

Allen Lew, a Virtuoso Builder of Public Works, Dies at 69; Those We've Lost

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Highlight: He bypassed red tape and erected stadiums, schools, hospitals and convention centers in Washington and New York. Mr. Lew died of the novel coronavirus.

Body

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This obituary is part of a series about people who have died in the coronavirus pandemic. Read about others [here](#).

Allen Y. Lew was best known as a prolific and proficient builder of public works. He succeeded in what can be a thankless mission by first bulldozing or, at least, bypassing, the barriers posed by municipal bureaucracy.

He characterized himself as someone with “a constructive level of impatience about getting things done.”

Mr. Lew oversaw billions of dollars' worth of public works in Washington and New York, where he returned late last year to supervise construction at his alma mater as the first Asian-American vice chancellor of the City University of New York.

Mr. Lew died on June 23 at a Queens hospital. He was 69. His wife, Suling Lew, said the cause was complications of the coronavirus.

Allen Yee Lew was born on Sept. 11, 1950, in Manhattan. His father was Fong Young Lew, an immigrant from Guangzhou, China. His Chinese-American mother was Helen (Yee) Lew. His parents owned and operated a dry-cleaning business.

He was raised in Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan and in Long Island City, Queens. Winning an art contest in elementary school inspired him to study design. After graduating from Brooklyn Technical High School, he earned a bachelor of science degree in architecture from the City College of New York, part of the City University.

“It was there that he became intrigued with the development and construction side of the business,” Ms. Lew said.

He received a master's degree in architecture and urban design from Columbia University.

He married Suling Goon, who was an equity sales manager and research director at an investment bank, in 1979. Along with her, he is survived by their son, Garrett Lew; a sister, Helen Chin; and a grandson.

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In New York, he was executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center from 1983 to 1988; a vice president at Rose Associates, the real estate developer; and vice president for capital programs of the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation.

He moved on to Washington to hack through red tape there. As chief executive of Washington's Sports and Entertainment Commission from 2004 to 2007 under Mayor Anthony A. Williams, he oversaw the design and rehabilitation of Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium, which brought major league baseball back to the nation's capital, and the design and construction of the \$650 million Nationals Park, a permanent home for the team.

He also supervised the building of Washington's \$850 million convention center and managed the \$1 billion rehabilitation of the District of Columbia's ramshackle school facilities. From 2011 to 2015, he was the district's city administrator under Mayor Vincent C. Gray, who described him as a "visionary and a doer."

Mr. Lew was president of the Washington Architectural Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Washington chapter of the American Institute of Architects, before joining CUNY as the senior vice chancellor of facilities, planning and construction management.

"Allen built a reputation as a hard-driving executive who prized speed and efficiency and mastered the art of cutting through bureaucracy," the university's chancellor, Félix V. Matos Rodríguez said in a statement.

Sometimes his methods raised eyebrows. He was once chided by the Washington city auditor for obstructing transparency. Mr. Lew attributed the lapse to inadequate record-keeping and what he called his "nimble" circumvention of stultifying regulations that impeded progress.

PHOTO: Allen Y. Lew spent two decades putting an imprint on major public works in Washington. (PHOTOGRAPH BY LATEEF MANGUM)

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