

Leaning Out Explores the Life of the World Trade Center's Structural Engineer

Leaning Out puts the spotlight on Leslie E. Robertson, the lead structural engineer of the Twin Towers, and his journey beyond 9/11.

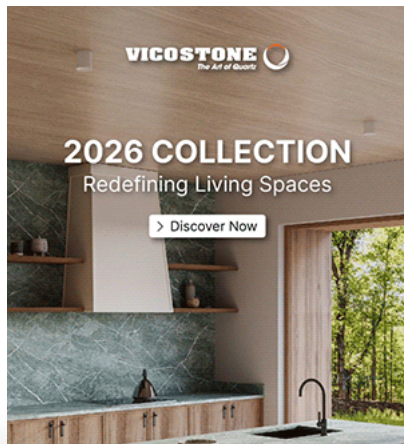
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The legacy of Leslie E. Robertson, the famed 90-year-old structural engineer, can be found in the modern high-rise building. Robertson's work – including the practise he runs with his wife, See Robertson Structural Engineers, LLC, and [The Robert Bird Group](#) – has enabled skyscraping growth in cities all over the world; his portfolio includes work on the World Financial Center in Shanghai, the Lotte World Tower in Seoul and the Rock 'N' Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. His storied career is deserving of a documentary on its own, but that's not where [Leaning Out](#), a film directed by Basia and Leonard Myszynski and produced by the American Institute of Steel Construction, begins. Rather, it starts with the destruction of one of his best-known buildings – on 9/11.





fact, the documentary points out that it's a wonder that New York's Twin Towers, after being struck by two planes, stayed upright as long as they did. But it also finds the humanity in Robertson: it explores how, after a stint in the navy, he emerged as a pacifist and anti-war activist. It details his life-altering relationship with wife SawTeen See. And it delves into the horror he felt as one of his greatest achievements fell – taking nearly 3,000 people with it.



The narrative of 9/11, the Myszynskis note, is often – and rightfully – told through the lens of its survivors and heroes. But perspectives like Robertson's are far rarer. “Never has the topic been approached from the perspective of the lead structural engineer and his personal encounter, what led to the commission, his insights and life lessons,” say the directors. “It's a private look into the world of this creative thinker and problem-solver who built the unbuildable, an engineer who prepared for every scenario with confidence, meeting all challenges with precaution, yet never could have predicted what actually happened on 9/11 and how it would affect his family and why he is still carries the enormous guilt.”



That the attack on New York led to an ongoing war was particularly devastating for Robertson, as was the fact that one of his creations was the site of indescribable trauma. (The engineer, *Leaning Out* notes, was famously considerate of the lives that occurred within his buildings.) But the documentary, as told through Robertson and those closest to him, doesn't end with grief – rather, it explores his work to bring peace to the families impacted by 9/11, and his work processing the event with others.



“Robertson’s activism is key, responsible for an organization that strengthened social responsibility for engineers, architects and planners, and as an advocate for the abolition of nuclear warfare,” add the directors. “A need for such organizations is resurfacing. His pursuit of peace and human rights is timely, as the world, and currently the US, is filled with new fears... His personal focus on communication and commitment to understanding all cultures and religions of the world are key elements to his success as a builder of iconic high-rises and cultural centres across the globe.”



As for Robertson himself, the film's directors were astounded by the clarity in which he recalled his career – and with how he processed tragedy. And as their research progressed, their film transformed from a story about technical prowess into a story about resiliency. “Seven decades of building the unbuildable across an engineering universe few have touched, and orbiting the minds of visionary architects while skillfully solving complex structural dilemmas, seemed to fade away when juxtaposed with one of the most horrific human and structural catastrophes in the world,” they say.

“It’s a journey, a juxtaposition, a connection, and a celebration of creativity.”

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