



# *Gestures of* **Empathy**

*Improving the quality of life*

By Trish Donnally

Some of the most successful details in our projects come from unexpected sources. A cancer center’s innovative “calm spaces” evolved from the suggestion of a concierge. A school helped turn an architectural necessity into a way to celebrate its students. And the personal lives of our own PEOple have informed the way buildings and public spaces are expressed. Gestures of empathy abound across the firm’s creative projects, with one constant unifying them all: Perkins Eastman designs environments to have a positive impact on the people who use them.

## **Indoor/Outdoor Living Rooms**

Principal and Executive Director Jason Haim recalls encountering an ironic situation while visiting his mother in the hospital. “Because of her diagnosis, she was encouraged to move as much as possible, and to get

out of her room. The only problem with that is there was nowhere to go,” says Haim, who was principal-in-charge of MarinHealth Medical Center (MH) in Greenbrae, CA, at the time. Walking through the congested halls of the hospital with its technical equipment and monitors was like winding through a maze, and there was no place to take a good walk, let alone get a breath of fresh air. While spending half of the two weeks his mother was there either visiting or spending the night, Haim says, “I wished we had a solarium, an amenity space, to walk to and to spend a few minutes together each hour when she had to ambulate.”

Haim transformed his wish into reality. “When I started to think about MarinHealth, I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be able to sit outside?’ As healthcare architects in California, we struggle with opening up patient rooms to the exterior due to code-



related issues. Perhaps we could make the solarium dual-function—indoor/outdoor, to provide this ability?”

Indeed, Haim and his team created five indoor/outdoor “solarium living rooms” at MH to give patients and their families an opportunity to step away and enjoy views of the spectacular surroundings—which include Mount Tamalpais, a meandering creek, and a nearby park—that provide the building with a unique respite quality. With physician approval, patients—even those tethered to an IV pole—are able to venture outside for fresh air. When it’s cold, patients and visitors can close the outdoor area and use the “living room” from inside. When it’s warm, as it often is in Marin County, they can close the interior glass doors and open the exterior glass doors to enjoy a soothing breeze. Four rooftop gardens provide additional destinations to take restorative breaks outdoors, enhancing the quality of life for patients and their families.

### Honoring Blair Phillips

Blair Phillips loved architecture and music. This young architect graduated with a B.A. in Architecture with honors from the University of Virginia in 2011, where he also distinguished himself as an exceptional classical pianist and participated in an a cappella group called The Academical Village People as a play on the name of Thomas Jefferson’s original campus design. Blair began his career with Perkins Eastman after he graduated, where he soon found himself working on The Wharf in Southwest Washington, DC. He specifically worked on The Channel Apartments and The Anthem music hall, where Blair’s combined passion for architecture and music was a perfect fit. Much of his time was spent with the small team sent down to the trailers at the job site. “Blair’s warm personality was a highlight of

the community that formed down at the waterfront, working alongside the development and construction team,” says Principal Hilary Bertsch. In 2013, however, Blair, an avid skier, took a trip to New England where he had a tragic ski accident and died at age 24. His parents contacted Perkins Eastman requesting details about their son’s last project in an effort to try to honor his legacy. “They took great comfort in learning that this project combined his love of both architecture and music,” says Associate Principal Douglas M. Campbell of Perkins Eastman DC. When the Phillips family asked if they could travel to visit the room-sized model of The Wharf, the project team invited them to see both the model and the waterfront job site.

“We took them to the site, which at that point was a big hole in the ground, and amazingly Monty Hoffman showed up,” Campbell says, referring to the founder and chairman of Hoffman & Associates and developer of The Wharf. “We introduced him to Blair’s family, and Monty touched us all deeply when he said, ‘We should rename the street between Parcels 1 and 2, Blair Alley.’” This street provides access to The Anthem’s back-of-house spaces and ends with a plaza at the edge of the Washington Channel. Over the next year, Perkins Eastman held an in-house design competition to add a striking, streamlined granite bowl fountain to this plaza, honoring the young architect’s memory. The fountain bears the following inscription: “May the music and design of Blair Phillips live on.” Blair Alley and this fountain are now permanent features of The Wharf.

### Making Students Feel Welcome

When Perkins Eastman DC modernized Roosevelt Senior High School in Washington, DC, in 2016, the design team transformed a forlorn center courtyard

#### Opposite page

The MarinHealth Medical Center provides indoor/outdoor “living rooms” to give patients and others easy access to the outdoors for fresh air and glorious views. Copyright Tim Griffith / Courtesy Perkins Eastman

#### Above

The Blair Phillips fountain at The Wharf in Washington, DC, honors a young architect who loved music and worked on the project, but tragically died in a skiing accident. The inscription on the fountain reads, “May the music and design of Blair Phillips live on.” Photograph by Andrew Rugge / Copyright Perkins Eastman



into a daylight-filled atrium in the heart of the school to give students a place to gather with friends and feel at home. The large space and its surrounding hard surfaces demanded acoustical baffles to mitigate the sounds and echoes throughout that area. In addition to being functional, however, the baffles needed to be symbolic and attractive.

Collaborating with school officials, the team proposed designing the panels with the 22 languages spoken by various members of the student body to reflect the school’s multicultural population. They printed 16 core school values—such as diversity, community, and equality—in English, then translated each value into the many languages.

“These panels not only represent the students and their heritage, but they bring vibrancy to the space and can also be used as a teaching tool,” says Alexandra Alephoritis, the Perkins Eastman graphic designer who designed the banners. “On the opposite side of the banners, there is a graphical depiction of the world map. When seen collectively, this side depicts the Eastern and Western hemispheres.” With a glance, students can feel a sense of pride as they experience this cultural space that honors their heritage.

### “The Colors of the Neighborhood”

As the Perkins Eastman team began to design the New York-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital: Center for Community Health (CCH), which opened on March 15, 2021, they—and the hospital’s neighbors—wanted the new 400,000 sf center to be well integrated into the venerable Park Slope neighborhood. As the first and largest major ambulatory care facility built in Brooklyn in 40 years, it needed to reflect the community and resonate with those who live there. Perkins Eastman took great care to address the neighbors’ needs and desires by engaging extensively with Brooklynites through multiple community meetings and public hearings.

After incorporating their feedback and undertaking an in-depth analysis of surrounding buildings to understand the character and context of the community, Perkins Eastman integrated the six-story CCH building into the neighborhood vernacular. The team used a warm, reddish-brownstone shade for the base of the pre-cast concrete structure to complement the nearby historic brownstones and designed residential-scale volumes to break down the massing. The building feels like it’s always been there.

A few designers went a step further. Principal Cristobal Mayendia and Associate Sebastian Medina carefully analyzed the façades of the brownstones nestled along the tree-lined streets throughout the vicinity. They photographed nearby row houses and other buildings, and captured the palette of Park Slope, which ranged from sand, salmon, saffron, cocoa, burnt-orange, and brownish-red to soothing stone shades. Using terracotta baguettes from Germany that reflect these hues, balanced with blue-grey and turquoise tiles that represent the sky, Mayendia and Medina designed a mosaic mural they named “The Colors of the Neighborhood.” They





presented different iterations of this mosaic during community meetings, listened and responded to feedback, and ultimately created an 18-by-45-foot installation to be integrated into the porte cochere, welcoming everyone who arrives at the main entrance to the new CCH. The soothing hues of the mural, curated from the colors of the historic neighborhood—and the CCH structure as a whole—now fit seamlessly within the context of this community.

### Get It Together Rooms

When the firm began planning the David H. Koch Center for Cancer Care at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, the deep-dive discovery phase played a big part in the final design. “The building has a program. However, our client intentionally asked us to push the boundaries of the program beyond preconceived notions and expectations,” says Jeff Brand, principal and executive director at Perkins Eastman and director of medical planning for this major healthcare center. “We took that to mean we needed to be inquisitive and explore what all the building stakeholders are seeking in their day. This building is a town of thousands of people, all seeking fulfillment of their needs in some fashion. It changes daily. So our inquisitive design process looked for the intimacy of what people are seeking.”

One discovery came from a concierge at an existing Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center building,

who oftentimes felt that people leaving the center may need extra support before they stepped out of the doors. Sometimes patients and their families receive difficult news, making them feel like they can’t face the outside world immediately.

Anticipating patients’ needs at the David H. Koch Center for Cancer Care at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Brand’s team planned a place for them to collect themselves, regain their strength, and take a few deep breaths before re-entering society. This sensitivity inspired the design of “Get It Together Rooms.” Now, if a concierge sees a patient who may need some extra support, he or she will invite them to rest in one of these quiet, calm-colored rooms off the lobby, which feature a comfortable place to sit and often an adjacent restroom. These spaces give patients a place to pull themselves together as a concierge offers assistance or a kind word to help that person throughout their journey. Brand says, “The Get It Together Rooms’ were designed to support people at their hardest moments.”

Such actions reflect our designers’ primary motivation to deeply understand the people who will use these schools, mixed-use developments, and hospitals. And amidst the dizzying array of code requirements, structural necessities, and space-planning needs, they never lose sight of these gestures of empathy. **N**

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### Opposite page

Top: The acoustical baffles at Roosevelt Senior High School translate school values into the 22 languages its students speak. Copyright Joseph Romeo / Courtesy Perkins Eastman

Bottom: “The Colors of the Neighborhood” mural at the New York-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital: Center for Community Health. Photograph by Andrew Ruge / Copyright Perkins Eastman

### Above

Perkins Eastman designed the corridor to the linear accelerator at the David H. Koch Center for Cancer Care at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City to create a calm, natural-light-filled pathway to a procedure that makes many patients anxious. Photograph by Andrew Ruge / Copyright Perkins Eastman

“The ‘Get It Together Rooms’ were designed to support people at their hardest moments.” - Jeff Brand