The Washington Post

Business

John Tishman, developer who shaped skyline of American cities, dies at 90

By Martin Weil February 7

John L. Tishman, who shaped the skyline of America as the builder of conspicuous structures such as the World Trade Center towers in New York, the Epcot theme park at Walt Disney World in Orlando and the John Hancock Center in Chicago, and was also an important innovator in the construction and building industry, died Feb. 6 at his home in Bedford, N.Y. He was 90.

A family spokesman said the cause was respiratory failure.

Like the Hancock Center that was built in the late 1960s, the twin Trade Center towers completed a few years later reached above 100 stories and were among the first buildings anywhere to attain that level, a figure that symbolized human aspiration and accomplishment.

In addition to his work as a builder, Mr. Tishman was regarded as a leader in the relatively new and specialized field of construction management. In this area, an intermediary, positioned between owner and contractor, tries to streamline the building process, to save money and foster greater efficiencies.

Beyond that, Mr. Tishman has been credited with introducing a cost-saving feature of the modern workplace: the system by which lights turn on and off, seemingly without human intervention, as people move about a building.

Although he did not invent the devices that control illumination by sensing motion or body heat, or both, he helped in their widespread use.

"We purchased a sensor system that an inventor had not previously found a use for," Mr. Tishman wrote in "Building Tall: My Life and the Invention of Construction Management," co-authored with Tom Shachtman in 2010. "We boxed it with relays to control high voltage and called it Infracon."

After Infracon was manufactured for his firm by others, he wrote, "We installed the new heat-and-motion sensors in buildings that we built for ourselves, particularly in the conference and meeting rooms of our hotels, and in several instances, in areas within buildings that we built for others."

Knowledgeable about the whys and wherefores of construction, Mr. Tishman had answers even for questions many

American employees probably never thought to ask, such as why the size of ceiling tiles grew from 1-by-4 feet to 2-by-4 feet.

He made the change in order to install the right number of fluorescent bulbs to meet lighting standards. Use of the smaller tiles demanded that the bulbs be placed so close together that they were "fried by the others' proximity," he wrote.

In the business of turning steel, glass and concrete into places where Americans worked and disported themselves, he and his company were known for projects not only in New York but also across the country.

In Los Angeles, he put up Century City and, in Detroit, the Renaissance Center. In addition to skyscrapers, he was also credited with New York's Madison Square Garden, which had ample detractors for its ungainly appearance but is still regarded as one of America's foremost sports and entertainment arenas.

In an industry that had over time developed familiar patterns and practices, Mr. Tishman was credited with finding new ways to circumvent traditional challenges.

During construction of the original World Trade Center buildings, huge amounts of steel of all shapes, sizes and purposes were needed. When he found that major providers were quoting prices well above what he had expected, he and his clients broke the job into different segments.

Rather than remain dependent on a single supply source for all shapes and sizes, they allocated steel purchases according to specific purposes — columns, beams and the like. Although such a practice may have imposed a greater burden on contractors and building owners, it came to be increasingly adopted, specialists said.

The Trade Center towers were destroyed Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists crashed airplanes into them.

In helping create the occupational field of construction management, Mr. Tishman wrote that it amounted in great part to doing what general contractors might have done. But, he added, construction management specialists sat "on the same side of the table as the owners, working with them," not negotiating against them.

As things developed, Mr. Tishman and his staff "were managers, being paid a fee for our expertise and our supervisory services." The Tishman firm, he wrote, became an organization that "built for an owner as though we were part of the owner's team."

He expanded the firm's activities in this area, he wrote, and helped persuade the federal government of the value of construction management in its projects.

Mr. Tishman's paternal grandfather, a 19th-century immigrant from Poland, founded the company. A description of his first building suggested it was far in style and location from what the company would become.

It was said to be a tenement, on New York's lower East side, a hard-pressed neighborhood that teemed with working-class residents, many of them fleeing poverty and persecution in Europe.

John Louis Tishman was born in New York City on Jan. 24, 1926. His father was also in the family business. During World War II, Mr. Tishman served as a Navy officer. He received a bachelor's degree in engineering from the University of Michigan in 1946 and soon joined the family firm. He became chairman in 1976.

His wife, Suzanne Weisberg, died in 2005. Survivors include two children, Daniel Tishman and Katherine Blacklock; and three grandchildren.

Tishman Speyer, a real estate and development company that owns Rockefeller Center and other major properties, was founded in 1978 by Mr. Tishman's cousin Robert Tishman and Robert's son-in-law, Jerry Speyer.

At least one goal of commercial construction is to make money. But for Mr. Tishman, achievement was not always about income. For example, he wrote that he and his co-worker in developing the new ceiling tile sizes did not profit from them because they were so easily copied. But, he added, "we had the satisfaction of having created a nationwide standard."

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