

EMPHASIS Architects & Engineers



Self-Tucker Focused on Designs to Inspire

By Michael Waddell

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Self-Tucker Architects wants to lift the aspirations of the community through great architecture and design.

The firm is currently involved with a variety of high-profile projects across the area, including the



Juan Self, left, and Jimmie Tucker, principals at Self-Tucker Architects, are associate architects for the Memphis Bioworks Foundation Specialized Laboratory, among many of the firm's projects.

(Daily News/Lance Murphey)

National Civil Rights Museum and the new ground transportation center at Memphis International Airport, and past work includes the Stax Museum, Stax Music Academy and the FedExForum.

“Good architecture can reflect the current human condition, and great architecture can lift us towards our aspirations, so we are always striving to create great architecture to help lift us up,” said managing partner

Juan Self. “Architecture is one of the most exciting fields to be in because we get to learn about other professions and how the facilities they work, live in and play in can enhance their experience.”

Self moved to Memphis from Washington in 1989 to open an office for McKissack and McKissack, and co-partner Jimmie Tucker returned to Memphis in the mid-1990s after attending school in St. Louis and then working as a registered architect in New York. The pair met in 1994 and decided to open their own firm.

“Rather than have two competing firms, we decided to form a partnership,” Tucker said.

Self has a strong interest in ecclesiastical architecture and cultural projects like museums and libraries, and he is the only person to work on all three major design projects at the National Civil Rights Museum over the past 20 years.

Construction began last October on the most recent renovations, which include the addition of a proper archive area for curating exhibits. The

\$7.5 million phase should be completed by October, followed by a \$7.5 million updating and revamping of the museum's exhibits, with a projected completion date in the first quarter of 2014.

"It is going to be a very moving experience and also a more interactive experience," Self said.

The renovated museum will be associated with the Memphis Heritage Trail, a project in the planning stages now.

"That project will be important in attracting tourists to our city and from an economic development perspective," said Tucker, who pointed out similar projects are being done in cities like Birmingham, Ala., Washington and Indianapolis.

Tucker is also excited about the upcoming opening of the South Memphis Farmers Market at the end of this month.

"It's going to have a big impact," he said. "That area is considered to be a food desert since there is a real lack of fresh fruits and vegetables and nutritious food options. I'm from South Memphis and I grew up in that area during its heyday, so I've seen the area when it was more vibrant in years past and it's great to see its resurgence. It's what gets me excited about being an architect – to see projects take place that have a very positive impact and begin to revitalize areas that have maybe been on hard times."

Self-Tucker is also the design architect for one section of the new bike trail and boardwalk that will run across the Harahan Bridge and connect Main Street in Downtown Memphis to the Main Street West Memphis trail. Self-Tucker is responsible for the fourth segment, which is budgeted at \$20 million and measures slightly more than a mile.

"We see that project as one that will have a lot of importance for the city of Memphis going forward in creating an even more vibrant riverfront," Tucker said.

The firm is also the architect of record on the new \$100 million seven-level ground transportation center at Memphis International Airport, which opened for business in March. The firm teamed with Walker Parking Consultants on the project.

Like many businesses, Self-Tucker navigated choppy waters after the recession of a few years ago, including reducing salaries for a time.

"Everyone sacrificed, and we were able to hold our team together," Self said. "And as the economy started to rebound, we were in a good position to handle the work."

Most recently the firm promoted Mario Walker, who worked at the firm while a student at the University of Memphis, to the position of project designer. The firm maintains a staff of 20 that includes six registered architects and four LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) accredited advisers.

One business strategy to help win new bids of the past few years has been to form strategic alliances with other firms that have expertise in specialized areas needed for particular projects.

The firm most recently teamed with Moody Nolan of Columbus, Ohio, and its expertise with assimilation facilities at medical campuses, to bid on a new project for UT Medical Group.

"Coming out of the economic downturn it's been a much more competitive market, particularly for larger, high-profile projects," said

Tucker, whose current projects include the expansion of the Memphis Business Academy, the Greenlaw Community Center and the new Memphis Bioworks Innovation Center. “We consistently team with well-known national firms, and we try to cultivate the positive relationships that we’ve built over the years. For the Bioworks project we teamed with Perkins-Will.”

Locally, Smith-Tucker has teamed with archimania to pursue projects like the renovation of the Vasco A. Smith Jr. Administration Building, as well as the Hattiloo Theater, which recently had its groundbreaking in Overton Square.

Both Self and Tucker are also heavily interested in development and are examining options for the Universal Life Insurance Building, which has been hanging in development limbo after the pair bought the building in 2006 and then the recession hit.

“I’m very optimistic that we will be able to develop it and bring life to the building in the very near future, hopefully in six months to a year,” Self said.

Self-Tucker might relocate its offices there and occupy up to 20 percent of the building, with hopes of finding the right mix of tenants to occupy the remaining 80 percent of space.