsibilities of an architect is ...

ensuring compliance with fire and life-safety codes. Our passion is good design,

but safety is extremely important. For example, you've got to make sure there are adequate exit doors in case of an emergency. If fire strikes, building materials should burn at a reasonable rate. Once people have exited the room, there needs to be a protected route through the building to the outside.

The biggest challenge for an architect ...

is helping clients understand the scope of their projects and how their ideas can best be achieved. This has to be done against a backdrop of considerations such as client budget vs. cost, numerous building-regulatory requirements, and balancing function and creative design. A strong design concept is an essential element, but it's the "nuts and bolts" of the process that always requires the most time and effort to make projects successful.

An early lesson I learned ...

is that the earlier you identify something that needs to be corrected, the less costly it will be and the less time will be involved. That's why we do design charrettes and use an intensive review system in our firm.

It's important for architects to ...

stay engaged with the project. Even after a set of drawings is completed and the project is under construction, you still have opportunities to help resolve whatever issues may arise and ensure that the design intent is achieved.

The most challenging project we've had ...

was the FedExForum. Eyes throughout our community were on that project, the largest public-building construction project in Memphis history. It was a collaboration among four architecture firms, with a tight schedule and a large budget that had to be maintained. The project was delivered on time and on budget to the City of Memphis.

The three projects I'm proudest of ...

I am most proud of the work I've done to revitalize Downtown Memphis and neighborhoods such as the FedExForum, Stax Music Academy and Museum, and the Heritage Landing Hope VI project, currently under construction.

When I was president of the American Institute of Architects Memphis Chapter ...

it was 2008, and efforts toward being more sustainable were beginning to gain traction. One of the initiatives I promoted was for AIA to focus on green and sustainable design. Another strategy we worked to implement was for different professional organizations that share a common interest in the community — architects, engineers, contractors, and the like — to work cooperatively in order to better leverage our resources.

My goal as the current president of the National Organization of Minority Architects Memphis Chapter ...

What we've accomplished so far is connecting architects in Memphis to a broader network of architects throughout the country so we can share best practices, experiences, information, and knowledge. It's important to not only understand what is going on in your particular community, but also what's going on in similar cities around the country. We want young architects to understand how critical and beneficial it is to have a professional network that's much broader than their colleagues in Memphis.

My list of "firsts" includes ...

Well, I was the first African American to serve as AIA president, but I don't really focus on "firsts." It seems somewhat distracting from the more important issue: What did you accomplish? What legacy did you leave? So it's not about being first; it's about what you have accomplished.

A project especially near to my heart ...

I designed our house, and although I am pleased with the way it turned out, I find myself critiquing details about it every day!

I've never designed ...

a new museum from the ground up. In the case of the Stax Museum, it was

the recreation of an important, historic building. In the case of the National Civil Rights Museum, it was designing within an iconic, existing building. We'd like to design a structure that makes a statement relative to the story being told within the building, in the form and aesthetics of the building itself.

My first name ...

Jimmie is my given name, not a nickname. My mother was one of 11 children who grew up on a farm in Canton, Mississippi, and Jimmie was a fairly common name in the South.

Growing up, my perception of civil rights ...

I understood that there were certain separations of the races, but at the same time, it was a period of change. I was aware of important politicians, activists, and community leaders fighting for equal rights.

When Dr. King was assassinated, I was ...

14 years old, out on my paper route. One of my customers told me what had happened. I knew Dr. King was a very important civil rights leader making big strides in the fight for equality. It upset and concerned me. I finished my paper route and then went straight home.

The part of architecture that requires the most stamina ...

Each job requires the successful coordination of so many aspects: client and user goals and aspirations, site, aesthetics, and budget, all to elevate the experience of buildings and public places.

My favorite architecture-related television show ...

I am a junkie for HGTV. I watch it all the time. I find out about new materials; I see different design solutions. I also see how different people design in other parts of the country. Up until a few years ago, there

really weren't any shows that featured architects — other than *The Brady Bunch!*

When I'm not being Jimmie Tucker the architect, I like to ...

travel and spend time with my family. I really enjoy snow skiing, but I don't have as much opportunity to do that here in Memphis as I did when I lived on the East Coast. I must admit that I am a workaholic, although I try to integrate architecture into my other interests.

My family ...

I met my wife, Cleora, shortly after moving back to Memphis in 1996, and we married in 1997. She is the director of operations for Self + Tucker. Our daughter, Kira, is 15 and is an honors student in the Memphis City Schools system. I haven't yet convinced her to become an architect!

My most memorable career moment ...

was when I became a registered architect in 1993. Becoming a registered architect is like a lawyer passing the bar exam. It's a big deal, and it opens up a lot of opportunities.

I'm not very good at ...

being patient. I want to charge in right away and handle whatever the situation may call for. I'm learning that sometimes it's best to let affairs develop in their own time and in their own way.

When a project is finally completed, I feel ...

It's one of the best feelings you can have, especially when you are able to meet or exceed your client's expectations, as well as your own. Similarly, it's also gratifying when you reveal a concept to someone and see their excitement at how you've interpreted their vision, and then you transform it into a reality for them. I have strived to embody what being a "service professional" is all about.

My final 2 cents ...

Design like you want to change the world! 