

# Mary-Jean Eastman PAVES THE WAY

*Building an architecture firm with grace and grit*



By Trish Donnally

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**Above**

Mary-Jean Eastman, vice chair and co-founder of Perkins Eastman, has been on point throughout her career.

*As a rare woman leader in the male-dominated field of architecture, Mary-Jean Eastman co-founded the global firm Perkins Eastman with Bradford Perkins when she was only 34 years old. Together, they have led their firm over the past 40 years to the top echelon of architectural design firms in the world, while breaking barriers and striving to make a positive impact with every commission they accept. Eastman discovered that not only her aptitude in advanced math, science, and design skills mattered, but her abilities to relate to others, collaborate, and build consensus have been equally critical.*

*“Architecture is a team sport,” says Eastman, now vice chair of Perkins Eastman, and the first to remind people that women were not always part of the team.*

“When I was at university in the 1960s, times were very different. Students I talk to today find it hard to understand—women were sent to college to find a husband, and that was my parents’ expectation,” Eastman says. After graduating from McGill University in her hometown of Montreal with a Bachelor of Science in Architecture in 1969, Harvard University accepted her application for graduate school, but her parents would not pay the tuition. “People are aghast that my parents wouldn’t support me. But my parents thought, ‘Why waste seven years of education

on a woman?” Instead, Eastman put herself through University College London’s Bartlett School of Architecture, where tuition was only £180 vs. \$6,000 per year. There, she earned a Diploma in Architecture, her professional degree, as well as a Master of Science in Architecture.

At Bartlett, Eastman had her only woman professor as a design critic, Mary-Jane Long. Long’s recent obituary explains that she applied to Yale Architecture School with her initials because she knew they would never

admit a woman. She went on to become a beloved professor at Yale for decades. Long offered Eastman a summer internship working with her, in the office of the renowned architect Sir Colin St John Wilson, on the programming for the new British National Library. This enabled Eastman to work on programming while studying major new libraries across Europe. It was the foundation of her career-long interest in programmatically complex buildings.

In 1974, after graduation, Eastman returned to Montreal and landed a job focused on the planning, design, and operations of the 1976 Summer Olympic facilities. Her experience working in a “big room,” where construction managers, engineers, and architects all work together in one space, afforded her the chance early in her career to see how all the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) disciplines came together—as a team.

After the Olympics, Eastman moved to New York and began working for New York State as part of a team pursuing the 1984 Summer Olympics. She met Brad Perkins, who was working for the joint venture Davis Brody/Llewelyn-Davies Associates that had been selected to prepare the bid. But when Los Angeles won, Eastman began working for Davis Brody. In 1977, Brad left Llewelyn-Davies to become the Managing Principal of the East Coast offices of Perkins & Will. Eastman joined that firm a year later and became a Studio Leader in the firm’s New York office. In 1981, Perkins and Eastman left to start their own firm.

“Mary-Jean and I had worked together for over four years when we established Perkins Eastman,” says Brad Perkins, chairman of Perkins Eastman. “During those years, we led many projects together and found that we had very complementary skills that resulted in successful projects and happy clients. Establishing Perkins Eastman was the logical next step in what has been a 44-year working relationship.”

Perkins Eastman worked with several law firms in the early ’80s. (Marty Ginsberg, Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s husband, was a client when the firm worked on his offices at Weil, Gotshal & Manges.) “Although Brad was very much the principal-in-charge of these projects, I was the day-to-day client manager, design manager, project manager, and—some assumed—interior designer. Clients in that era found it much more acceptable to see women in that role than they did as an architect,” Eastman says. “It enabled me to have much more authority.”

### Holiday Party in Eastman’s Tribeca Loft

While authority mattered, building a culture of collaboration was just as important. Eastman interacted with staff on a personal level as well as a professional one, whether that meant bringing in donuts on a Saturday, lending a colleague maternity clothes after her daughter was born, or hosting holiday parties at her Tribeca loft for staff and their significant others.

### A Little Help from Friends

In the ’80s, Eastman worked on two of Perkins Eastman’s seminal architectural projects. For one, a friend introduced the firm to a developer in Stamford, CT, who was planning Canterbury Green, a mixed-use development. “This approximately 500,000 sf project was the first to give us real credibility in the development community,” Eastman notes. “On this project, I gained my first real architectural construction experience.”

Eastman realized it was critical to have a man at her side to work with development clients, because at that time, most in the development community did not welcome women in leadership roles on their projects. But things were about to change.

As it embarked on a new headquarters, Consumers Union, publisher of *Consumer Reports*, had retained a friend of Brad’s who owned a firm that designed laboratories. “Brad’s friend got us on the list for the architectural Request for Proposal (RFP), but initially we were eliminated for our lack of lab experience. Then it turned out we had two other important qualifications,” Eastman says. “Brad had not realized that the co-coach of his daughter’s soccer team was a senior leader at Consumers, and Rhoda Karpatkin, the president of Consumers Union, was thrilled at the possibility of working with a woman architect. Rhoda was an important force in the consumers’ movement, and I had many fascinating conversations with my first woman client when I drove her to our project meetings in Yonkers,” Eastman says. The firm continued to work for Consumers Union for decades. “I learned how strong client relationships create an ongoing stream of repeat work.”

#### Below

Perkins Eastman’s work for Consumers Union was awarded, in part, because the president of Consumers Union loved the idea of working with a woman architect. Copyright Chuck Choi / Courtesy Perkins Eastman





### Do Sweat the Small Stuff

Perkins Eastman discovered small projects could lead to much bigger commissions too. In the mid-'80s, the New York City Department of Design and Construction (NYC DDC) was having difficulty finding architects who were interested in doing small projects. “We agreed to do the 7,500 sf Clarendon Library in Flatbush [Brooklyn], and Ty [Kaul] and I were the project team,” Eastman says.

Kaul, now an associate principal, continues the story, “We only had one 80-foot length where we were allowed to have windows. But we wanted more light, so we proposed a skylight,” he says. Perkins Eastman prevailed, and the glass block skylight ended up providing light and saving energy, since lights didn’t need to be turned on during the day. “We set the building back from the street to get a community garden using all 500 square feet of the extra space too,” he says.

“We loved the Clarendon Library way past the hours the fee would support, and in the end the city’s Art Commission gave it a significant award,” Eastman says.

### Excellent Work Leads to More Work

Next, the NYC DDC awarded Perkins Eastman a 40,000 sf police precinct station in Queens. The firm’s work on the 107th Precinct garnered an award from the Queens Borough president, the AIA NY State, and it was published in *Architectural Record*. In the late '90s, NYC DDC gave the firm a third project, the 315,000 sf Queens Civil Courthouse in Jamaica. That project was also published in *Architectural Record*, and the firm has gone on to complete many more courthouses. “At this point, we had established ourselves as a firm that could produce excellent institutional buildings.”

At the same time, Eastman also realized that many of her clients on these public projects—the library, police station, and courthouse—were women who had risen through the ranks to leadership positions. Healthcare projects presented another opportunity where women made impactful decisions.

“For the past 25 years, healthcare has been the main focus of my practice, partly because I have always been

interested in programmatically complex buildings, but also because hospitals often have women in leadership positions. They first rose to prominence through nursing and are now important clinicians,” Eastman says.

“Brad and I have had a decades-long relationship with Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center that started in the early '90s when a construction manager acquaintance recommended the firm to the CEO of the institution,” Eastman says. “Brad completed our first project, the 16,000 sf Guttman Diagnostic Screening Center.” The client, the director of outpatient facilities, would soon become the administrator of the entire hospital. Her mission was to make Memorial Sloan Kettering a patient-focused institution in addition to being a renowned research organization. “As the former chief flight attendant on the [White House] press plane, she had a background in hospitality and challenging situations,” Eastman says. “After I met her and understood her design goals, I told Brad, ‘I want that client.’ Thirty years later, we have completed four major outpatient centers and renovated much of the main hospital.”

Perkins Eastman has gone on to build many other medical facilities. “At NYU Medical Center, I found myself sitting across from a female hospital president and again realized the advantage I had with women clients. The female president at Vassar Brothers Hospital, where we built the cancer center, moved on to St. Vincent’s Bridgeport Hospital.” This relationship led to another, larger project at that institution.

### Creating a Pathway

“A few years ago, when we were in the late stages of the David H. Koch Center for Cancer Care at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, the MSK administrative leaders realized that not only was their administrative team mainly female, so were many of the consultants,” Eastman recalls. “The construction manager, project manager, structural engineer, and on the architectural team, the co-principal-in-charge, three project architects, and much of the architectural team were also women. The hospital administration was so impressed with this leadership team that they held a large seminar for their staff where we

“We loved the Clarendon Library way past the hours the fee would support, and in the end the city’s Art Commission gave it a significant award.” – Mary-Jean Eastman

all discussed our contributions to the project,” Eastman adds.

In 1998, Eastman was recognized by her peers as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. “My prominence as the rare female name principal of a large firm led to invitations to the boards of the AIA New York, the New York City Building Congress, the ACE Mentor Program, and the Salvadori Center,” she says. The latter is an organization that introduces teachers to architecture and engineering so they can transfer that Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) knowledge to their students.

“Mary-Jean was very interested in the Salvadori Center because she really felt it was a way to reach young girls interested in the sciences. She was so focused on the need to reach girls early on who might have an interest in architecture,” says Nick Leahy, co-CEO and executive director of Perkins Eastman. In 2012, Eastman founded the Women’s Leadership Initiative to nurture other women leaders across the firm. Fast forward, and today half of those in leadership positions at Perkins Eastman are women.

Barbara Mullenex, managing principal of the Washington, DC, studio, says, “Mary-Jean is passionate about the success of women.” Mullenex shares an anecdote. “A few years ago, I was asked by Rachel Birnboim [associate principal] to join Mary-Jean at a women’s leadership conference in the AEC industry. Mary-Jean, the featured speaker, was acknowledged for her contribution and leadership as the founding partner of one of the largest architecture firms in the U.S. I was very flattered and honored to be asked to join her and to be on the opening panel. We had such a fun hour-and-a-half on that panel!

“She and I both have daughters—both named Caroline, the same age, and both studied ballet,” Mullenex continues. “In some of the questioning from the audience about work-life balance, raising children, and having a career, we shared stories—some

funny, some poignant—but we both laughed about our husbands’ inability to put their young, 8-year-old daughters’ hair into a bun for ballet. Other girls had perfect buns—our daughters’ were always kind of off center with lots of hair wisps flying around.”

Eastman comments, “It was a rare opportunity to bond as dance moms. In the largely male culture of architecture, that doesn’t happen often, but I did have an interesting conversation with Diego Matzkin, a principal at Perkins Eastman, who is the dance dad of a very talented son.” Eastman is an avid balletomane who has followed the New York City Ballet since 1969. She took ballet class regularly until her hip surgery at 62 and now practices Pilates/gyrotonics. When she moved to New York in 1976, it was the center of the dance world. “I watched Balanchine conduct rehearsals, had Martha Graham as a teacher, and was in class with Makarova and Baryshnikov,” she relates.

### An Evolution

Architecture has been evolving over the years, Eastman says, “Today we understand that inherent bias is inevitable and has a huge impact on the way we are all perceived, but our 40 years as a practice, and the norms and expectations about who belongs in architecture, have changed fundamentally,” she says. “Early in this century, women started to comprise half of architecture-school populations,” unlike when she was one of only six women in her architecture class of 70.

“Things have changed,” she says, and just as graduate-school ratios have evened out between men and women, Perkins Eastman reflects the same dynamic. Forty years after its founding, more than 1,000 PEOple are collaborating across 22 studios, a global team that includes 515 women. More than half of the firm’s studios are led by women, but Eastman believes there is more work to do. Her goal for Perkins Eastman is to truly value the perspectives and qualities that women bring, so the firm can attract talented women from any background to all positions and levels of seniority. **N**



#### Opposite

The award-winning Clarendon branch of the Brooklyn Public Library was a small project that led to bigger projects. Copyright Chuck Choi / Courtesy Perkins Eastman

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Left: Mary-Jean Eastman led the team that designed the Queens Civil Court in Queens, NY, a project that laid the foundation for more work on institutional buildings. Copyright Chuck Choi / Courtesy Perkins Eastman

Right: Mary-Jean Eastman leads a group of Perkins Eastman architects including (L to R): Jennifer Romeo, Joanne Violanti, and to Mary-Jean’s left, Nasra Nimaga. Photograph by Andrew Ruggie / Copyright Perkins Eastman