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John L. Tishman, Builder Who Shaped American Skylines, Dies at 90

By DAVID W. DUNLAP FEB. 6, 2016



John L. Tishman in his New York office in 1990, in front of photographs of some of the landmark properties his firm helped to build. Credit Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

John L. Tishman, a master builder of the 20th century whose Tishman Realty and Construction Company transformed the skylines of Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and New York, died on Saturday at his home in Bedford, N.Y. He was 90.

The cause was respiratory failure, said John P. Gallagher, a spokesman for the Tishman family.

An heir to the company founded by his grandfather Julius in 1898, Mr. Tishman supervised the construction of three of the world's earliest 100-story-plus skyscrapers: the [John Hancock Center](#) in Chicago, completed in 1970, and the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, completed in 1973.

The bold Tishman logo — a red “T” formed by a steel beam and column — could be seen at major projects around the country, including Madison Square Garden in New York, for which the original Pennsylvania Station was razed; Century City in Los Angeles, on what had been the 20th Century Fox back lot; the Renaissance Center in Detroit, which was intended to spur reinvestment in that beleaguered city; and the Epcot theme park at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla.



Mr. Tishman in 1995 with, to his right, Rudolph W. Giuliani, New York City's mayor at the time, and George E. Pataki, who was then the governor of New York, announcing plans for a 42nd Street development project. CreditBebeto Matthews/Associated Press

Two major New York performance spaces, Carnegie Hall on West 57th Street and the New Amsterdam Theater on West 42nd Street, were renovated by Mr. Tishman's company.

The Carnegie project, in 1986, was marred by complaints from discerning listeners who said the hall's fabled acoustical properties

had been compromised in the renovation. In 1995, [it was reported](#) that a layer of concrete, one to four inches thick, had been discovered under the stage floor. Mr. Tishman maintained that the concrete had been present before the renovation began. The floor was replaced.

Businesses created and controlled by members of the Tishman family continue to play large roles in the building and development fields, including the new World Trade Center. Mr. Tishman's son, Daniel R. Tishman, is the vice chairman of a group now known simply as [Tishman](#). The younger Tishman also sits on the board of Aecom, an international conglomerate that [acquired the Tishmans' construction business](#) in 2010 for \$245 million.

John Louis Tishman was born in New York City on Jan. 24, 1926, to Louis and Rose Tishman. His father, who was also in the family building business, died when Mr. Tishman was 4.

Rather than jump immediately into the business himself as he was coming of age, Mr. Tishman studied electrical engineering at the University of Michigan, from which he graduated in 1946. He served in the United States Navy and taught math before joining the Tishman company in 1948.

Five years later, he [married Suzanne Weisberg](#). She died in 2005. He is survived by their two children, Daniel Tishman and Katherine Blacklock, and three grandsons.

The second generation of the business was led by David Tishman, John's uncle, whose projects included the Tishman Building at 666 Fifth Avenue. At the time, Tishman Realty and Construction acted as developer and also general contractor, both for its own projects and those of other companies.

John Tishman stepped into the public spotlight in 1960 when, as the company's vice president in charge of construction, he described to The New York Times — presciently, as it turned out — how [reinforced concrete was replacing steel-frame construction](#) for residential high-rise projects.

It was Mr. Tishman who announced in 1965 that the United States Steel Corporation would furnish more than 42,000 tons of steel for the John Hancock Center in Chicago. He said it was the [largest steel contract](#) for a commercial structure since the [Empire State Building](#).

The experience that the Tishman company gained as it built the 100-story Hancock Center stood the firm in good stead with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey in the search for a general

contractor for the World Trade Center. Tishman was chosen over two competitors in 1967 to do the job.

When prices for the 185,000 tons of steel needed at the trade center came in much higher than expected, Tishman and the authority divided the job into 15 separate bid “packages” — exterior columns, interior columns, beams, trusses — and negotiated discrete deals with smaller steel makers rather than depend on giants like U.S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel to supply everything.

“The tactic of breaking a huge job down into small segments began to gain acceptance as a way of doing business in heavy construction,” Angus Kress Gillespie wrote in “Twin Towers: The Life of New York City’s World Trade Center.”

[Rockefeller Center Inc. acquired the construction arm](#) of the Tishman business in 1976, but the family bought it back in 1980, with John Tishman as chairman and chief executive of what amounted to the [new Tishman Realty and Construction](#). “We are no longer in the development business for ourselves,” he said at the time. “We are now in the service business for others.”

(Tishman Speyer Properties, an owner of Rockefeller Center, among other landmarks, is a development company founded in 1978 by John Tishman’s first cousin, Robert V. Tishman, and Robert’s son-in-law, Jerry Speyer.)

In 2011, the University of Michigan Press published “[Building Tall: My Life and the Invention of Construction Management](#),” written by Mr. Tishman and Tom Shachtman.

By this time, Mr. Tishman was chairman emeritus of Tishman Realty and Construction. He also served as chairman of the New School in New York, where both the John L. Tishman Auditorium and the Tishman Environment and Design Center bear his name.

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, like so many other New Yorkers, Mr. Tishman [could only watch helplessly](#) on television as the events unfolded in Lower Manhattan.

After the second jetliner hit the south tower and the 110-story building collapsed, he froze. Too shocked even to say goodbye to his colleagues, he simply left the Tishman Building on Fifth Avenue and headed home.