



Charles J. Simbas

CHARLES J. PANKOW

1923–2004

Elected in 1997

*“For contributions to the application of
innovation in construction engineering.”*

BY DEAN E. STEPHAN

CHARLES J. PANKOW JR., a leading innovator of building techniques in the construction industry, a pioneer in the integration of design and construction processes in commercial construction, and founder and CEO of Charles Pankow Builders, died on January 12, 2004, at the age of 80.

Charlie was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on October 6, 1923, to Bess and Charles Pankow. He was the middle child in a family of three siblings. His exposure to the construction industry occurred early in life. His father, a graduate of the University of Illinois in architecture, spent his career managing major construction projects. Most of Charlie’s childhood was spent in South Bend, Indiana, and he took great pride in the fact that his father was the superintendent for the construction of the Notre Dame stadium, a complex project completed in record time for that era.

Charlie responded to his boyhood interest in engineering design and construction by entering Purdue University to study civil engineering. As with so many at that time, his education was interrupted by World War II and he entered the US Navy as an ensign. His tour ended in Japan in 1946 and he returned to Purdue to complete his studies. Upon receiving his bachelor of science degree in civil engineering in 1947, he and bride Doris traveled to Los Angeles, California, to start his career in the construction industry.

His first job was in the structural engineering office of S.B. Barnes as a junior engineer designing public infrastructure buildings. In 1951 his love of construction led him to accept a position with the Peter Kiewit Construction Company in its Arcadia, California, office. While there his keen engineering mind, construction and management skills, and creative energy became apparent and he soon rose to become the manager of Kiewit's building division.

Charles Pankow's hallmark was determination, and that determination spawned numerous innovative solutions to difficult construction engineering problems. Thin shell construction of the San Diego Convention Center, horizontal slip forming of the concrete piles for the Hayward Bridge across the San Francisco Bay, slip forming of the vertical structural concrete elements of high-rise buildings, molding complex architectural concrete shapes for building exteriors, and the use of prestressed reinforcement in precast concrete structural elements are achievements that bear witness to his belief that "if you are good, you can find solutions; anyone can find problems."

During this time Charlie's growing awareness for the need to integrate the design and construction process if innovative building techniques were to be efficiently incorporated into construction projects caused him to leave Kiewit in 1963, at age 39, and form his own construction company. There was no work in hand or in sight, just his reputation for finding solutions to difficult design and construction problems. Operating out of the basement of his home, with Doris keeping the books, he proceeded to build a company whose projects have reshaped skylines from Long Island, New York, to the Hawaiian Islands.

Two keys to the success of the company are, first, his belief that the application of innovation in construction engineering could beneficially impact the cost and quality of commercial buildings. The company formed alliances with architectural and engineering firms to design and build projects that incorporated innovative technologies and construction practices and provided owners with a single source of responsibility for the on-time and within-budget delivery of their project.

The second key was his ability to transfer to the culture of the company his determination to succeed through innovation and creative solutions. In managing his company, he didn't dictate his concepts or solutions to others. In fact, it was unwise to present a problem and request a solution. He had his own ideas but he wanted you to present yours, reflecting his belief that your only limit should be your imagination. That approach to design solutions and construction means and methods resulted in unfettered participation by all parties to the construction process and created a special company with a major impact in a very traditional industry.

Charles Pankow had a restless energy and always felt that everything could be improved on and more could be accomplished. A saying in the company captures his refusal to rest on past achievements: "Others seek to copy what we have long since made obsolete."

Charlie's accomplishments have been recognized over the years by awards and accolades, including an honorary doctorate of engineering from Purdue University (1983); the distinguished Alumnus Award, Purdue University (1970); the American Society of Civil Engineers' Presidents' Award (1994); the American Concrete Institute (ACI) Roger H. Corbetta Award for "Innovative methods of construction leading to significantly increased efficiency and economy in the use of concrete" (1974) and its Henry C. Turner Medal (1990); election to the National Academy of Engineering by his peers (1997); and it was with great pride that he lent his name to the prestigious Civil Engineering Research Foundation's Pankow Award for Innovation.

He sought to advance the competence and professionalism of the construction industry by actively participating in various industry organizations. He was president of ACI in 1983 and served on its board of directors from 1974 to 1984; he was also a founding member of the Civil Engineering Research Foundation, serving from 1988 to 1993, and an active member of the Construction Industry Presidents Forum, American Society of Civil Engineers, Engineers Club of San Francisco, Structural Engineers Association of Southern California,

American Society of Concrete Construction, and Urban Land Institute.

Charlie continued to mentor young construction engineers and led his beloved construction company until the day of his death. Other than the scores of young engineers he inspired and whose careers he helped mold, perhaps the greatest testament to the construction engineering skills of this extraordinary man are the thousands of housing units and millions of square feet of office buildings, retail space, hospitals and healthcare facilities, hotels, and recreational facilities that his company built. These are buildings that enhance society and enable its commerce—silent monuments across this land that bear testimony to the ingenuity, honesty, and perseverance of this remarkable man. He is greatly missed.

His son wrote:

Quiet and focused, confident and determined, I remember noting when I was around 21 years old, he was the most disciplined man I knew; today he is the most disciplined man I have ever known. My Dad was unique, he didn't teach with words, but through example—his life being one. I recall one time when I was 19 on a visit to New York City; he took us boys down to the Bowery to meet some of the more unfortunate souls on this planet. It was an uncomfortable experience, but one I never forgot—exactly what he wanted.

My Dad believed in a few basic axioms that he carried with him throughout his life:

- whatever you can imagine you can do
- the word CAN'T should be removed from the dictionary
- true leadership is leading first and creating consensus last
- the United States of America is the greatest example of freedom and hope the world has ever seen
- telling corny jokes is OK

My mother was by his side from the day they left Illinois through all the adventures of pioneering a career and life in California, including raising a family of four children. When we were growing up, his work kept him from home quite a bit, but in spite of his demanding schedule, he managed to recruit every single sponsor for

our town's first Pony and later Colt baseball leagues. Even as a young baseball player, I never really appreciated that until I was older.

Many years ago I asked my grandmother, his mom: when did he know what he wanted to do? And she said, one summer when the family took their vacation they drove out of South Bend on one side of town and returned two weeks later driving back in on the other side. When he realized where they were, he actually asked to go back to the other side of town before going home so he could see the progress being made on the only building under construction at the time in South Bend—he was six years old.

He was the champion of the CAN DO spirit and attitude that if something is worth doing it's worth doing right the first time. Yet, for as long as I can remember he kept a sign over his desk that said "The worst day of fishing is better than the best day at work." This is the only sign he ever kept.