

Arthur Rubloff, 83, Colossus Of Real Estate Development

May 25, 1986 | By Jack Houston and Stanley Ziemba.

Carl Sandburg called Chicago "the city of big shoulders." For years, some people believed those shoulders belonged to Arthur Rubloff, whose name, in giant letters, appeared on billboards on so many buildings.

Mr. Rubloff, 83, a giant in Chicago real estate development and once ranked by Forbes magazine as one of the nation's top five developers, died Saturday in his home on North Lake Shore Drive. Services will be held at 11 a.m. Tuesday in Temple Shalom, 3480 N. Lake Shore Dr.

Though not a Chicago native, Mr. Rubloff came to love the city, and with that love envisioned an unlimited future for its redevelopment.

As chairman of Arthur Rubloff & Co., one of Chicago's largest real estate firms, he was given much of the credit for "The Magnificent Mile," the redevelopment of North Michigan Avenue; the Ft. Dearborn Project, the redevelopment of the Near North Side; and the North Loop Plan, a major proposal to redevelop part of the city's downtown.

The company's ubiquitous billboards made it seem synonymous with the managing or selling of large buildings. And Mr. Rubloff, never one to be self-effacing, did not mince words in listing his achievements as a developer.

"So what can I tell ya?" he asked a writer for Chicago magazine who had come to profile him. "I did North Michigan Avenue's Magnificent Mile. Nobody helped me. I built Sandburg Village. Saved the Near North Side, that's what I did. Everyone was against it. You don't think anyone would have ever come up with the North Loop redevelopment project if I hadn't started it or planned it --not in a hundred years.

"I have the kind of vision and knowledge and imagination to do these kinds of deals by myself, and I've done them many times."

But Mr. Rubloff's critics, of whom there were many, contended that even though he played a major role in the developments, he was not solely responsible for conceiving or implementing them.

Furthermore, they often noted, even without his contributions, some of those projects would have been implemented.

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"Arthur was a man of considerable vision whose contributions to our city will be praised long after him," said Willard Brown Jr., chairman of Arthur Rubloff & Co. "... His vision and commitment to our city will long remain an inspiration to all of us."

Mr. Rubloff is remembered by some younger businessmen as generous with his help and expertise in aiding the birth of new businesses.

"If we were to name two key persons who made a difference to our business, Arthur would be one of them," said Gene Silverberg, who with his brother, Joseph, owns the Bigsby and Kruthers chain of men's clothing stores. Mr. Rubloff got his start in real estate in 1919 as a 17-year-old Loop broker. By the time he was 28, he had made \$100,000 in brokerage commissions selling downtown office space. Several years later, he negotiated a huge North Kansas City development project that began a 32-year relationship with Allen & Co., an investment-banking firm.

Shortly after World War II, he put up one of the pioneer major shopping centers--Evergreen Plaza--at the corner of 95th Street and Western Avenue on the edge of the South Side. He later helped promote North Michigan Avenue as one of the world's renowned retail shopping districts and took credit for nicknaming the street "The Magnificent Mile."

Mr. Rubloff also participated in the development of such large-scale projects as Chicago's "Old Town" and San Francisco's "Southland" and "Sun Valley" projects. He also codeveloped Carl Sandburg Village, a Near North Side housing development that later sold at a \$65 million profit.

He also considered the concept of new cities. In the 1950s, he acquired 107,000 acres near El Paso with the idea of building the largest city in America. He paid \$875,000 for the land, but soon was offered \$12 million for it. With that kind of profit, he told Forbes, he could not afford to continue. More recently, he envisioned an ambitious renovation of 14.5 acres in downtown Chicago--the North Loop project, with a projected cost of \$900 million. His planned development would have embraced the Daley Center across from his Brunswick Office Building, 69 W. Washington St.

Mr. Rubloff touted his North Loop plan to three Chicago mayors: Richard Daley, Michael Bilandic and Jane Byrne. Daley wanted him to redevelop one block between Washington, Randolph, State and Dearborn Streets and put the public library there.

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But Mr. Rubloff decided it was time to change the shape of the entire downtown, so he drew up plans to cover seven blocks--bounded roughly by Wacker Drive, Wabash Avenue and Washington and La Salle Streets. Daley approved the plans. But just as Mr. Rubloff was set to begin work on them, Daley died in late 1976.

Bilandic was of little help, according to Mr. Rubloff. Then came Byrne, who considered his ideas outmoded, even outlandish because his plan called for demolishing virtually all existing buildings within the North Loop renewal zone, including several landmark theater buildings. Byrne replaced Mr. Rubloff with a whole new set of North Loop redevelopment advisers.

Mr. Rubloff once said that the only landmark in the entire State of Illinois worth saving was Abraham Lincoln's home in Springfield.

Despite Bilandic and Byrne's rebuffs, the idea of redeveloping the North Loop was said to remain close to Mr. Rubloff's heart, because he considered his suburban shopping malls partly to blame for the decline of Chicago's central business district.

But after years of seeing his North Loop plan sputter and stall, Mr. Rubloff said in 1983 that he did not see any great future for the area.

Nevertheless, in March, 1986, a team of developers led by Jerrold Wexler and John Buck signed a contract to buy the vacant block at State Street and Wacker Drive, proposing to build a 40-story office tower alongside a 600-room luxury hotel.

Mr. Rubloff was considered by many as an enormously generous man. He pledged \$5 million to help the University of Chicago in renovating its 468-bed medical center, and gave another \$5 million to Northwestern University to build a new law school on its downtown campus.

His gift of \$6 million in 1984 to the Art Institute of Chicago was the largest single contribution ever. He also gave the Art Institute 140 bronze sculptures, valued at \$4 million, and a \$3 million collection of paperweights. "I've given a great deal of money away, but I don't consider that in itself anything special," he said. "I think everyone owes something to the city where you live. . . . I have put a mark on Chicago, and my enjoyment in giving is in seeing the results of what I do."

A tall man, Mr. Rubloff was easily recognizable by the distinctive walking cane he carried and the bowler hat and circular-framed glasses he wore. He would often hand out crisp new \$1 bills to children he encountered during visits to his Evergreen Plaza shopping center.

He was born June 25, 1902, in Duluth, Minn., the oldest of five children. His father, Solomon, was a Russian Jewish immigrant and a traveling jeweler who later operated several jewelry and dry goods stores.

The family suffered a severe financial setback, however, when they moved to Chislm, Minn., where a fire destroyed much of the town.

Young Arthur was something of a truant in Chislm's grammar school. There were too many things to do in the surrounding forests, and he was much more intent on finding ways to make money than he was in listening to his teachers. His business career began at the age of 7 when he had four or five jobs. He sold the Duluth Herald, was an agent for Chicago's Saturday Night Blade, shined shoes evenings at a hotel and set pins in a small bowling alley.

In 1914, when he was 12, Arthur ran away to Duluth, where he got a job as galley boy on the ore boat J.S. Stevenson, which sailed between Superior, Wis., and Buffalo. By age 13, he ended up in Cincinnati, where he worked for a furniture company.

Two years later, when he was 15 and learned his parents had moved to Chicago, the young Mr. Rubloff went to work there in his father's newly established ladies ready-to-wear manufacturing business. About a year later, his father's uninsured plant burned down, and the family's fortunes were once again at a low ebb.

But for Arthur, this tragedy became a turning point and the beginning of a long and successful career in real estate. When the elder Rubloff sent his son downtown to lease a loft on Market Street, the realty man with whom Arthur dealt was so impressed he offered him a job.

By the age of 18, he had made \$8,000. A year later, he joined Robert White & Co., a company with whom he was associated until 1930. During those 10 years, according to accounts by Mr. Rubloff, he was making \$50,000 a year and spending it all.

On Aug. 10, 1930, with only \$700, Mr. Rubloff went into business for himself, finding tenants space in the Merchandise Mart. In the years following, through hard work and imaginative enterprise, Mr. Rubloff built his firm into one of the country's largest.

Mr. Rubloff married Josephine Sheehan in 1934.

The first Mrs. Rubloff died Oct. 22, 1974. Mr. Rubloff was married again in June, 1980, to Mary Taylor from New York.

Survivors include his wife; a daughter, Felicia; two sisters; and a brother.