Stanford

Forest Olaf Peterson, Ph.D.

- Research Affiliate, Civil and Environmental Engineering
- Staff, Civil and Environmental Engineering

Bio

BIO

Dr. Forest Olaf Peterson is Co-Director of the Stanford Workforce VDC Lab, an initiative of the Stanford School of Engineering and Doerr School of Sustainability. Peterson teaches Construction Project Assessment and Budgeting (CEE 240), developed the foundational concept of the VDC-capable construction workforce, and runs an educator certification program placing faculty across Silicon Valley.

As founder of Palo Alto Data Group, Peterson leads development of eCPR, a data infrastructure platform for labor standards enforcement on public works. Peterson holds the California franchise for cadwork, a Swiss BIM platform and CIFE industry member, on building information modeling for heavy civil infrastructure, including highway and rail. Previously, as the founding employee at Rhumbix, a construction technology startup backed by Greylock Partners, Peterson made the Series A pitch.

Public service roles include Palo Alto Planning and Transportation Commissioner, chair of the Flood Protection Bond Oversight Subcommittee at Valley Water, board director of the Santa Clara County Construction Careers Association, a nonprofit, and he is a subject matter expert contributor to California labor standards legislation.

Peterson holds M.S., Engineer, and Ph.D. degrees from Stanford. The doctoral work, completed under Terry Winograd, made a seminal contribution — 'change' as a formal primitive in AI agent ontologies applied to construction project monitoring. Peterson is a three-time named engineering fellow at Stanford — Brahtz, Oglesby, and Olsen. His research on teaching construction project management is one of the most cited papers for its influence on construction engineering education internationally.

Peterson brings both blue-collar and white-collar perspectives to the role of scholar of infrastructure. For seven years before Stanford, he was a concrete laborer on large infrastructure projects with the Laborers' International Union of North America. Those years taught social and environmental dimensions from the ground up. His fellow laborers wanted to work safely. However, though skilled, they often did not have the information to succeed without unnecessary hardship. Without it, on a large highway project, a two-ton barrier dropped and hit something that flipped it over where it came to rest just inches above Peterson's chest. They celebrated his chance survival. One cried in memory of a recent work fatality. They were told to get back to work. The futility of the situation has left a lasting impression.

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