

Celebrating
35
 YEARS

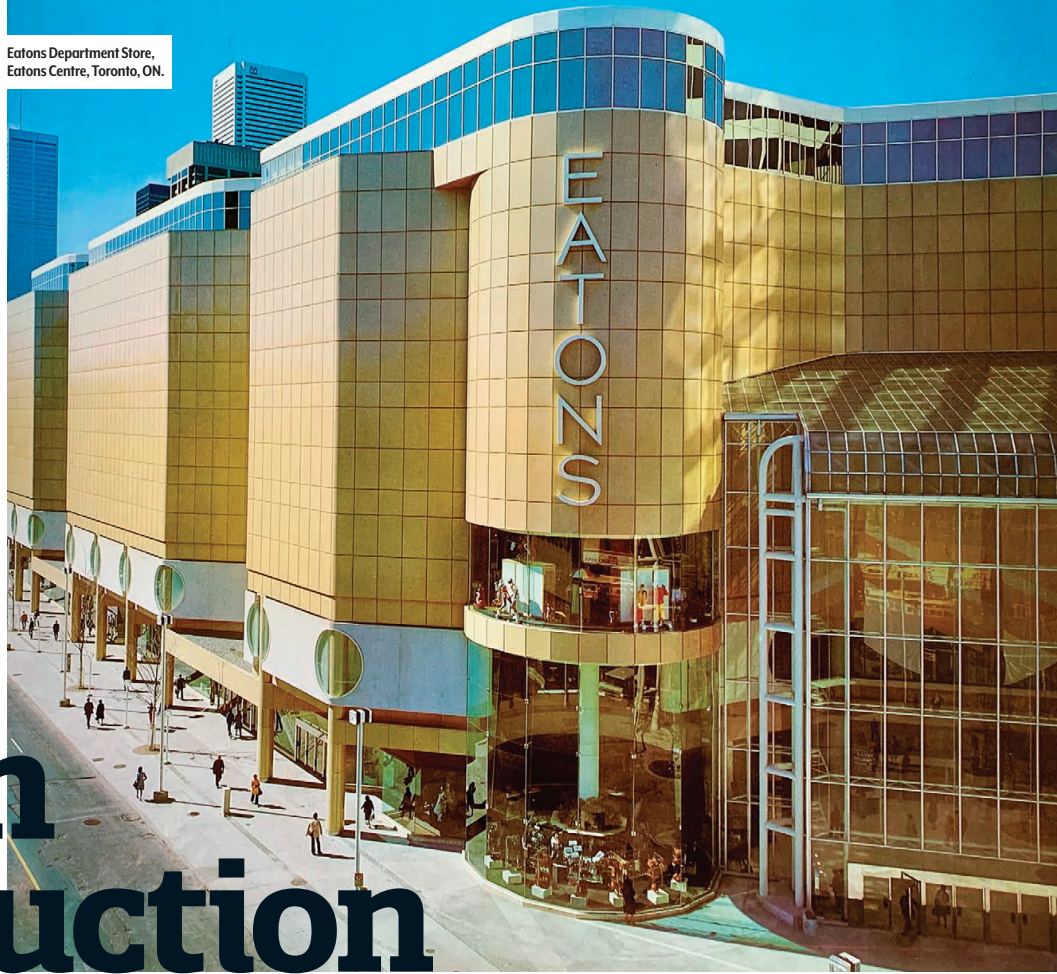
Award

VDZ+A
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Eatons Department Store,
Eatons Centre, Toronto, ON.



Eastern Construction Company

Celebrating 70 Years

by ROBIN BRUNET | photography courtesy EASTERN CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

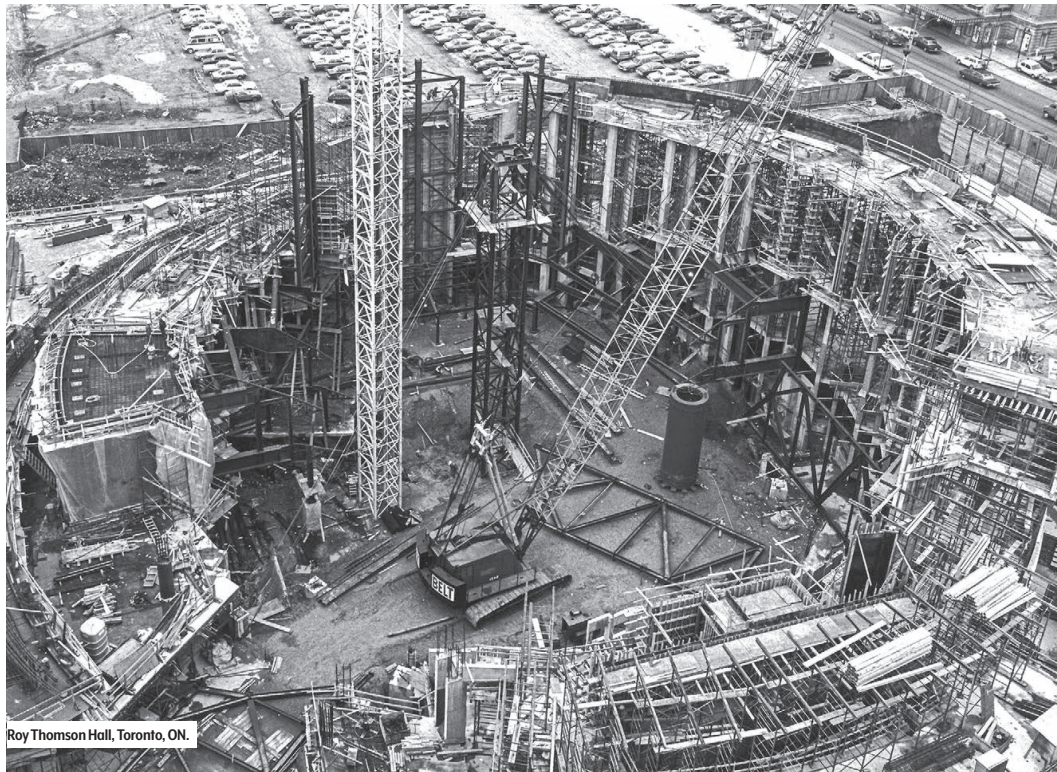
In terms of attitude, the construction community falls into two camps: companies that actively maintain a high profile, and those who prefer to focus exclusively on the work.

Eastern Construction Company is definitely of the latter persuasion. Over the decades its management team has let the work speak for itself, and it speaks volumes. Eastern's portfolio ranges from Roy Thomson Hall and the Metro Toronto Convention Centre South expansion to the Windsor Casino and the Daphne Cockwell Complex at Ryerson University – with innumerable other projects that have helped evolve the skylines of home-base Toronto and neighbouring regions.

But as Eastern marks its 70th anniversary this year, having completed over 800 projects and with business brisker than ever, president and CEO Bryan Arnold finds himself reflecting on his company's success, as well as identifying the traits that have informed its trajectory.

He says, "If I had to summarize our character, I would repeat a description someone once gave me: 'You're a mid-sized company, like a middleweight boxer who punches above his weight.'"

Arnold pauses to consider the analogy: "It's pretty accurate. Every day we go toe-to-toe with the EllisDons and PCLs of the world. But we're not so big that we can't go toe-to-toe with the smaller guys either."



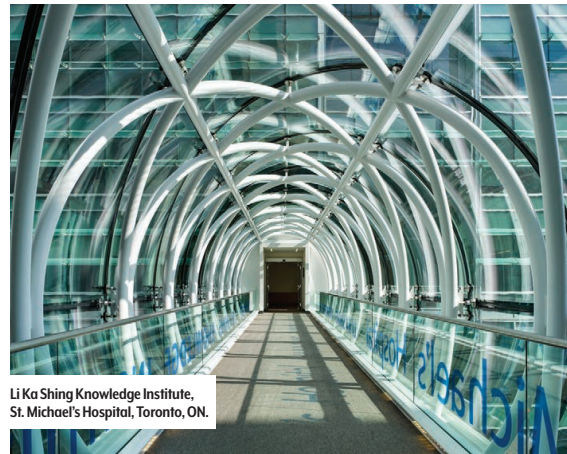
Roy Thomson Hall, Toronto, ON.



Halton Police Station, Oakville, ON.



UTS Renovation Expansion, Toronto, ON.



Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute, St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto, ON.

Frank DeCaria, chairman at Eastern and former president and CEO, believes his company being 100 percent employee-owned has contributed significantly to its success. “When I joined in 1978, Eastern was driven by an entrepreneurial spirit, and that spirit is very strong today,” he says. “Then as now, senior people took new talent under their wing and mentored them. Also then as now, we were proud of our core values of integrity and professionalism in all of our business dealings.”

Dean Walker, executive vice president who joined Eastern 16 years ago, adds that the company’s mid-range size provides another important benefit. “The door of senior management is always open,” he says. “We not only know everyone’s names, we know who they are. We’re a close group. That’s why we can punch above our weight.”

Eastern began operations as a Windsor-based regional construction company on May 1, 1951. Founder Edmond Odette managed the firm with his brother Bud, initially gaining a foothold with the food processing and industrial projects that flourished following World War II. “Even back then, the Odettes were focused on quality, not volume,” says Arnold. They also quickly earned a reputation for collaboration and completing work on time and on budget.

In the 1960s, Eastern relocated to Toronto and secured a significant number of projects in the retail and office segments. It also formed a western subsidiary and became known as Canada’s largest builder of retail facilities, constructing 95 shopping centres, 71 department stores, and 67 grocery stores over a period of two decades.

By the time Eastern celebrated its 40th anniversary in 1991, the company had built more than 40 offices within the City of Toronto; seven years later it achieved another distinction by becoming 100 percent employee-owned. Today, Eastern is acknowledged for its expertise in three key areas: adaptive re-use of heritage structures, high-performance sustainable buildings, and tall wood structures, and it’s capable of undertaking a volume of over \$250 million per year in a variety of sectors.

DeCaria is one of several Eastern staff members who lived through a good deal of the company’s history. “I had just come out of the University of Toronto’s civil engineering program when I joined



Sheraton Centre, Toronto, ON.



80 Atlantic, Toronto, ON.



Ryerson DCC, Toronto, ON.

Eastern 43 years ago, and my first job was as a field engineer helping to build mezzanines, catwalks, and extend a train shed for a new GO facility at Union Station,” he recalls.

DeCaria laughs when asked why he wasn’t tempted early in his career to jump ship. “I got offers, but I liked the Odettes,” he replies. “They were firm but good people, and they valued new talent. At parties, they always made it a point to converse with the younger crowd, and they were my mentors.”

Back then, such nurturing of talent also inspired ‘new blood’ like DeCaria to find innovative solutions to problems. “I’ll never forget when we had to move a historic roundhouse rail building to make room for the Metro Toronto Convention Centre

expansion,” he said. “Nobody knew how to do it, but after a lot of searching I found a specialist, and we wound up moving the 1,300 tonne building 700 feet without damaging the structure.”

Perhaps it was due to the company’s ethos of keeping a low profile, but it wasn’t until the early 2000s when, shortly before DeCaria became president, he realized the significance of Eastern’s work. “It happened when the National Ballet School of Canada became a client and I had the chance to see their students perform,” he recalls. “Their skill literally took my breath away. I can’t properly explain the impact this had other than to make me realize we weren’t just in the brick and mortar business, we were building for the future.”

That realization carried over into subsequent projects, especially in the health care and education realms. “We had always maintained high standards, but now I saw the bigger picture in what we were doing,” DeCaria says. “I strongly believed if you built the best buildings you would attract the best people, and I tried to instill that belief in others.”

Like DeCaria, Arnold joined Eastern in 1978: initially he was turned down as site superintendent for Roy Thomson Hall and got hired for a Bank of Montreal computer complex job, only to be transferred to Roy Thomson shortly afterwards, where he stayed for three years and three months.

Although he has a wealth of memories about job sites and challenges (he spent another three years helping to build the CBC Canadian Broadcasting Centre at a cost of what would be \$615 million today), some of Arnold’s strongest career memories pertain to loyalty. “A major strike occurred two years into my employment, and I figured I would be laid off because I was low on the company totem pole,” he says. “But the Odettes told me in no uncertain terms that I wouldn’t be let go and would continue to be paid, because they needed me.”

Arnold adds, “Many decades later, when the COVID lockdowns began, it was my distinct privilege to send the same clear message to my staff: nobody would be laid off, even if they had to sit at home for months.”

Arnold is compelled to share another memory, not of a game-changing project or a construction challenge, but of Bud Odette asking him to help install an air conditioning system in a local school for students with disabilities. “Later I talked to the principal and learned that Bud had visited the school, found out it didn’t have proper air conditioning, and quietly went out and bought all the necessary equipment himself,” he says. Today, Eastern continues the tradition of giving back to the community, in the same quiet fashion of the Odettes that so impressed Arnold.

The loyalty, generosity, and camaraderie valued so highly by Eastern veterans such as Arnold and DeCaria is equally valued by ‘newer’ talent like Walker as well as Heather Anne Popovich, who is Eastern’s director operations.

Popovich, who joined the company in 2005, recalls, “Even when I was being interviewed for the job I got a strong sense that this was an organization with a family ambiance full of long-term employees, and that made me feel secure.”

However, Popovich left Eastern six years ago to work on a hospital project as a client representative. “And almost immediately I realized I had made a huge mistake,” she recalls. “I admitted this to Frank DeCaria, and he was very gracious and took me back.” Today, Popovich loves nothing better than applying her skills to landmark projects, of which

the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute at St. Michael’s Hospital is a personal favourite.

As Eastern celebrates its 70th anniversary, it’s not surprising that the goal moving forward is to maintain the values that the Odettes brought to the company and ensure that new generations of builders and engineers get every opportunity to develop their skills. “We’re about midway through a succession plan that will see excellent people at all levels of the company,” says Walker. “Plus, our newcomers have loads of talent, which makes me confident about our ongoing success.”

That sentiment is shared by Arnold. “I’ll remain here as long as I stay healthy and continue to bring value, but I won’t stand in Dean’s way when he’s ready to lead Eastern,” he says. “Instead, I’ll be happy to assist him.”

As for future growth, Arnold says there’s room and opportunities for expansion. “But that’s not important. Retaining who we are is, especially considering 75 percent of our work comes from repeat clients.”

Arnold’s retrospective of Eastern draws to a close as matters pertaining to current projects come to his attention. But he offers a parting comment about Eastern’s anniversary that also encapsulates the mindset that has driven his colleagues for so long, “Companies don’t survive after 70 years by just looking at the bottom line,” he says. “And I’m so thankful none of us had that exclusive focus.” **A**



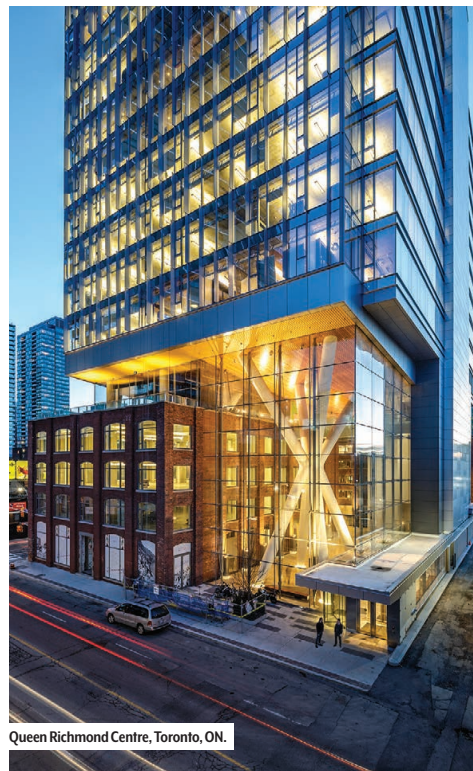
Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Toronto, ON.



TTC McNicoll Bus Garage, Scarborough, ON.



T3 Bayside, Toronto, ON.



Queen Richmond Centre, Toronto, ON.

