

Tucker's Nonprofit Work Mirrors Architectural Career

Friday, October 06, 2006, Vol. 121, No. 197
ZACHARY ZOELLER | The Daily News

Riding a bike or pushing a metal grocery cart, Jimmie Tucker delivered copies of the Memphis Press-Scimitar to about 100 South Memphians every afternoon from 1965 to 1968.

A sixth grader who enjoyed drawing and listening to Memphis soul music from the local recording mecca, Stax Records, Tucker learned the aesthetic nuances of his neighborhood as he made his way down cracked sidewalks on his daily route.

After more than two years delivering papers, W.C. Davis, Tucker's district manager from the Memphis Publishing Co., recommended he apply for a company scholarship for children.

Tucker won the scholarship and enrolled in The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, five miles from Princeton University. He eventually received his bachelor's degree in architecture and urban planning from Princeton.

"It took me out of my neighborhood and really broadened my horizons," he said.

Great wide world

Fast-forward to July 2006.

Tucker, founder and co-principal of Memphis architectural firm Self Tucker Architects Inc. with partner Juan Self, was named chairman of the board for United Housing Inc. With UHI, he provides pro bono architectural expertise to revitalize neighborhoods across Memphis.

Blending his professional know-how and intimate knowledge of Memphis past and present, Tucker creates housing that provides high quality living conditions for tenants while complementing its surroundings.

Every UHI house is low maintenance, meaning the interiors and landscaping require few, if any, improvements over time, and each home comes stocked with kitchen appliances as well as central heat and air.

"You see a lot of housing that is being built and sometimes it's just a missed opportunity," Tucker said. "You drive around neighborhoods and there's not a real effort to design something to add to the community in which it's being built.



Name: Jimmie Tucker
Position: UHI Board of Directors Chairman; Self Tucker Architects Founder and Principal
Company: Self Tucker Architects
Basics: A native Memphian, Tucker works with local nonprofit United Housing Inc. to provide affordable housing for low- to middle-income families in Memphis.

"Regardless of income, someone should feel good about living in their house," he said.

More than bricks and mortar

While Tucker is professionally based at Self Tucker Architects, he does not take his new position at UHI lightly.

His duties include leading the board of directors by keeping the motivation and goals of the organization at the forefront, he said. And he is confident that the 17-member board shares his high hopes.

"We have had a number of good, solid board members and that continues to be the case," he said.

Tim Bolding, executive director of United Housing, not only works with Tucker for UHI but teaches a class for women and minority business owners through the Center City Commission.

"It's really good to work with Jimmie," Bolding said. "He is a positive asset for our board of directors."

Currently, Tucker is working with UHI on two significant housing developments.

UHI has joined Ralph Smith and Jim Dickinson of ETI Corp. to plan a 320-unit subdivision in Frayser at James Road and McLean Boulevard. Construction of the 2,000-square-foot homes will begin in 2007.

While most UHI homes have sold in the range of \$65,000 to \$80,000, the homes in Frayser might go for \$150,000 to \$200,000, Bolding said.

"We're looking for that to be a signature project," he said. "I really want it to be a shot in the arm in the Frayser community."

UHI also has joined Nehemiah Housing Corp., a nonprofit, faith-based organization, to develop a subdivision in Whitehaven. Tucker is handling the design of 24 homes.

In each case, the opinions of neighborhood residents and future tenants are of utmost importance.

"It's not necessarily all about the buildings," he said. "You definitely want to engage the people ... so they don't see you as an outsider."

A museum guru

With Self Tucker Architects, Tucker has put his touch on many Memphis schools, churches and homes, most notably the Stax Museum of American Soul Music at 926 E. McLemore Ave. and the National Civil Rights Museum at 450 Mulberry St.

Designing the new Stax was a dream come true for Tucker, who, as a young musician, idolized the label's artists, such as Booker T. & the MG's, Otis Redding and Isaac Hayes.

When Self Tucker pitched its idea to Stax, Tucker and several colleagues formed a mock group, J.T. & the MG's - Jimmie Tucker and the Museum Gurus - complete with prop instruments and a dance routine.

"Stax was a very exciting project," he said. "I grew up in Memphis when Stax was a very viable organization."

Self Tucker is continuing work in the area with Town Center, a mixed-use, four-acre development across from Stax. Town Center will offer retail spaces and restaurants on its first floor with housing above.

As the Town Center likely will draw visitors from its neighbor, the importance to blend into its surroundings is crucial, he said.

"That's very much in keeping with the terms of New Urbanism," he said. "You may try to do something cutting-edge, but take cues from existing buildings and the streetscape so it's something that's not just put there in isolation."

New Urbanism tries to create pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods with character, emphasizing a variety of types of dwellings, a discernable neighborhood center and mixed-use development.

Are you passionate?

With a first-class education and co-ownership of a leading architectural firm, why does Tucker dedicate so much time to nonprofit work?

To him the question is nonsense.

"I feel like I'm a pretty fortunate person in some of the opportunities I've had, and I get great support within the community," he said. "I'm doing a profession that I'm really passionate about, and I feel that's an incredible privilege."