Larry Field, Los Angeles Property Developer, Deemed Life ‘Not So Bad’

Cheery catchphrase became trademark of Bronx-born builder who worked with architect Frank Gehry

Larry Field in 2014, in Los Angeles.

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By James R. Hagerty
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Larry Field said he found his career in real estate by accident.

In the 1940s, working in his father’s neighborhood grocery store in the Bronx, in New York City, he learned salesmanship. After graduating from what is now Baruch College, he sold Dove soap to supermarkets. Then he decided to join E.F. Hutton & Co. to learn the securities trade, but a chance meeting with a former college classmate prompted him to become a real-estate broker instead.

Exuberant and outgoing, he found tenants and managed properties. After moving to Los Angeles in 1965, he started building houses and buying commercial buildings. His knack for making friends and winning their confidence helped him find investors for
his projects. They included his dentist and people he met at his gym.

Mr. Field also befriended Frank Gehry before the architect became famous. They collaborated on several

projects.

Transforming old warehouses or industrial buildings into quirky offices became one of his specialties. He made major donations to Baruch College, the Cedars-Sinai healthcare organization and the Walt Disney Concert Hall, designed by Mr. Gehry, in Los Angeles.

He named his flagship company NSB Associates. The name derived from his customary response when asked how things were going: “Not so bad!.”

Mr. Field died Jan. 28 at his home in Beverly Hills. He was 89.

When his daughters were young, he was so busy with real estate that he saw little of them on weekdays. On weekends, he took them on excursions, often involving visits to buildings he wanted to inspect.

His younger daughter, Robyn Field, recalled being assigned in the third grade to write an essay about her family. She wrote that she had no idea what her father’s job was but that it involved driving around and looking at buildings.

Lawrence Neil Schonfeld, known as Larry, was born Oct. 21, 1930, in New York. The family name was later changed to Field. An only child, he grew up in the Bronx with his parents, immigrants from Hungary. His father worked as a waiter before opening a
small grocery store. His mother made salads sold at the store.

He studied at the City College of New York business school, now known as Baruch, and earned a degree in 1952. When he took a Dale Carnegie course in public speaking, he proved so adept that he was hired to help teach the class. That experience taught him to project confidence and gain the trust of others, he later said.

During a two-year hitch in the Army, he taught political-science courses and managed sports teams at Fort Slocum, just north of New York City.

One of his early jobs was for the U.S. arm of Unilever. Drawing on his buoyant personality and boyhood knowledge of the grocery business, he established himself as a star Dove soap salesman. He concluded he was unlikely ever to be president of the company, however, and a career in middle management didn’t appeal to him.

He quit, traveled in Cuba and Europe, then stumbled into real estate. While learning the business, he attended evening classes at New York Law School and earned a degree, giving him a fallback in case real estate didn’t work out.

Among his early investments in the Los Angeles area was land in Lancaster, Calif., where he had been told an airport would be built. That didn’t happen, and the purchase was a flop. He did better with apartments, office buildings and housing tracts.

When he needed a mortgage loan, he wrote in his 2019 memoir, “Not So Bad,” he typically went out for a drink with a lending officer. “I’d tell him I needed a million dollar loan, where the property was, and what I was planning to do with it,” he wrote.

“Loans were made on very flimsy information, and half the time lenders didn’t bother verifying the income of the building…. It was who you knew in the business that determined whether you got the loan or not.”

In the 1970s, a mutual friend introduced him to Mr. Gehry. When the architect wanted to buy space for his studio, he asked for help from Mr. Field, who gave him free advice. “We did everything he said, and it worked,” Mr. Gehry said.

Later, Mr. Field found a larger space for Mr. Gehry’s firm in a building formerly used as a BMW test facility in the Playa Vista neighborhood of Los Angeles. The two men acquired the building as partners. They also teamed up to build the Gehry-designed Ascend office building, perched above a parking lot, in El Segundo, completed in 2018.
Mr. Field’s wife, the former Eris Perll, died in 2009. He is survived by two daughters, two granddaughters and his companion of the past 10 years, Rivka Seiden.

In his memoir, he cheerfully admitted to making some terrible investments, including a cattle-breeding business in Texas and a savings-and-loan institution in California. Even so, he accumulated enough money to make major donations that left his name and that of his wife on educational, cultural and medical facilities in the U.S. and Israel. As he might have put it, not so bad.

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