

# Tucker is first black architect to receive the Gassner Award

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Jimmie E. Tucker will be the first African-American to receive a prestigious award given yearly to a Memphis architect for his or her contributions to the profession and the community.

"I take it more in the context of the importance of being a role model, particularly for those aspiring architects," Tucker said Monday of being honored as the 2018 recipient of the Francis Gassner Award.

Tucker will formally receive the award Saturday during the AIA Memphis 65th Anniversary Gala at Ballet Memphis.

He was informed he'd be this year's recipient during a momentous 24 hours last week.

Tucker and the firm he founded with Juan Self, Self + Tucker Architects not only designed the \$6.2 million renovations of the historic Universal Life Insurance Building at 480 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., they had bought the then-vacant building a dozen years ago and developed the adaptive re-use project. The 68-year-old building played a prominent role in housing successful black businesses that served the underserved.

Tucker and his partners cut the ribbon Tuesday on what he considers to be his proudest achievement. The next day — which happened to be the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination — well known Memphis architect Frank Ricks called to tell Tucker he will be the 2018 Gassner honoree.

The news was all the more "meaningful because it came right after we had the ribbon-cutting of the Universal Life Building," Tucker said.

"... I'm having a sense of contemplation of what the City of Memphis had accomplished... and what we had accomplished in being able to have the ribbon-cutting of Universal Life the day before the call about the Gassner Award."

The award was established in 1977, the year that revered modern architect Francis Gassner died.

Tucker is a native Memphian and founding principal of Self + Tucker Architects, a 23-year-old firm whose tagline is "Designing A Better Memphis."

"Jimmie's dedication to improving communities across Memphis through practice and service, his unwavering commitment to fostering equity and the future of practice by encouraging youth to see design-thinking and the built environment as a means for building better communities for all, and his leadership in organizations such as The American Institute of Architects and the National Organization of Minority Architects is a testament to Francis Gassner's legacy," AIA Memphis leaders said in a release.

Tucker was also the first African American architect to serve as president of AIA Memphis.

His work has contributed to Memphis, particularly in underserved and distressed urban neighborhoods, according to AIA Memphis.

He has participated in the planning for the Memphis Riverfront Masterplan and Main Street to Main Street Multi-Modal Connector Corridor. He also has been engaged in master plans for Memphis 3.0, Cleaborn Homes, Memphis Choice Neighborhoods, Robert R. Church Park, Uptown West, Memphis BioWorks and Memphis Heritage Trail.

He has led community planning and neighborhood revitalization initiatives for South Memphis/Soulsville USA and Orange Mound.

Self + Tucker Architect has pursued "place-saving" as well as place-making projects, according to an AIA Memphis release. In addition to the Universal Life Insurance Building, he and his firm helped preserve Lauderdale Courts and stabilize Clayborn Temple.

Self + Tucker also started the process of getting LeMoyne-Owen College listed on the National Register as a historic district. The firm worked to preserve the president's home, Sweeney Hall, Steele Hall, Brownlee Hall and Hollis Price Library.

Tucker has also contributed to providing such affordable housing as Lauderdale Courts, LeMoyne Gardens Hope VI redevelopment, and Heritage Landing (formerly Cleaborn Homes).

Tucker serves as an adjunct professor of architecture at the University of Memphis.

"One of the things I tell my students: Neighborhoods that are experiencing certain challenges, those are the neighborhoods that really need our attention, our focus and our energy, and really deserve good design," Tucker said. "Those are the neighborhoods where you can really have an impact."

He was the founder and first president of the Memphis chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA). He also has served on the Downtown Memphis Design Review Board, and boards for the Urban Land Institute, United Housing, and U. S. Green Building Council.

Tucker grew up in South Memphis and attended Lincoln Junior High. He worked a newspaper route for the old Memphis Press-Scimitar when his district manager encouraged him to apply for a newspaper-sponsored scholarship that sent carriers to boarding schools.

Tucker won a scholarship and attended The Lawrenceville School near Princeton University, where he would earn his undergraduate degree and where he decided to become an architect.

"When they see I'm working hard and then my work is being recognized by my peers, I think it just says a lot about the state of our profession ... and the fact that good work is recognized and it's acknowledged and that all is very encouraging," Tucker said.