

## NAVIGATING

# The Future

*A Q+A with Perkins Eastman's co-CEOs*  
**ANDREW ADELHARDT, SHAWN BASLER, AND NICK LEAHY**



By Trish Donnally

### Above

Perkins Eastman pivoted during the pandemic and created a more flexible plan integrating more space for collaboration, a makers' lab, and hoteling. Photography by Andrew Ruggie / Copyright Perkins Eastman

### Opposite page

Perkins Eastman designers seek to create spaces that inspire patients' healing and well-being. The new Stanford Hospital features 40,000 sf of rooftop gardens. Copyright Brad Feinknopf / Courtesy Perkins Eastman

New synergies abound at Perkins Eastman. The firm recently opened two new studios, one in Austin and another in Raleigh, and joined forces with three prominent and exciting firms, VIA, Pfeiffer, and MEIS, each now recognized as a Perkins Eastman Studio. A recent conversation with co-CEOs Andrew Adelhardt, Shawn Basler, and Nick Leahy provides insights into the firm's growth, how health and well-being, sustainability, and flexibility will affect design in the future, and the intangible importance of collaboration in an architecture firm.

## Q What is the strategy behind Perkins Eastman's recent growth?

**Andrew Adelhardt (AA):** The goal, to create a practice that is balanced geographically and by practice area, is based on our strategic plan. We've made strides toward that, which makes us more resilient to market fluctuations, and balances out our possible future. When one area is going well, it can pull along another area, whether a geographic area or a practice area, that isn't doing as well.

**A Shawn Basler (SB):** Opening new studios in key markets, such as Austin and Raleigh, and merging with firms that strengthen our capabilities geographically, diversify our markets, and provide opportunities with our clients to help them grow, helps us expand. It allows us to compete in areas we haven't been able to in the past, and allows us to attract more talent.

**Nick Leahy (NL):** By doing this, we have strengthened our West Coast presence, our Transportation + Infrastructure, Arts + Culture, and Sports + Exhibition practice areas. As buildings and projects become increasingly complex, you need that breadth of expertise and talent to fuel the innovation.

## Q How important will health and well-being, which is inextricably connected to climate change, be in terms of design going forward?

**SB:** We believe in holistic wellness, and the focus is more than just health and wellness for individuals; it's also for the planet.

**NL:** People are starting to fully appreciate that the built environment is fundamentally tied to the health and well-being of everybody. It is a key part of the social infrastructure of society. We live in a designed world—everything at every scale from cities to silicon chips that we increasingly rely on to do our work—is designed. That means what we design has an impact, an impact on the health and well-being of people and the planet. Everything we do is design, and design is everything we do. We have to keep that in mind no matter what project we are working on. We have to remember we are privileged to have the skills and talents that can have such a positive impact, and we have a responsibility to make a difference in people's lives, and to tackle climate change by design.

**A SB:** The shift toward health and wellness has been happening over the last five to seven years. COVID-19 accelerated the shift. Everything was always about building performance and sustainability, but the conversation has shifted to, 'How does that make me healthier? How does it affect me as an individual, as somebody working in that building, or living in that building, or staying in that building?'

**AA:** Shawn hits on a point that before COVID, the focus was on sustainability for buildings, and the pandemic has accelerated that. Now, it has become sustainability for humans, which ties into our Human by Design ethos. This has become a larger aspect of our practice and architecture practice generally.

**NL:** It touches everything about society, like how you organize your cities and how the walkability of a city is related to health, to access. People are beginning to understand that COVID was the accelerant, but things will accelerate even more. COVID brings the need for health and well-being to the fore.

It goes back to that holistic approach to health. Humans have a connection to nature that's fundamental. The whole climate-change aspect is critical. People are going to value infrastructure more, they're going to see it in a different light than maybe certain generations have up until this point, and that infrastructure is the social infrastructure as well. People are starting to understand how interconnected everything is, how complex the world is, and how important design is in making a positive change.



## Q What are Perkins Eastman's goals in sustainability?

**NL:** Sustainability is integrated into everything we do, and in the last five years, we've ramped up and built a good foundation moving forward. If you were to look at us three years ago, net zero energy seemed like an untenable challenge. However, we just opened two schools targeting net zero, Benjamin Banneker Academic High School and West/John Lewis Elementary School in Washington, DC, in August. As a firm, we now strive to integrate sustainable design strategies into all of our designs. We are never done; we can always improve. This is going to be a constantly evolving effort. [See related story, page 40.]

A



## Q How will flexibility affect design going forward?

**SB:** Flexibility will be a big part of design, and expandability and being able to change rapidly will be increasingly important. It's not just healthcare; it's everything. Look at office buildings. Our own Pittsburgh Studio, for example, pivoted during the pandemic while designing its new office. Our team added more collaborative spaces, hoteling, a variety of seating, plus a makers' lab, and reduced the amount of space we need. Flexibility plays a key role in the new design.

A

**AA:** We could point to our design of Stanford Hospital, designed to be a flexible building to adapt to changing needs, and a modular building. That's going to become a bigger part of what healthcare institutions are doing.

**SB:** It will affect everything in healthcare for sure. Things are moving actually very, very fast. Healthcare and modular solutions—wherever they can quickly get things running in communities where they may not have access to the same healthcare as others—will be critical.

## Q What changes do you see in workplace as we emerge from the effects of COVID-19 over the last couple of years?

**NL:** People want flexibility in terms of their working environments, but I think they also crave connection. To me, cooperation and collaboration are critical. The remote world has shown us some benefits, but I don't think we've reached a balance. Yes, people are going to use our studio space differently, but it's going to be fundamental to bring people back together. We are social creatures and we learn from each other through connection and interaction. Design happens when people get together and talk about challenges and solutions, and draw together. The virtual

A

world has come a long way, but I don't think it's going to replace people, relationships, connections. There's something fundamentally human about getting around a table and designing together.

**SB:** It takes longer to do things and you miss the ability to collaborate and sketch things and look at drawings together. Things happen more spontaneously and faster when people are working in a studio together. One of the things we always did well is we were able to work in teams across the firm. But what people forget is we used to fly people around a lot so they could actually work for a week in that office, know the team, and hang out with them in the evening to build relationships and bonds. And we would do that regularly so there was face time. So, we were working remotely, but we were also bringing people back together a lot more.

**NL:** Spontaneity and serendipity are important in design. People love strong human connections, interpersonal interactions, and bouncing ideas off each other. That's been much harder to do virtually.

**AA:** At our core, we're a collaborative firm, and without that spontaneity, it's very difficult for employees to mentor and to be mentored, and to learn by osmosis overhearing the various conversations and discussions that are going around, whether sitting at their desk or getting a cup of coffee. Those spontaneous interactions are opportunities for learning and help to bring everyone along. We've lost some of that because everything has to be planned, every meeting has to be planned. It makes what we do more difficult.

I also think that in talking about infrastructure, the discussion about broadband being a part of infrastructure is an important element of who we are now and where the world is going. Broadband has become a necessity, like water. Broadband for everybody—to mitigate the differences between people and cultures—will have a huge impact on everyone. It always strikes me when I see our work on the boards and I see people present projects that we have a profound impact on people's lives and the potential for that impact to be even greater in the future.

**Perkins Eastman architects and designers are known for creating solutions that make a positive impact on the people who use the spaces they design. How can Perkins Eastman make an even greater positive impact going forward?**

Q

**NL:** Bringing up the next generation is really important. We've always been a firm that if you have a bright idea, no one is going to stand in your way as long as you've got the initiative to pull it off. Go for it. We need to be constantly evolving, getting better; we need to be the place where people feel welcomed and respected for their talent and insights no matter what their backgrounds or perspectives. Actually, the more perspectives the better, to my mind. We need a creative culture where the focus is on designing to improve things for people. That's what Human by Design is about.

A

**SB:** The younger generation is also more transient, and being able to retain our talent while allowing them to be transient within our firm is important. Whether that's within a practice area or project type or studio or office location, we have the ability to offer that to people, and that's important.

**NL:** We need to be open to change. We are celebrating 40 years and we have an amazing legacy on which to build, but we still have a lot of work to do to truly be the best we can be. That is a good thing, we shouldn't be static, we need to evolve and embrace the changes going on around us. We have tremendous resources and great people. As leaders we need to listen, allow the younger generation the opportunity to grow, contribute, and then recognize them for that. We believe design is a dialogue, and the more diverse voices you can bring into the team, the better. To that end, we know we have more work to do to. It is exciting to see the energy and passion our people have around DE&I, and there has been terrific progress on several fronts to recognize the challenges

we face as a firm as well as the opportunities we have to make a difference and be more inclusive, but there is more to do. There always will be.

Q

**What are the biggest challenges you're facing now and as you look forward?**

**AA:** The biggest challenge we face right now is maintaining our culture despite the disturbance that occurred from the pandemic and everyone working at home, and growing our culture with our new affiliates. Job satisfaction comes from people, values, and a collective sense of accomplishment; we need to foster that and value that.

**SB:** The way we use data to inform our decisions will be increasingly complex. That's where PE Strategies' work is incredibly relevant. How do we develop that strategic consulting more and expand these capabilities?

A

**NL:** It took 40 years to build the firm to where we are today, and we want to be sure to build in the right digital infrastructure going forward. How we use data and building that structure will really be important. The shift to the digital economy will be dramatic. This is going to have unforeseeable impacts as our work changes quickly. That speaks to being agile as a firm, and also being able to balance out geographical challenges, which has been one of the strategies we have taken by growing our footprint in the West and Central regions.

We're at an interesting but uncertain point. If you look at the world, everything is a bit shaken up now. The pandemic is probably the biggest shakeup since World War II, but it's very different. I don't think we've yet fully understood the impact and all the changes we're going through right now. Nor do I think anyone can comprehend the full impact. We are still not through the pandemic, and we know we have to address the existential crisis of climate change. Design plays a critical part in the solution. These challenges provoke and need innovative and creative people from everywhere to make a difference. And Perkins Eastman is about making a difference through design—what a wonderful opportunity. **N**



**Opposite Page**

Perkins Eastman connects patients, family, and friends to nature with its designs, such as this lounge at Stanford Hospital, where Rafael Viñoly Architects, Architect of Record, and Perkins Eastman, Healthcare Architect, collaborated. Copyright Brad Feinknopf / Courtesy Perkins Eastman

**Below**

Flexibility and agility were central to the design of the Jewish Child and Family Services campus, which is comprised of the renovation of a dated brick building and the adaptive reuse of an adjacent carpet store in Skokie, IL. When the project broke ground in March of 2020, construction—deemed an essential service—progressed without interruption and the campus opened in August. Copyright Andrew Bruah / Courtesy Perkins Eastman