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Mack-Cali co-founder and NJ real estate pioneer, John Cali, dies at 95

Bruce Schonbraun recalls being in a meeting with real estate developer John Cali “and eight or nine very smart people” in the 1990s and Cali telling them he saw a future for real estate development in Jersey City.

“They all told him it wasn’t a smart idea,” Schonbraun said, “and he politely told them, ‘I hear everything you’re saying, and you’re wrong.’”

He then set about building the Harborside Financial Center along Jersey City’s waterfront, a trophy project that breathed new life into an old city.

“He was one of the early visionary pioneers in New Jersey real estate,” said Schonbraun, a longtime friend and head of real estate for FTI Consulting, a global consulting firm.

Cali, the cofounder of one of the country’s largest real estate investment trust firms, died on Saturday. He was 95.

Cali cofounded Cali Associates in 1949 with his brother, Angelo, and Edward Leshowitz. The three began developing single-family houses in northern New Jersey, building more than 5,500 homes in the state.

The firm was known for the quality of its developments, but also for its sense of vision. In the late 1960s, as people and businesses were moving out of the cities and to the suburbs, Cali added suburban office building development to its portfolio. During the next two decades, the company built more than 2.2 million square feet of class A office space in New Jersey.

Cali was born in 1918 in Colorado. His family moved to Clifton when he was young.

After graduating from Clifton High School, he attended Indiana University where he majored in sociology and psychology. He worked his way through college by playing saxophone and clarinet in jazz and swing bands.

“What distinguished John from other people was that John was an artist,” Schonbraun said. “When he imagined a building, he did it from an artist’s viewpoint. It wasn’t just bricks and mortar to him.”

Cali took the company public in 1994. He continued as chairman through its \$1.2 billion merger in 1997 with the Mack Company, a family owned, private firm involved in commercial real

estate development, management and acquisitions.

The merger was the largest private-to-public REIT transaction at the time.

Cali retired as chairman in 2000 and became chairman emeritus until fully stepping aside in 2003.

The new company, Mack-Cali, added residential properties to its portfolio with the purchase of Roseland Properties in 2010.

“Icon is an overused word,” said Carl Golden, copresident of Roseland, “and you don’t want to diminish it, but without any ambiguity, anyone involved in real estate over the past few decades would share that he is one of those iconic figures. He transformed the landscape of New Jersey real estate.”

Mitchell Hersh, Mack-Cali president and chief executive officer, said in a statement that Cali’s “impact on the industry in the New Jersey region will forever be evident. His experience, knowledge, guidance, philanthropy and friendship will be greatly missed.”

Cali was also known for his love of music and his philanthropy. In 2006, Cali and his family donated \$5 million to Montclair State University to help establish a school of music that bears his name.

“He was a really tough, smart businessman but with the soul of an angel” said Susan Cole, president of Montclair State University.

“He had a generous spirit grounded in intelligence, and this is very rare,” she said.

At the time the grant was announced, Cali said, “It’s a great feeling when you see young talent budding right there in front of you on the stage.”

Cole said he often attended musical events at the college, where students surrounded him.

“He made students feel at ease instantly. His delight in their efforts was so obviously genuine that students responded in an extraordinary way,” she said.

Cali is survived by his wife, Rose, his children, Brant, Jonna and Christopher, his grandchildren and extended family. A memorial service is being planned for a yet-unnamed date.

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