

Eli Broad rose to service when L.A. was at a low point. His imprint is impossible to miss

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When Eli Broad flew into Los Angeles International Airport in 1963 with his wife, Edye, the 30-year-old self-made millionaire was not impressed. “The ground below us called to mind the old saying,” he would later write, “Los Angeles is 100 suburbs in search of a city.”

When he died Friday, he was an 87-year-old billionaire who had a greater impact on his adopted home than perhaps anyone else in this city’s modern history.

Broad left an indelible imprint on the city he once scoffed at, aiding in its transformation into a global city. He never held elected office but was one of Los Angeles’ most influential figures for crucial decades of growth, setbacks and rebirths.

He took a prominent place in one of the city’s most desperate hours, in the mid-1990s, when an economic recession, the Rodney King beating and subsequent uprising and the Northridge earthquake left L.A. battered.

It was also a moment when corporations that once called Los Angeles home were rapidly exiting and, by many measures he was the last of the succession of civic builders who for a century held great sway in the city.

His work touched many parts of civic life, from the revitalization of downtown L.A. to the city’s rise as an art capital to his efforts to improve L.A. schools and crucial support for



Philanthropist Eli Broad is surrounded by union construction workers at a ceremony for the Broad Museum in downtown Los Angeles in 2013. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

the charter school movement. He didn’t always get what he wanted, and not everyone always agreed with his vision and brand of power.

But his achievements are hard to dismiss.

He retired from public life a few years ago, but the seeds of his efforts continue to blossom. After years of delays, the massive Grand Avenue development he championed is now rising in Bunker Hill. The Frank Gehry-designed towers are transforming the downtown skyline once again in Broad’s image.

“Eli Broad, simply put, was L.A.’s most influential private citizen of his generation,” Los Angeles Mayor Eric

Garcetti said on Twitter Friday. “He loved this city as deeply as anyone I have ever known. He was a dreamer, often seeing things that others didn’t or couldn’t. He was a builder — of homes, the arts, educational opportunity, health breakthroughs that transformed dreams into reality.”

Broad was the founding chairman of the red sandstone Museum of Contemporary Art and later its financial savior. He revived the campaign to build Disney Hall when it was all but dead. His foundation generated \$2 million toward construction of the Caltrans District 7 Headquarters in the Civic Center. The Broad Museum, which houses his and Edye’s collec-

tion of modern art, opened its doors in 2015.

The list goes on and on. But as a new transplant from Detroit, Broad and his company — Kaufman & Broad — first had a hand in helping create Southern California’s sprawl.

He was a storied figure in the real estate industry, one of the most prolific home builders in Southern California during the post-World War II boom years when fields and farms turned into subdivisions. He became an instrumental player in the suburbanization of the region, helping create waves of homes for first-time buyers. Kaufman & Broad was the largest home builder in the San Fernando Valley in the 1960s.

“He had his hands on the door-knobs of as many houses for the masses as anyone,” said real estate developer Steve Soboroff, who oversaw construction of the Playa Vista planned community.

Kaufman & Broad expanded into other regions including San Francisco and into Canada and France. By 1977, the company had delivered 100,000 homes. Broad retired as chairman in 1993 but stayed in business and ran the financial services firm SunAmerica, his second Fortune 500 enterprise.

Los Angeles money manager Alan Snyder, who knew Broad, said the businessman was a “visionary in financial services” who applied the same deep thinking to that industry that he did to home building — providing a product that would serve the people who bought his homes.

“Constructing homes is the early part, right?” Snyder said. “Retirement is the later. He wanted to be the engine to help people realize their retirement dreams.”

SunAmerica was acquired by New York-based American International Group for \$18 billion in a deal announced in 1998. It had 1,000 employees in Southern California and 2,500 nationwide at the time.

The merger swelled Broad’s personal wealth but also engendered fears that the high-profile executive might become less visible in Los Angeles business, civic and political affairs. That turned out to be far from true. He stayed on at SunAmerica and announced his retirement as its chief executive in 2000 — before embarking on his career as perhaps the highest-profile civic leader in Los Angeles.

“Eli was a giant in the business community. Everybody who knew him, looked up to him,” said Lloyd Greif, a veteran Los Angeles investment banker.

Broad also carved out a legacy in education, one that quickly became controversial.

On the political side, he was a leading campaign donor behind successive slates of L.A. school board candidates. His favored candidates typically opposed those who had won the backing of the teachers union. Early on, these Broad-backed candidates put forward an agenda of sound fiscal management and academic accountability through test scores and other metrics.

His regular civic collaborator was L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan — an alignment that continued even after Riordan left office. Both gradually evolved to become strong supporters of independently operated charter schools, most of which are non-union. A legacy of this effort is a de facto two-party system in local education politics — with candidates funded by charter supporters on one side and those with teachers-union backing on the other. Periodically, the candidates endorsed by Broad and Riordan claimed a board majority.

But Broad’s involvement was not always predictable. Recently, he found common cause with the teachers union in supporting a local education tax.

And his influence went well beyond political campaigns. He set up an education foundation, which, for a time, gave out an annual prize to school districts that his evaluators judged to be improving quickly. The foundation ultimately abandoned that reward. His nonprofit also created a training system for senior school district leaders.

He wanted to infuse career educators with the skills possessed by top leaders in private business. And he wanted to draft people from outside education into the field, giving them enough knowledge to take charge of school systems traditionally run by educators.

He saw a need for fresh, better-trained talent in what he regarded as a hidebound field.

His critics perceived him as training an army of union busters.

But Broad also was a major backer of Measure H, the 2017 voter-approved sales tax increase that pays for homeless services, Los Angeles City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas said in a statement Friday evening.

“Today, we lost a trailblazer, a philanthropist, and a great friend of Los Angeles,” Ridley-Thomas said.

Even more than that, though, Broad “was a doer — a man of action,” the councilman added on Twitter. “Right now, I’m reminded of a song that’s often heard at memorial services across the land:

“‘Let the works I’ve done speak for me.’ May he rest in peace.”