



Serving the Community: A Q&A on the Universal Life Insurance Company Building

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The Universal Life Insurance Company Building is a 2020 recipient of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation National Preservation Awards, the highest national recognition bestowed upon a preservation project by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Award recipients represent the best of the best in historic preservation, adaptive reuse, and the re-imagining of historic buildings for the future.

The Universal Life Insurance Company Building in Memphis, Tennessee, is an architecturally unique site with a long tradition of community empowerment. Once home to the largest Black-owned business in Memphis, the building continues this legacy as an economic development resource for its diverse community.

Designed in 1947 by the renowned African American architecture firm McKissack & McKissack, the Egyptian Revival-style building's original owner was the Universal Life Insurance Company (ULICO), which was established in 1923 by J.E. Walker, A.W. Willis, and M.W. Bonner. The Walkers also founded Tri-State Bank to "constructively change

community conditions” for Black Americans in Memphis. By 1973, ULICO had become the largest Black-owned business in Memphis and the fourth largest Black-owned insurance firm in the nation.



Exterior view of the Universal Life insurance Building. | Credit: Trey Clark

Businessman and owner of Memphis’s first Black-owned radio station, WLOK, Art Gilliam started his career at the Universal Life Insurance Company after graduating from Yale University in 1963.

The building was also used as a meeting place for organizers of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Jesse Jackson and Sammy Davis Jr. After decades of service, ULICO terminated its operation in 2001 and Self Tucker Properties, purchased the building from Tri-State Bank. An innovative public-private partnership with the city of Memphis yielded critical funding for the restoration, and the city committed to a 10-year lease for

approximately 48 percent of the available space in the building. The city's Office of Business Diversity and Compliance and Self + Tucker Architects now occupy the building.

With the revitalization completed in 2018, the mission-driven developers aspired to make the building renovation a vibrant, healthy, and environmentally responsible development incorporating energy-efficient systems, recycled products, and waste reduction practices. The building has achieved LEED Gold Certification, and in the future, will feature a 50-kW solar parking canopy.

As part of the Memphis Heritage Trail, the Universal Life Insurance Company Building also includes a public historic gallery space highlighting the rich history of the building and the impact the founders made locally and nationally.

The following Q&A is with Jimmie Tucker—who along with Juan Self is a founding principles of Self + Tucker Architects—is one of three in a series of Q&A-style blog posts with the 2020 Driehaus Award recipients. Learn more about the full slate of 2020 awardees [here](#).

While reviewing your award nomination, our jury members were struck by the unique architecture of this building due to its uncommon nature in the South. Did its architectural style play a role in your decision to buy and restore the property?

As an architect, I was certainly inspired by the architecture of the Universal Life Insurance Company Building. Cities are defined by history, and the architecture is a tangible example of the legacy of the people and the place. Joseph Walker, Moses McKissack, and Calvin McKissack were very intentional about selecting the Egyptian Revival architectural style for the Universal Life Insurance Company Building because it contrasted with the typical western styles that dominated the Memphis landscape. The Egyptian Revival style, complete with obelisks and Egyptian symbols, has been described as embodying the achievements and intellect of Africans during an era in which Black Americans were stigmatized by stereotypes of supposed inferiority and lack of mental aptitude.

Self + Tucker Architects believes sustainability is simply part of architecture. Preserving or adapting a building so that it can be repurposed is the ultimate in recycling. Sustainable buildings should be designed to outlive their initial use and live on to become something else. We live this belief through our extensive experience with historic preservation projects, adaptive reuse projects, restorations, and renovations. Additionally, the city of Memphis itself benefitted. Saving historic buildings allows us to maintain the authenticity of our city and lets us collectively respect those who came before us—and those who will come after.

However, these types of projects require their own set of skills, research, and problem solving. We learned firsthand what it means to breathe new life into an old building—and to do so within budget and funding constraints. We had to make the case for a partnership with our city administration and enlist the support of community stakeholders with an affinity for the building. We also collaborated with preservation experts, leveraged the latest technology for sustainability and energy efficiency, and implemented an innovative financing strategy that included pursuing bond funding and available historic tax credits.

What was the most challenging part of this project?

The most challenging aspect of the project was to secure funding for the building renovation. We purchased the building in 2006, and it did not reopen until 2018. In 2007, we successfully placed the building on the National Register of Historic Places. However, this early success was thwarted by the recession of 2008. Additionally, throughout these years we received expressions of concern regarding the mix of the proposed tenants, which included professional services firms.

In 2012, we engaged in discussions with the city of Memphis about possibly forming a public-private partnership. The city ultimately agreed to lease 47 percent of the available tenants. Several possibilities were explored for potential tenant space. Fortunately, the city needed more space and greater visibility. This entity was the ideal use to bring the envisioned synergy to the building to create an ecosystem for entrepreneurs and creatives.

The public-private partnership also facilitated the bank financing that we were able to add to the capital stack, along with over \$2 million in bond funding. Additional equity was provided in the form of approximately \$700,000 in historic tax credit investment, and a Virginia-based family whose primary business is trucks and construction equipment sales became the Federal Historic Tax Credit investor for this project.

How does this building continue its history of “improving the economic condition of people of color” with its current use and focus on entrepreneurship today?

ULICO was originally located at the current site of the FedEx Forum but had to relocate. The area was experiencing “White Flight,” and ULICO was approached by a nearby white church interested in selling its building. But instead, ULICO decided to purchase the lot that now sits at Danny Thomas Boulevard and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue and build their own building. Documents indicate that this was an intentional decision for Dr. Walker to expand upon ULICO’s legacy by establishing autonomy. His actions were a decisive statement in opposition to negative stereotypes of Black Americans at the time, and also to bring some economic stability to the Black community in the Memphis area.

From 1923 to its untimely demise in the early 2000s, the Universal Life Insurance Company was a major driver of the economy of Memphis. As an African American-owned architecture firm, we carry on ULICO’s legacy of Black representation in the Memphis business community. With the adaptive reuse of the ULICO building as a business and innovation hub, we also hope to help accelerate the economic future of the city. The Universal Life Insurance Company Building provides a venue to facilitate the creation of a new generation of Memphis-based businesses.

What would make for a better Memphis? Stories help us to make sense of our world. The Universal Life Insurance Company Building is a story of Black struggle and Black success. With the opportunity to build on the foundation created by our ancestors and role models, we have a responsibility to preserve its history.

History gives us moments to reflect and examine what we have accomplished. If we judge ourselves by the accomplishments of Joseph Walker, A. Maceo Walker, and Patricia Walker [one of the founders and subsequent leaders of ULIC], we have not come far enough. However, by telling their story, we aspire to inspire a new generation to expand their aspirations.

What inspires you about this project?

It's amazing to think that Joseph Walker, A. W. Willis, and Mark Bonner founded the Universal Life Insurance Company just two years after the racial massacre of 1921 in Tulsa.

I continue to be inspired every day by the impact that the Walker family and the other Universalites had on the city of Memphis during the nearly 80-year existence of the company from 1923 to 2001. On an almost daily basis, people tell us stories of their connection to the Universal Life Insurance Company and how it had a positive impact on their lives. It would have been devastating for the city if this landmark had been demolished after the closing of the ULICO. Fortunately, the story lives on, and we are proud and honored that we were able to use our architectural expertise, passion, and commitment to the city of Memphis to intervene.

In an era of Jim Crow and intense segregation, Memphis made the Walker family, and vice versa. The Universal Life Insurance Company Building is a monument that addresses Memphis' accomplishments and reminds us that what transpires in the past reverberates into the future.

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