

# Jim Stanton, a leading builder of suburban homes and downtown lofts, dies at 81

Stanton was the most influential developer of his generation.

By Jim Buchta (<http://www.startribune.com/jim-buchta/10644536/>) Star Tribune |

JUNE 19, 2017 — 8:28PM

Jim Stanton, one of the most prolific — and gutsy — real estate developers in the Twin Cities, died Saturday of a stroke. He was 81.

Stanton developed broad swaths of Twin Cities suburbs and weed-strewn industrial sites in downtown Minneapolis. He got into the real estate business more than 55 years ago and for much of that time was a developer who platted more than 6,000 homesites in 28 metro communities.

"Jim was a force — there will never be another like him," said Peggy Lucas, co-founder of Brighton Development, another pioneering downtown developer. "Few people appreciate the impact he had on the city ... first the early North Loop and then the Mill District."

Colleen Ratzlaff LaBeau, one of his four children and a ReMax Advantage Plus agent who was marketing coordinator for Stanton's company, said his success was far from an accident. He was a "calculated risk taker," she said. He slept little, was a voracious book reader and was interested in people. His favorite hangout was Cuzzi's, a downtown bar.

"He wasn't a drinker, but he just liked to sit and talk with people," she said. "He studied things, and that's why he didn't fail like a lot of people did."

Stanton, born in 1936, was the oldest of 12 children. His dad wanted him to stay and work the farm in Greenvale Township near Faribault, but he had other ideas.

"He was intrigued with real estate," LaBeau said.

When Stanton was president of the Minnesota Association of Realtors in 1986, he acknowledged his good fortune: "Other than the real estate industry, where else can a farm kid have the opportunities that I've had?"

Stanton graduated from Bethlehem Academy in Faribault in 1954 and served in the National Guard at Camp Ripley and Fort Carson, Colo. In a [paid obituary](http://www.startribune.com/obituaries/detail/203827/?fullname=james-m-stanton) (<http://www.startribune.com/obituaries/detail/203827/?fullname=james-m-stanton>), his family said that Stanton "later went on to get his Ph.D. from the 'school of hard knocks.'"

Early in Stanton's career, he carved up vast tracts of suburban sod fields and cropland into homesites. For a time, he was known as the "King of Coon Rapids." But he wasn't afraid of complicated, unglamorous urban redevelopment.

He helped transform the North Loop from a grungy outpost for artists into one of the region's most trendy neighborhoods by developing expensive condos. He then provided an affordable place for artists displaced from the North Loop by turning the neglected Northrup King warehouse in northeast Minneapolis into studio space. That building became the epicenter of the nationally known Northeast Minneapolis Arts District.

Stanton's development appetite ran the gamut from mixed-use commercial projects to the upscale Wilds Golf Club in Prior Lake, which he bought out of bankruptcy and resurrected. In the wake of the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009, Stanton snapped up hundreds of suburban sites for pennies on the dollar and was the first to break ground on a downtown Minneapolis condo building. That project, Stonebridge Lofts, sold out before it was completed.

At the time of his death, he had residential and commercial projects under construction in 10 cities in Minnesota and Wisconsin. They include his most ambitious condo project: The Legacy, a 374-unit building that's rising in the Mill District next to Stonebridge Lofts.



3198356.jpg

([http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows\\_1497913](http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1497913))

June 23, 1986 Jim Stanton, president of the Minnesota Association of Realtors: "Other than the real estate industry, where else can a farm...

Though Stanton wasn't a bookish stereotypical real estate developer — he favored leather jackets and jeans over suit coats and ties — he was an influential and larger-than-life member of several local and national professional associations for builders and developers.

Just 10 days ago, Siegel said, Stanton attended a planning meeting of the Builders Association of the Twin Cities. "As always, he was looking forward to opportunities to continue to elevate the housing industry," said David Siegel, executive director of BATC. "Jim was also a leader in elevating the housing industry's advocacy efforts."

Stanton held several industry leadership roles and received several awards from BATC and others. He was the 2010 recipient of BATC's Robert L. Hanson Award for industry service, and in 2014 he was inducted into the Minnesota Real Estate Hall of Fame. A 35-year member of the Builders Association, he served on the board of directors for both the Builders Association of Minnesota and the National Association of Home Builders.

Stanton had a reputation for delivering no-frills projects on time and at competitive prices. "When he priced his lots, he priced them to sell, and when he priced his condos, he priced them to move." LaBeau said. "His passion wasn't about greed, it was about keeping what he had going, and adding to it."

Though Stanton believed in the power of momentum, he wasn't afraid to put on the brakes.

In 2014, he scuttled plans for a 20-story condominium building on Hennepin Avenue because his instinct and analysis told him that buyers wanted more parking than zoning rules at the time would allow. The city didn't budge and neither did he. "When the city wakes up and understands that you need more parking, then we'll do something," Stanton said at the time.

That kind of tenacity saved him from failure, said Lynn Leegard, who was lured away from a plum job as an executive at Edina Realty to be his general counsel 13 years ago. She said that while he was a shrewd and studied business guy, his rural roots gave him an advantage over other developers. She used to call him a "dirt guy" who understood the fundamentals of development, including how to dig a foundation and grade land.

"He really understood the nuts and bolts of a job site," she said. "And he was always on the job site."