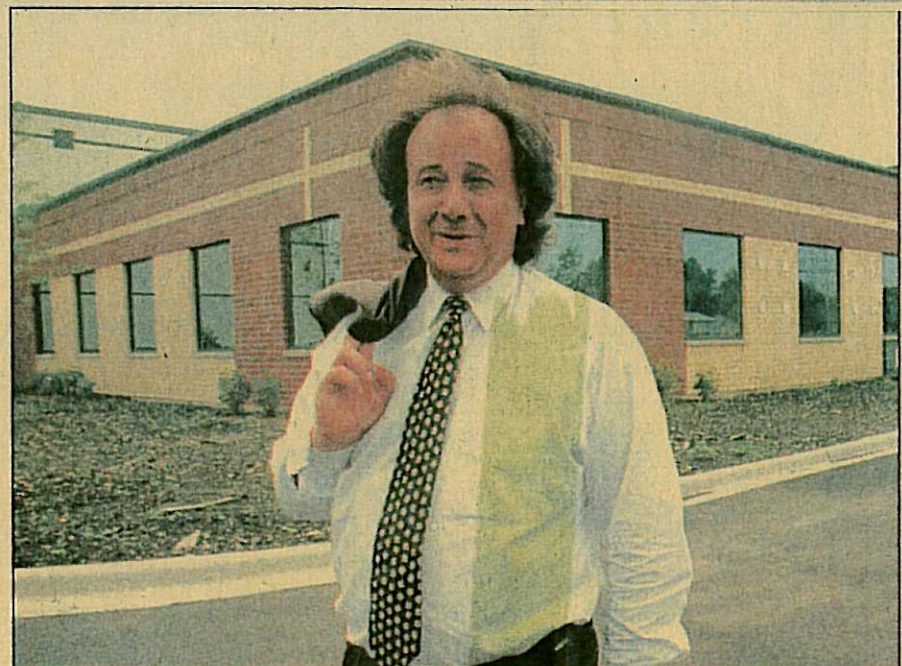


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# Tempo Du Page

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Tribune photo by Hung The Vu

Born in Sicily, John Gullo now lives the American dream as his development business continues to grow.

## John Gullo flies high around O'Hare airport

By Martha Russis  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

**W**ith his untamed hair and accented English, John Gullo may not immediately fit the mold as a leader of a company that has locked up part of the O'Hare real estate market.

But get him started talking about bricks and mortar and his true calling as a businessman and builder is revealed.

Over the last two decades, Gullo, 48, of Elk Grove Village has methodically bought and developed a large share of industrial property around the airport, particularly in Elk Grove Village. He's now one of the area's major landlords.

At Elk Grove Village's Centex Industrial Park, one of the world's largest, Gullo has built nearly one-fifth of the 2,000-plus buildings and did an estimated \$10 million in business during the 1980s building boom. He also commands a smaller share of the Wood Dale and Itasca markets.

Gullo, head of Gullo International Development Corp., also in Elk Grove Village, specializes in single-tenant buildings for industrial users. He owns and has developed a total of 350 acres in the western O'Hare area.

Much of that has been built on speculation without an initial buyer, a risky practice that repeatedly paid off with corporate demand for space near the airport. As the airfield

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## Gullo

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spurred development of Elk Grove Village and planners visualized half of the village as an industrial park, Gullo was one of the first to seize the opportunity.

"I think he had foresight when there were not so many people doing business in this area," said Kay Rohan, a vice president with broker H.F. Rothschild Co., a real estate firm in Wilmette, and a player in the O'Hare market.

"All our buildings, they stand up next to any other projects," Gullo said. "That has been my hopes and my wishes, that I want to get the best and make sure people recognize who I am. We built our name for that reason."

In the current economic downturn affecting the construction industry, Gullo is focusing on build-to-suit orders with confirmed buyers. Currently, he holds 50 vacant acres in Elk Grove Village and another four in Wood Dale, and has just completed an 87,000-square-foot building for Petersen Aluminum at Tonne and Fargo Roads in Elk Grove Village. Another building is under way in Wood Dale for a 10-year lease by Hankyu Transport U.S.A.

Gullo has found his niche by designing and building structures that don't look like their neighbors. A "Gullo" building stands out.

"He has a definite flair. His buildings are distinctive because of arches, because of atriums, because of columns. Those are things other builders do not do," said Nancy Carlson, Elk Grove Village's economic development director who works with most of the industrial park companies.

Gullo said he incorporates his interest in European design into his building designs. "We are sort of into modern design, so we want to keep that high-image look," he said. "We like that strategy of being modern."

From start to finish, Gullo International crafts buildings in-house with the help of architect Carmelo La Spina, who joined the firm five years ago. La Spina said open-minded clients and creative professionals are key to designing unique structures.

"I think every building should have some personality, and since I have been here, there has not been one building [like another]," La Spina said.

What anyone will also tell you is that a Gullo building doesn't come cheap.

"Mr. Gullo's buildings have been

known as a little more expensive but a little nicer. Companies like to have an identity and like to be in free-standing buildings, even if they are small," said Rohan, who represents a number of foreign firms.

Gullo, whose first name by birth is Giovanni, has transported some design touches from his native Sicily to the drawing boards in his Elk Grove Village offices.

He was 17 when his mother and father brought him to the United States to visit his uncle. He moved here permanently a few years later.

When he first came to the States, Gullo bused tables at Como Inn to support himself while he learned English. Later, he worked as an auto mechanic before becoming his own boss and starting a painting company.

Shortly after, he linked up with Trammell Crow Co., a commercial developer that had hired him to paint its buildings. But it didn't take Gullo long to realize he could tap the same building market on a smaller scale. Along with a partner, he borrowed money to construct his first buildings on spec. All of the buildings were sold or leased quickly.

Gullo bought out his partner, and J. Gullo Builders was born. He later renamed the company Gullo International Development Corp. because "in my mind, it was going to expand."

In one sense, the company grew, but not geographically. Intuition that the airport would continue to be a certain draw kept Gullo around the Elk Grove area, with occasional deals in suburbs farther out.

"I feel that you will never go wrong to develop in this area," Gullo said. "If I were to go further away from here, I could do business, too, but my chances would cut down 30 to 40 percent. So why should I take the risk?"

Gullo's commitment to not venturing beyond proven territory has also earned him the confidence of lenders.

"It is his burning desire to succeed," said Dennis Gallagher, one of Gullo's principal lenders and second vice president of NBD Bank in Highland Park. "He is very emotional and very focused on his development and specifically his name."

Aside from Gullo International, Gullo also operates Gullo International Realty Group at Gullo's Elk Grove Village headquarters, 46 Lively Blvd. The realty group manages the sales and leasing of Gullo's buildings.

Gullo said he tries to convey to

customers the importance of having the right building.

"If you want image, you want [a more highly designed] type of building. If you are not looking for image, you rent a straight, square box," Gullo said.

One skeptic turned believer is Robert Arthur, owner and president of Arthur Machinery in Elk Grove Village. Over the last five years, Gullo has built two progressively larger buildings for Arthur's tool business.

"He conveys the message that you have to aspire to grow, and he urges you to look at the big picture and look down the road," Arthur said. "Being in a Gullo building has without a doubt been good for our business."

Gullo's forte is small companies—typically a sales, distribution or manufacturing center—that wants anywhere from 5,000 to 90,000 square feet.

His prices, which are above average for the western O'Hare area, start at \$25 per square foot to buy and \$3 to \$9 a square foot a year to rent.

"For the company that wants a higher image building, he can produce that building probably better than any other developer out there. Most companies can appreciate his building from an aesthetic and a cost point of view," said Ron Behm, an agent with Colliers, Bennett & Kahnweiler Inc., a real estate brokerage in Rosemont.

Behm said Gullo has thrived because he lives up to his word.

"You live on a reputation, and he has a fine reputation that you can shake his hand and it's as good as signing a piece of paper," Behm said. "That is very important nowadays when people are looking over their shoulder."

Gullo's three children recently joined the company to help their father and learn the business.

Virginia, 24, deals with the banks, attorneys and title companies; Mariann, 21, works with the construction project managers and takes care of payables and accounting; and 19-year-old Mario works in the office during summers.

"It just is an excellent feeling knowing that you are dealing with these people from the very beginning breaking ground and 8, 10 months later you are giving them a key," Mariann said.

Gullo hopes to convey to them the same passion for the business he has so they can keep the business moving forward.

"We want them to carry through and teach them the business and make Gullo International continue with success," Gullo said.