

# BUILDING A LEGACY

American International Construction evolves from humble beginnings 35 years ago to become go-to restoration specialist throughout Ohio, Michigan & beyond



Photo by Ken Krych

**TEAMING UP** American International Construction's staff includes (from left) Andrew Sycz, Adam Petrasek, Samantha Sycz, William Perry, Michael Petrasek, Lee Petrasek, Joel Garn and David Sycz.

By Lou Kren | Photos courtesy of American International Construction

**N**ow closing in on its 4,000th project, American International Construction (AIC) has cemented its claim as a nationwide leader in the caulking and building restoration industries. Incorporated in 1978 by John Petrasek, the business is now led by his son Michael who holds the reigns as president. AIC, headquartered in Berea, tackles projects of all sizes with work ranging from complete façade restorations for large corporate office buildings and hotels to storefront renovations for small local businesses. Within that realm, Michael Petrasek sees his company as a specialist.

“We enjoy taking on the challenging, high-end restoration work that others may shy away from,” Petrasek explains. “American International Construction performs a lot of difficult masonry restoration and rebuild on historic structures as well as balcony restoration on high-rise buildings. Those are the types of challenges that we embrace.”

Specifically mentioning his “on-staff Leonardo da Vinci” – vice president Bill Perry, who performs painstaking

research and engineering work for the most demanding projects – Petrasek takes pride in the company’s inhouse expertise, backed by engineering and construction partners that have teamed with AIC for years.

“We are a one-source building-façade/building-envelope solution,” he says. “We can work with any type of cladding, and if decorative ornamental work is needed, we will provide that with our inhouse talent or work with partners that we know and trust.”

“[AIC] is totally committed to quality,” Petrasek continues, stressing how one off job can pollute thousands of successful projects. “The weakest link in this business is the customer that you haven’t fully satisfied. Do 5,000 perfect projects and let down one client, and that one voice is louder than everyone else’s. So we have built the company on that premise.”

Petrasek’s business approach goes like this: “Give us the opportunity to complete one project and you will be



**HOUSES OF THE HOLY** AIC's project portfolio includes work on numerous religious structures, such as masonry façade and window restoration at the distinctive St. Theodosius Cathedral, a prominent presence in Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood.

extremely pleased." Not surprisingly, single projects have turned into many long-term clients for AIC.

"And I surround myself with the best people possible, from the bottom of the company to the top," he says. "They have to prove to customers what I am saying."

Petrasek makes no idle boast – AIC is rated as an A+ company with the Better Business Bureau, and is a three-time *Inc.* 5,000 award recipient.

With a wealth of experience in historic restoration and preservation services, AIC is well recognized in that arena. Overall, the company provides a host of restorative and protective services, including caulking; masonry restoration; storefront renovation; complete façade restoration and recladding; concrete balcony restoration and replacement; and wall and floor coating systems.

The company has forged an impressive track record and has built a broad base of clientele. Its project presence includes not just Ohio and Michigan, but also New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, West Virginia, Virginia, Illinois and

Kentucky. AIC also provides consulting services throughout the country.

### From modest start to major player

First established by Michael's father John as a caulking and building restoration contractor dedicated to the restoration and preservation of commercial, residential and institutional building façades and structures, AIC's initial focus was primarily in new construction. John worked to establish a name for AIC by traveling the United States providing caulking, building cleaning and waterproofing services.

In 1981, Michael joined the firm and began establishing the building-restoration side, which has become the main focus of the company today. In October 1988, he became president of AIC after an illness required John to step down. Michael retains sole ownership of the company and has grown the business into its current solid position.

AIC is a nationwide leader in the building-restoration industry and has



## Founded on Family

Throughout *Properties'* conversation with Michael Petrasek on his upbringing and American International Construction's evolution, he inevitably traces back to his parents. Their struggles and perseverance, and the will to succeed exhibited by his father, John (above), permeate the business. A look at John's journey to America and the founding of AIC makes clear why his legacy endures and drives the company, and his son Michael, forward.

John Petrasek decided to leave Yugoslavia in 1941, soon after Germany invaded his homeland early in World War II. Leadership choices in Yugoslavia at that time were unappetizing – Marshal Tito, a Communist hardliner, or Adolf Hitler and his right-wing nationalist philosophy. John would join resistance movements and travel throughout Europe, often ending up in the thick of confrontations between the German and Russian armies. He and his comrades are credited with rescuing downed U.S. pilots and shepherding them to safety in Italy. Along the way, John learned several European languages, parlaying these skills into a role as interpreter for the U.S. Army in Austria.

As an interpreter, John learned firsthand of the suffering brought by the Communist conquest across Eastern Europe. "I recognized early in life that I could not live under such a system [as Communism]," he told a reporter for a 1969 newspaper article. "That is why I was so determined to find a way to get to America."

John's efforts to reach American shores succeeded in 1951. He brought with him an Austrian girl, Margaret, whom he had met six weeks before leaving. The following year she would become his wife.

Though an experienced construction engineer, John at first could only find menial work in the United States, initially as a dishwasher in Chicago. He came to Cleveland to visit a friend and took jobs as a Fuller Brush man and bakery deliveryman. But again, his persistence and drive paid off as he eventually found work with a construction firm.

By the early '60s, after eight years in employ at the firm, John decided to strike out on his own, forming Building Services, a construction firm headquartered in Lakewood. Displaying the determination that led him through World War II Europe and to a new life in the United States, John would build that business and ultimately form AIC. —LK

**SAVING SURFACES** At both Baldwin Wallace University's Dietsch Hall (top), in Berea, and the Glidden House (bottom), located in Cleveland's University Circle district, American International Construction has completed detailed sandstone restoration work.

established long-term relationships with national clients such as Forest City Enterprises, Kaiser Permanente and Simon Property Group to name a few.

The company's fortunes today seem light-years from its status in 1978, when 58-year-old John formed the business with little funds and even less office furniture – he laid a door across two file cabinets in the basement of his home to serve as a desk. But given where John had come from, the challenge of building AIC did not faze him (see 'Lasting Legacy' sidebar, pg. 5).

Growing up, Petrasek remembers how blueprints covered every flat surface in the house as his father

*"I surround myself with the best people possible, from the bottom of the company to the top. They have to prove to customers what I am saying."*

**Michael Petrasek**

*American International Construction*

grew the company. Despite being involuntarily immersed in his father's endeavor, he developed no desire to make AIC his life's work. That began to change in 1981, his senior year at Bowling Green State University. Set to start a career in journalism, Petrasek had to weigh one request from his father: "Give me some help to get this company to another level."

"Knowing what my dad went through in Europe and with both of my parents being immigrants and trying to succeed in a new and different country, I said, 'Sure, I'll help,'" he recalls. "My dad said, 'Give me six months or a year, and then

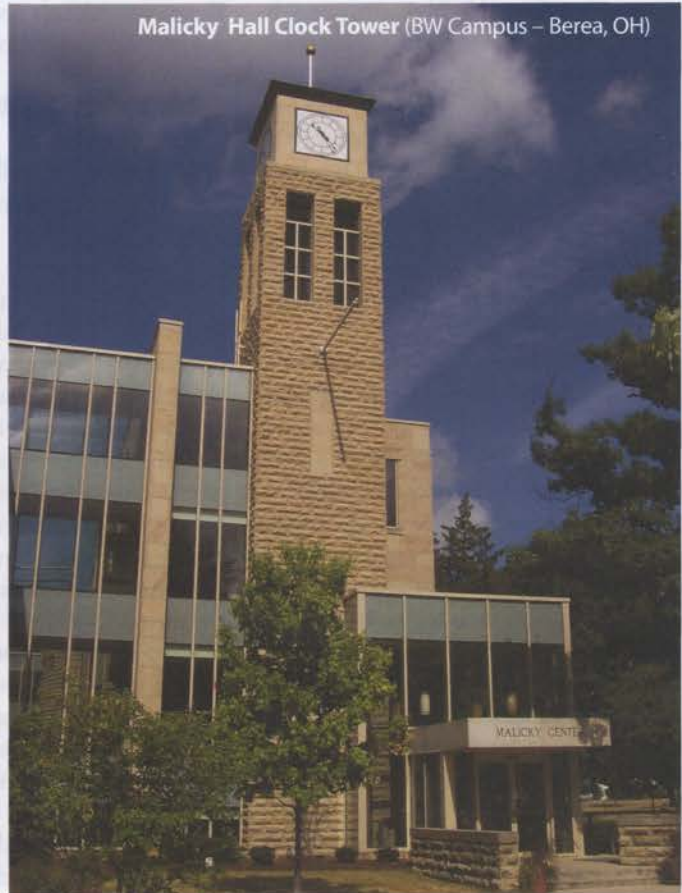




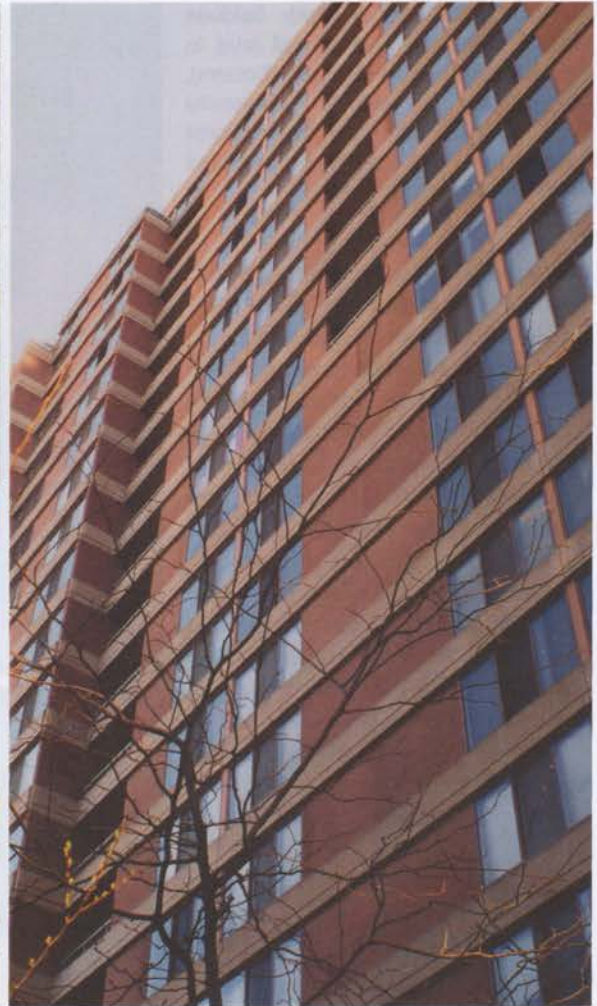
Kinsman Presbyterian Church (Kinsman, OH)



Burrell Observatory (BW Campus - Berea, OH)



Malicky Hall Clock Tower (BW Campus - Berea, OH)



**OUTSIDE IMPROVEMENTS** The company has completed a range of national projects, including exterior façade restoration at The Grand (left), an apartment building in North Bethesda, Maryland; Pavilion Apartments (bottom left), in Chicago; and The Lenox Club Luxury Apartments (right), in Washington, D.C.

do your own thing.’ One year became two, then three, and I was still there.

“It was difficult and it took a long time to establish AIC. We went from the house to a small office to a bigger office and then to a little bigger office, then ended up putting up our own building across the street from where we are now.”

When John became ill after 10 years running the company, Petrasek continued to build AIC – literally. He sold the old building and purchased nearby land and a barn owned by one of the last pipe-organ builders/repairers in the United States. Today that barn is being transformed into AIC’s 20,000-square-foot headquarters, including a new 2,900-square-foot office build-out and an adjoining 9,000-square-foot warehouse currently under construction.

Five acres of land across the street from its current headquarters gives AIC room to grow.

### Building from within

AIC maintains 50 employees on average, including skilled bricklayers, masonry workers, plasterers and more.

“It has been a slow steady climb,” Petrasek says. “We blend together younger and more experienced people, and we also bring in apprentices. We pair new people with veterans to teach them the AIC culture and system.”

The AIC roster includes Joel Garn, senior project manager, and Michael’s sons Adam and Lee, as well as two nephews, David and Andrew, and a niece, Samantha, who together bring third-generation progressive thinking to

the firm. “Their youth and exuberance help to ensure the continuation and strength of AIC and its commitment to its clientele and the community at large,” Petrasek explains.

Adding new blood and continuing to build its project footprint, AIC sticks to the values on which it was founded, and Petrasek makes sure that the legacy of his father John permeates the business.

“My dad, with his drive, built the base for this company,” he says. “He was a vibrant guy with a never-say-die attitude. Nothing has happened here overnight, and the core values my dad instilled in me are the values that drive American International Construction.” **P**

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**LANDMARK EFFORTS** Key projects completed by American International Construction over the years include work at Coraopolis Towers (left), in Coraopolis, Pennsylvania, and the LaQuinta Hotel (right), in North Olmsted.

## Signature Projects

Throughout the past 35 years, American International Construction (AIC) has completed a multitude of projects, big and small. When asked to describe AIC's signature jobs, Michael Petrasek, president, points out those that marked watershed moments in the company's development.

### Tower City Cleveland

Petrasek counts simultaneous projects in and around Tower City in the late-1980s and into 1990 as the point at which he knew that AIC had "arrived."

"With Tower City under construction, AIC was working on the Ritz Carlton, Skylight Office Tower, The Avenue at Tower City, MK Ferguson building and exterior restoration of the bottom 15 floors of the Terminal Tower," he says. "I looked around and saw our employees, trucks and equipment everywhere."

### Cedar Place Lansing, MI

AIC will reach out to perform work outside of Northeast Ohio, and Michigan is a state where the company has quite a project footprint. In 2009, with the automotive industry in the throes of its worst slump in a generation, AIC arrived in Lansing to take on exterior restoration of a large senior apartment complex for Forest City Enterprises, a longtime, valued client. "We came to Lansing during bad times, especially within the automotive industry," recalls Petrasek. "It was a large project – a huge building that required a lot of engineering and structural work, including balcony work."

The scope of the \$1.2 million task was enough to qualify this as a signature project, but Petrasek finds another reason for calling the Lansing work out. "We came in and hired a lot of people in a community that had been decimated by a plummeting auto industry," he says. "We did bring the building back to life, and I'm proud of it not only because we helped the residents of that building, but we also helped the community. We brought 10-12 workers from the local union hall – all incredibly hard workers – and they are still with us today. These guys were like a gift to us, and continue to do a lot of jobs, especially in Michigan where we undertake a lot of projects."

### Jacobs Field Cleveland

Under construction in 1993-1994 as part of the Gateway development, Jacobs Field is identified by Petrasek as a huge project that not only tested AIC's mettle, but brought the company to prominence. "We were one of the last contractors to arrive on that project," he recalls, "and were told that soon there will be a guy standing at home plate, so we would have to be finished."

AIC worked against a tight deadline, tasked with a massive undertaking: caulking, water-repellent work, expansion-joint installation and grouting of the entire seating bowl. The company actually

fabricated urethane expansion joints for the project in its own warehouse. "We did such a good job of fabrication that the manufacturer of the material we used to make the joints ultimately hired us to make expansion joints," Petrasek says. "The material manufacturer would then sell the expansion joints to installers all over the country."

### Baldwin Wallace University Berea

AIC has completed about 20 major projects for Baldwin Wallace (BW), estimates Petrasek, and about eight to 10 projects large and small each year. Earning special mention given that both BW and AIC call Berea home, the strong relationship began a decade ago with AIC asking for one small project to prove itself. BW said yes, AIC delivered, and projects have followed fast and furiously. It's a perfect match – Baldwin Wallace with its primarily old-style wood, stone and masonry architecture, and AIC with its expertise and reputation in restoring exactly that.

The most recent collaboration, exterior restoration of Marting Hall, including its iconic cupola, as well restoration of an historic stone stairway near Kulas Hall, exhibits the capability of AIC as well as the commitment of Baldwin Wallace to preserve its rich past. These projects were profiled in the October 2013 issue of *Properties*. –LK



*A Commitment to Quality Since 1978*

*BW Marting  
Hall Cupola*



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