

Fostering a Creative and Compassionate
COMMUNITY

*In Perkins Eastman's award-winning senior living practice,
the people make all the difference*



**PERKINS —
EASTMAN**



Above: Maravilla at The Domain in Austin, TX, is the embodiment of a resort-style, walkable, and connected neighborhood in an urban setting. Copyright Brandon Barré/Courtesy Perkins Eastman

Below: The interiors of Oak Trace in Downer's Grove, IL, engage residents in familiar hobbies. Perkins Eastman led Lifespace leaders and residents through a hands-on process to identify activities—from gardening to yoga—and designed flexible spaces around these needs. Photograph Andrew Rugge/Copyright Perkins Eastman

Cover: Residents and guests enjoy one of the many outdoor spaces at Spring Lake Village in Santa Rosa, CA. Photograph Sarah Mechling/Copyright Perkins Eastman

By Jennica Deely

The places where we live have a lot to do with how we age and how we feel about aging. But what comes to mind when you think of “senior living?” For many, these images may include flickering fluorescent lights or worn linoleum floors in the shared rooms of an institutional setting. For decades, these images have provided the backdrop for a culture-wide stigma surrounding old age.

Slowly but surely that perception is changing. Advances in medicine, technology, and quality of life, among many other factors, are pushing the bounds of human longevity. To maintain healthier lifestyles, the environments for aging—and how we think about and name them—are also undergoing rapid reinvention. Perkins Eastman stands at the forefront of firms that are changing the face (and the architecture and interiors) of these living spaces.

[Maravilla at The Domain](#), an award-winning project in the 2021 American Institute of Architects Design for Aging Review, is a beacon in that portfolio. The Austin, TX, development—a site-specific design built with native materials and landscaping—reads more like a resort than a life plan community with bespoke lighting fixtures, elegant furnishings, and dining options that range from casual to gourmet. Supportive elements such as on-site physical therapy, a holistic wellness program, and 34 memory-support residences blend seamlessly within the design. “The architecture is straightforward and dignified,” the AIA DFEAR jury said. This lauded project represents a purposeful evolution in Perkins Eastman’s senior living practice that began quite modestly nearly 40 years ago.

The firm’s first senior living client, Miami Jewish Home & Hospital for the Aged, hired Perkins Eastman to design the small May Visitors Center on its campus. It won the first of many senior living awards for the young practice, solidified the firm’s relationship with this well-known client, and became a building block for many other client partnerships to follow.

A few years later, Miami Jewish Home connected Perkins Eastman to the Morse Geriatric Center

(now MorseLife) in West Palm Beach. Here, Perkins Eastman designers pioneered the use of “biaxial” rooms in the first addition to MorseLife’s campus. Biaxial rooms make use of a central wall or divider, so beds are not side-by-side (as with standard hospital-like rooms). The newly imagined layout enhanced resident privacy—and changed the design paradigm for the nursing-home industry. In this respect, Morse became a showcase campus that helped build Perkins Eastman’s reputation for design innovation.





Top left: [NewBridge on the Charles](#), a campus for Hebrew Senior Life located outside of Boston in Dedham, MA, offers residents a supportive and intergenerational residential care environment with a focus on healthy living. Copyright Chris Cooper/Courtesy Perkins Eastman

Top right: An example of the "biaxial" room, located in the NewBridge on the Charles campus, exemplifies the privacy and separation of the layout first developed by Perkins Eastman in the early 1980s. Photograph Sarah Mechling/Copyright Perkins Eastman

The senior living practice continues to innovate and grow nearly four decades after these landmark projects were completed. Such longevity in a field that's become so competitive is a credit to the people who make up the team. An ever-lengthening list of awards (150+), constantly increasing numbers of new and repeat clients (700+), hundreds of projects across the United States, and projects expanding into countries around the world are testament. The firm also consistently ranks as the highest-performing senior living practice among the world's largest AEC firms in publications including *Building Design + Construction* and *World Architecture*—further affirmation of the practice's influence, commitment, and aspirations to change what living environments mean for aging adults.

Purpose

Brad Perkins, co-founder and chairman of Perkins Eastman, has played a central role in building the senior living practice. "We are very proud of this core group of 125 professionals in seven domestic and two international studios who lead our work in this field. These people, and the work they do, embody our ethos of 'Human by Design,'" he says.

For many in this group, "Human by Design" fosters collegiality. "Everyone has the same goals in mind, and egos are often checked at the door in favor of a collaborative process, which strengthens their connections with clients," says Jenny Budka, a senior associate and project architect who specializes in growing the practice's expertise in holistic, sustainable design.

And while this collegial atmosphere unites the group, there is no one-size-fits-all mentality. Associate Emily Pierson-Brown, for example, initially came to Perkins Eastman seeking to combine her background in residential architecture with a newfound interest in urban and community planning. She's found that and more. Her passion for bringing voice to marginalized groups, leading the Pittsburgh region's Women+ in Design PGH, and serving on Perkins Eastman's Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion committee give her valuable perspective when she's working with senior living clients. "We don't shy away from uncomfortable conversations, but embrace them as part of the process of getting to a deeper meaning behind our projects," she says.

Below: In the [Moorings Park Center for Healthy Living](#) in Naples, FL, Perkins Eastman engaged current and potential residents, as well as staff and leadership, in a process to explore independent living offerings, wellness facilities, outdoor spaces, and dining options. The end result is a community focused around a new central lake with communal parks and scenic views for the active and independent residents. Copyright Chris Cooper/Courtesy Perkins Eastman

“We design for people. We design to enhance the human experience and leave a lasting and positive impact on people's lives and the world we inhabit. It starts and ends with the human being.” —Perkins Eastman mission statement





Compassion and Care

Such deeper meaning can only come from developing strong ties to the people who will live in the communities the firm designs. Before Perkins Eastman started working with senior living environments in the early 1980s, it was rare for a design team to meet the people who would ultimately use the spaces it was designing, recalls Dan Cinelli, one of the principals of the senior living practice. This lack of connection resulted in lackluster spaces that failed to serve the needs of their residents, staff, or family members (think back to those dated nursing homes). Perkins Eastman changed this model by leading simple activities with residents: pinning images cut out of magazines into collages on the wall; conducting overnight stays for a first-hand experience of sleeping, waking, and eating in a life plan community; facilitating group discussions; and conducting one-on-one interviews with the leadership of senior living organizations, residents, and staff. Those exercises provided insights that allowed the senior living team to better intuit each new project. “It’s about caring and being inquisitive,” says Cinelli. “The more questions we can ask, the more empowered the residents become.” The signal of success in this approach is evident in the expressions of residents and staff once a project is completed, Cinelli says: “This twinkle in their eyes, when they see that we were really listening to them all along, means everything.”



While Perkins Eastman designs a lot of new construction, many of its projects are renovations and repositionings—not always the most glamorous work. But Associate Principal Jenn McDermott, one of the practice’s interior-design leaders, finds these projects highly gratifying because of their power to transform both the spaces and the people who inhabit them. “Residents are typically resistant to change, but when they see their environment start to transform, the feedback is very different. It’s so rewarding when they walk by as you’re installing the final artwork and accessories, and they tell you how much they love it,” she says.



The team’s compassion extends beyond its projects. Associate Principal Hillary DeGroff leads the firm’s involvement with charitable events such as the Walk to End Alzheimer’s. “I’ve found the best way to stay connected to the industry as a whole, build my connections, and give back to my community is to be involved in these organizations in a volunteer capacity. I love being able to share my passion around designing for older adults with others,” she says.

“It’s about caring and being inquisitive.”

—Dan Cinelli

Curious – always learning

Research and publishing has been an important underpinning to the senior living practice's steady evolution and innovation. Long before the term "thought leadership" went mainstream, David Hoglund received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to write *Housing for the Elderly: Privacy and Independence in Environments for the Aging* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1985), which established the young architect as an early expert in senior living design. Numerous studies, white papers, and articles, including *Building Type Basics for Senior Living* by Perkins Eastman (Wiley)—now in its second edition and available in English and Mandarin—have since joined the canon of the firm's pioneering body of published work. In tandem with an ever-growing roster of built work, Perkins Eastman's original research positions the practice as deeply informed, highly credentialed, and innovative. The process of conducting and sharing these works has helped open doors to new clients and collaborations and drive change throughout the industry.

Better together

What distinguishes Perkins Eastman's senior living practice is not just the questions that are asked during client meetings, but the welcoming and collaborative atmosphere in which they are posed. "It is essential for my work in a firm/practice area where architects are not just commodities to produce a set of drawings, but trusted advisors in strategy, planning, and design," says Senior Associate Max Winters, an architect and project manager who produced the firm's first podcast, *Shaping Dementia Environments*.

Principal and Senior Living Practice Area Leader Joe Hassel has witnessed first-hand the benefit of constructive debate. "A lot of times, we'll be sitting in a client meeting, and a few of us might disagree. Rather than stay silent and move forward to maintain the peace, we will speak up and bring the issue to the fore. Openly working through design challenges, in front of and alongside the client, is so imperative to great design. Often, after these sessions, clients reach out

to personally thank me and the team, saying that the discussion, although difficult, actually improved the outcome," Hassel says.

The senior living team has also turned to outside industries for paradigm-shifting inspiration. As tech innovations such as smart sensors, wearables, and artificial intelligence were gaining traction in the marketplace several years ago, for example, Principal Leslie Moldow noticed it was starting to have an effect on the senior living market—an observation that led her to convene a group within Perkins Eastman to explore other major industry disruptors and identify new ways for providing services and housing for people as they age. The initiative became the *Clean Slate Project*, a white paper that analyzes innovations across 24 industries to identify the "macro shocks" that could in turn shape change across the senior living sector.

Introspective – ahead of the curve

Ever adaptable, the senior living practice developed its successful consulting arm in the midst of the financial crisis in the late aughts, when architectural commissions slowed nearly to a halt. "We knew we needed to offer a service to bring organizations along slowly, so that when they were able to invest again, we'd built a relationship," says Associate Principal Lori Miller, the group's marketing leader.

Known as IDEAS, Perkins Eastman's visioning and advisory process stands for Integrating Design, Economics and Assessment into Strategy, which aims to build consensus among multiple stakeholder groups. Starting with a client's or community's own mission, Perkins Eastman moderates the views and perspectives of residents, staff, leadership, and governance structures to help them develop plans for the future. As the senior living practice has grown over the years, its IDEAS services have benefitted from the research and expertise of Perkins Eastman's support networks in Design Research, Sustainability, Design Technology, and Design Strategies, which have all enabled the group to continually outpace its peers in the industry.

Opposite page

Top: Leaders in the senior living practice meet regularly to discuss projects and the industry in general. Photograph Sarah Mechling/ Copyright Perkins Eastman

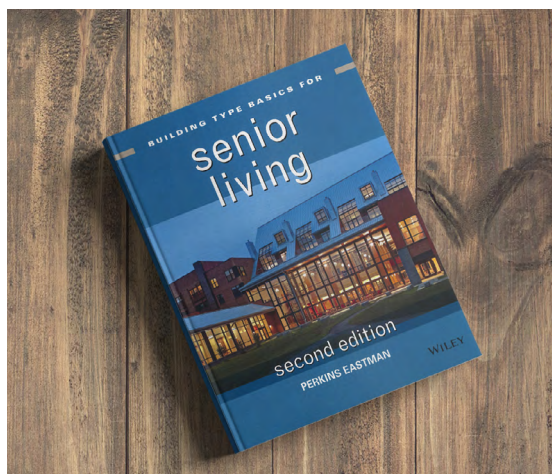
Middle: Group discussions, creating collages of inspirational images, and other collaborative activities are hallmarks of Perkins Eastman's initial planning and design process. Courtesy Perkins Eastman

Bottom: Perkins Eastman staff and their families participate annually in the Walk to End Alzheimer's. Courtesy Perkins Eastman

This page

Below left: Perkins Eastman literally wrote the book on senior living design, now in its second edition.

Below right: The *Clean Slate Project* analyzes innovations across 24 industries to identify the "macro shocks" that could in turn cause change across the senior living sector.





This page

Above: VIA—A Perkins Eastman Studio designs many projects in the Pacific Northwest. [Aegis on Madison](#) in Seattle is knitted into the larger Capitol Hill community and features several amenities, including the Queen Bee coffee shop, that are open to the public. Copyright Lara Swimmer/Courtesy VIA—A Perkins Eastman Studio

Below: [Changsha Xiangya Health Valley](#), in the capital of China's Hunan Province, features modern and sophisticated design that appeals to Chinese residents seeking a life plan community and wellness institute. Courtesy Perkins Eastman

Opposite page

[Ginza East](#), a 32-story retirement community located in downtown Tokyo, is one of Japan's first urban high-rise life plan communities. The project's developer, Half Century More, is a leader in Japan's senior living industry and has built many communities in the suburbs of Tokyo and Osaka. This project marks a significant commitment to bring those same high standards of design and care into an urban setting. Copyright Milroy & McAleer/Courtesy Perkins Eastman

Purposeful vision and strong values are imperative to building great teams, but without a framework for process and innovation to occur, progress can still stagnate. Through programs like Markitects, first established by Principal Dan Cinelli in the firm's Chicago studio and later expanded to incorporate the entirety of the senior living practice, younger team members work with the practice's more experienced leadership to develop important skills—interviewing, pitching, cold-calling—in realistic situations. “The portfolio of built work only gets you so far,” says Principal and Practice Area Leader Martin Siefering. “As part of an international practice, you have to know who these people are, what they're passionate about. We have to make sure they get the exposure—to us, what we're thinking, and what our clients are thinking.” An empowered and capable group of emerging leadership is critical to building and

maintaining a great project portfolio, he adds. “That's the future.”

Promoting diversity and diversifying models

The need to diversify models for senior living environments becomes ever more urgent as the Baby Boomer wave continues to fill in this demographic and demand customized communities that speak not only to their needs but also satisfy their many interests and lifestyles. To that end, the team is leveraging the firm's expertise in hospitality, education, retail, entertainment, and healthcare to augment its approach to this changing market. The recently formed Thought Leadership & Communications (TLC), a group comprised of emerging leaders within the practice, is already leading to a convergence of new ideas and research that will inform future projects.



“

As part of an international practice, you have to know who these people are, what they're passionate about. We have to make sure they get the exposure—to us, what we're thinking, and what our clients are thinking.”

—Martin Siefering



This page

Above: A welcoming and public courtyard brings multiple generations together at Trillium at Tysons in Northern Virginia, a new project with Silverstone Senior Living.

Opposite page

The entry-level restaurant at [Anthology of King of Prussia](#) in Pennsylvania replaces the standard reception area and offers a lively place for residents and visitors to enjoy a drink or a meal with friends or family. Photograph Andrew Rugge/ Copyright Perkins Eastman

One TLC paper exploring the popularity (and climate friendliness) of adaptive reuse, for example, examines which types of existing buildings would best lend themselves to transformation for senior living clients.

The council is also addressing the concept of living for 150 years. While that kind of lifespan seems like science fiction to many, research has shown that the first person to reach that milestone has already been born. And Perkins Eastman sees in it a pressing issue that will likely redefine how living spaces are designed in the future. These studies, while useful for the firm and its clients, have the potential to bring about broader change when done in collaboration with academics who are studying the aging process, says Associate Principal Alexis Denton, an emerging leader in the practice who specializes in both architecture and gerontology. Perkins Eastman's research partners include experts at Stanford, the Harvard Graduate

School of Design, and the University of Southern California, among others, who will help its senior living practice keep pace and remain relevant with academic science and research that goes beyond the realm of architecture.

In keeping with the times, the name of the practice itself is also constantly evolving—from “Housing for Specialized Populations” and “Environments for the Aging” to “Senior Living” and now, simply, “Living,” to address an ever-changing mindset in designing for people who themselves are defying classification.

Honoring the legacy of the practice while bringing new people into the fold and championing new methods have been part of the DNA of Perkins Eastman's senior living practice since it started, and will continue to guide how it evolves in the future. Says Hoglund, who's been with practice since its inception: “Our strength has always been, and always will be, our people.” **N**

“*In keeping with the times, the nature of the practice is also constantly evolving—from ‘Housing for Specialized Populations’ and ‘Environments for Aging’ to ‘Senior Living’ and now, simply, ‘Living.’*”

“ Our strength has always been, and will always be,
our people.” —David Hoglund



**PERKINS—
EASTMAN**

Human by Design