

**DOWNTOWN**

# Universal Life Building honored with national preservation award

By [Linda A. Moore](#), Daily Memphian

Updated: October 29, 2020 4:00 AM CT | Published: October 29, 2020 4:00 AM CT



The Universal Life building at 480 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Ave., seen here in 2015, was renovated by Memphis-based Self+Tucker Architects in 2018, at a cost of \$6.2 million. (Daily Memphian file)

The Universal Life Insurance Co. building in Memphis is one of three 2020 winners of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation National Preservation Awards.

The honor was announced Wednesday, Oct. 28 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The building at 480 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Ave., was designed in 1947 by Nashville-based African American architecture firm McKissack & McKissack and once housed one of the largest

Black-owned insurance companies in the nation.

The renovation of the Egyptian Revival-style building was done by another African American firm, Memphis-based Self+Tucker Architects, in 2018, at a cost of \$6.2 million. It is now the home for Self+Tucker and the City of Memphis Office of Business Diversity Compliance.

“This award is one that we are aware of because in 2018 Crosstown Concourse received the same award. It’s one of the top awards for preservation,” said Jimmie Tucker, who along with Juan Self, are the founding principals of the architecture firm. “So I decided to submit this year, and we’re very honored and excited about receiving this award.”

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### Self + Tucker celebrates 70 years of Universal Life building

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Universal Life, originally located on Beale Street, was founded in 1923 by J.E. Walker, A.W. Willis Sr. and M.W. Bonner.

The new location was completed in 1949 at what was then Linden Avenue and became a focal point for the Black community. It was the site of at least one Melrose High School prom and a gathering place during the Civil Rights movement. By 1973, Universal Life was the largest Black-owned business in Memphis.

Self Tucker Properties LLC bought the building in 2006.

Now, not a day goes by that someone doesn’t tell a story about their connection to Universal Life, Tucker said.

“We know the story and have found out a lot more since purchasing the building and endeavoring to preserve it,” he said. “One important fact, a lot has been said about the Memphis headquarters. Universal Life had a presence in 10 states and the District of Columbia. They had 200 people locally, but had as many as 700 people in their employ around the country. That was an incredible accomplishment for a company based here.”

The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007. It is also part of the Memphis Heritage Trail, celebrating Black achievement in business, cultural and music.

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### Crosstown Concourse receives prestigious preservation award

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In renovating the building, Self+Tucker left intact original woodwork, wood and glass doors, marble wainscoting and floors.

Other 2020 winners are the Fowler Clark Epstein Farm in Boston and the Chelsea District Health Center in New York city.

“We are deeply honored to partner with the Driehaus Foundation to recognize outstanding projects that demonstrate historic preservation’s potent combination of architectural innovation, economic power, and cultural enrichment,” said Paul Edmondson, president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in a statement. “This year’s recipients’ vividly demonstrate that activating historic places through partnerships and creativity supports the health and vitality of individuals and their communities across the country.”

The winners were by an external jury and will recognized on Oct. 29 during a virtual ceremony.

#### TOPICS

SELF+TUCKER ARCHITECTS

UNIVERSAL LIFE INSURANCE CO.

JIMMIE TUCKER

CROSTOWN CONCOURSE

#### **Linda A. Moore**

Linda A. Moore covers education, South Memphis and Whitehaven. A native of South Memphis, Linda has covered news in Memphis and Shelby County for more than 20 years and was formerly a reporter with The Commercial Appeal.

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