

Tacoma Urban Performing Arts Center (TUPAC)

Revitalizing Hilltop's Art Community



Tacoma's historic Hilltop neighborhood is growing and changing rapidly. New investment and infrastructure, including the recently opened Hilltop Link light rail station, are a double-edged sword for residents: they provide needed improvements and services while further accelerating the gentrification of the historically Black neighborhood. In the midst of this change, many in the community are working diligently to preserve the heart, soul, and rich cultural heritage of Hilltop.

Location

Tacoma, Wash.

Architect

Mithun

Size

10,000 SF

Tacoma Urban Performing Arts Center — known as TUPAC — has deep roots in the Hilltop neighborhood and relies upon the incredible power of art to inspire and unite its community in the face of unprecedented change.

TUPAC's mission is to provide the youth of Tacoma — particularly Black and BIPOC youth — with opportunities to achieve artistic excellence through culturally relevant, pre-professional dance training, community events, and classes in performing arts. It provides a wide range of courses, and while it is best known for its youth ballet program, people of all ages are welcome to participate in classes and community theatre productions.

"The importance of art in a community is more than just dancing and singing," said Klair Ethridge, TUPAC's co-founder and executive director. "The arts help us flourish, to experience and imagine the possibilities in life. You learn understanding and how to get in touch with your heart. When communities don't have that, there's a missing piece."

TUPAC was co-founded by Ethridge and Kabby Mitchell III, who was the first Black company member in the history of Pacific Northwest Ballet. Their vision was to create a place where underserved communities, long starved for arts and culture organizations, could go to learn and grow through the arts. In early 2023, TUPAC hosted a live theatre production of *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*, a well-known musical written and performed by Black artists. It was the first Black community theatre produced in Hilltop in more than 35 years.

"Hilltop has been a desert for performing arts — there was no avenue for our community to express themselves through art for a long, long time," Ethridge said. "It's amazing to have a part in providing that to this community, and this is just the start."

Mitchell tragically passed away in 2017 at the age of 60, shortly after TUPAC officially opened its doors. His impact, however, will live on for many years to come thanks to the work of people like Deshawn Morton, who was mentored by Mitchell



as an up-and-coming performer in Tacoma and now serves as the School Director for TUPAC.

“Kabby took me under his wing — this amazing, wonderful Black man who showed me I could be a professional dancer,” Morton said. “Now that I’m here in this role, working in this organization that he started to help mentor and build up the next generation — there’s nothing more that I could ask for and there’s no better way for me to repay him for the incredible opportunities he gave me.”

Ballet requires grace, of course, but it also demands tremendous strength, discipline, and precision from performers, providing aspiring dancers with life lessons that extend far beyond the stage. Morton’s passion for helping his students grow, both as dancers and as people, is evident in all of his work.

“Dance provides discipline, work ethic, and physical and cognitive skills that help you become a better person, and that’s important for our youth to receive,” Morton said.

Though TUPAC is less than a decade old, it has already left an indelible mark in the Hilltop community. It produced a popular annual showing of “The Urban Nutcracker” — a modern telling of the classic Tchaikovsky ballet — and has focused recently on stories that celebrate the lives of people from Hilltop. Earlier this year, TUPAC partnered with Northwest Sinfonietta on a live production of *Nettie*, a ballet on the legacy of Nettie Craig Ashberry, a Black woman who founded Tacoma’s NAACP chapter in 1913 and fought tirelessly against racism in her community.

It’s a story that rings particularly true at TUPAC, which is currently located just three blocks from Nettie’s former house and will soon move even closer. Sellen has partnered with TUPAC to build its new home, designed by Mithun and located on the ground floor of a new affordable housing building in the heart of Hilltop. The new space will include state-of-the-art studios and a performance space with bleacher seats.

Its current facility is a former Rite Aid store, and while the organization is grateful for the space, it does present some limitations on the classes it can offer and

prevents it from hosting many of its own productions, requiring it to rent stage space at local venues. That will no longer be the case in its new home.

“We will be Black organization operating a Black-owned facility in a historically Black neighborhood,” Ethridge said. “We have to even the playing field. We have to give our community the chance to express themselves...If all goes well, we’ll be here in 100 years, and we’ll be thriving — known not just in Tacoma, but nationwide, for the artists that come out of this facility.”

The project is supported in part by \$3M in federal funds, but additional support is needed to complete the project. Visit tacomaupac.org to learn more about the project, the classes offered by TUPAC, and its upcoming run of live theatre performances of *A Hilltop Holiday*, a twist on the classic musical *Scrooge*. ✨



Hear from Executive Director Klair Ethridge and School Director Deshawn Morton as they share why TUPAC’s work is so important and how its new home will play a key role in revitalizing Hilltop’s performing arts scene.

PHOTOS: Courtesy of TUPAC

RENDERING (ABOVE, BOTTOM RIGHT): Image courtesy of Mithun and Plomp