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Self Tucker Architects Concrete history

Architects to reshape black success symbol to office building

By **Amos Maki**

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Jim Weber
The Commercial Appeal

Jimmie Tucker (left) and Juan Self, of Self Tucker Architects, have bought the Universal Life Building with plans to turn it into an office building.

As architects, Juan Self and Jimmie Tucker, principals of Self Tucker Architects, have helped design a host of historic spaces with connections to the city's rich African-American heritage.

Their influence has been felt in projects like the STAX Museum of American Soul Music and Robert Church Park, the Beale Street green space named after the city's first black millionaire.

Now, Self and Tucker are turning their attention to another historic space: The Universal Life Insurance Co. building on Linden.

Self and Tucker own the 33,000-square-foot building and plan on turning it into an office building that they hope will encourage more development in the area.

The building, built in 1949, was the headquarters of the insurance company that was founded by Dr. J. E. Walker, A.W. Willis Sr. and M.W. Bonner in 1923.

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The project is Self Tucker's first foray into development, and the company will move its office into the building. The owners plan on recruiting businesses to fill the space.

"We have had a keen interest in development and we saw this as a great opportunity for development, not only for the building itself, but for the surrounding area," Self said.

The building sits at the corner of Linden and Danny Thomas, in the shadow of FedExForum and much of the development that has occurred Downtown over the last few years.

Tucker and Self are very much aware of the building's history and the company's role in the African-American community, and they vow to treat it with a "careful respect."

"It's almost difficult to express how much we appreciate the history," Tucker said. "It's important we sustain the development and let it reflect the history it played such a valuable role in."

The Universal Life Insurance Co. became one of the largest African-American-owned insurance companies in the country. The building was designed and built by McKissack & McKissack, a prominent African-American architectural firm.

Universal Life played an important role in the lives of many of the city's African-Americans, providing jobs and insurance coverage to working-class blacks.

Tucker, a native Memphian and former carrier for the defunct Memphis Press-Scimitar, delivered the newspaper to the home of Pat Walker Shaw, the daughter of A. Maceo Walker, who took over the company in 1953.

Maceo Walker was a towering figure on the business and civic landscape, always fighting for equal rights and for a greater share of the city's economic pie.

Deanie Parker, president of the Soulsville Foundation, said she knows Self Tucker will give the building the respect it deserves.

"The one thing I found to be extremely incredible about Self Tucker was a number of people on that team were already acquainted with Soulsville and the role Stax records had in the community, being the glue that held the community together," she said. "They have a knowledge of this city and a caring for this city and a feel for this city."

Self and Tucker formed Self Tucker Architects in 1995. They credit their success to sticking with what they know best and having a strong supporting cast.

"What helped me was not focusing on what we didn't know, but focusing on what we did know, and that is good architecture," Self said.

"We have a good team and we've had great support from clients and people in the community," Tucker said.

Parker thinks it is the community that is winning.

"There is nothing that makes a greater impression than African-Americans claiming, reclaiming and holding onto our heritage," she said. "That building is a landmark. That building represents the entrepreneurial spirit of this African-American community.

"It was a place of pride as much as STAX records was," Parker said. "I'm so glad they are doing it."

-- Amos Maki: 529-2351



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