

International Women's Day in Design

Designing With Nature, Leading with Care

Martha Desbiens

By Lindsay Lewis

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BE: What initially inspired you to pursue a career in architecture, and who or what influenced you most along the way?

I initially pursued architecture as an undergraduate based on a high school counselor's recommendation, drawing on my interest in art and strength in geometry. It wasn't until my junior year of college, in a required interdisciplinary course with students from across the AEC disciplines, that I discovered landscape architecture. The landscape faculty introduced a way of thinking that resonated deeply with me, one that acknowledged the complexity of living systems, from seasonal rhythms and lifespans to hydrology and ecological processes. That perspective clarified my direction and ultimately led me to landscape architecture.

**CELEBRATING
WOMEN IN AEC****Martha Desbiens**Principal
MNLA (Mathews Nielsen
Landscape Architects)**22**
YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY

BE: Can you share a project you're especially proud of and explain what made it meaningful—either professionally or personally?

The landscape installation for the new Kathleen McCartney Hall at Smith College in Northampton, MA, was completed this past fall. MNLA has been shaping the landscape vision for Smith College since developing its landscape master plan in 2020, and Kathleen McCartney Hall was the first project we carried through construction. It was especially meaningful to see the landscape master plan priorities fully realized on the ground: replacing lawns with low-mow grasses and meadows, improving stormwater capture through rain gardens, providing universal access between the campus core and the pond, and expanding outdoor learning through an outdoor classroom and an occupiable green roof.

BE: Have you had mentors or advocates who played a key role in your career growth, and how important is mentorship for women entering the field now?

The founding principal of MNLA, Signe Nielsen, has been an incredible inspiration and advocate throughout my career. She is not only one of the most respected landscape architects in the field, but also an exceptionally kind and supportive firm leader. Having built the firm while raising a family as a single parent, she deeply understands the challenges women face in balancing professional ambition with family life. She has created a genuinely family-friendly firm culture, demonstrating that success does not require sacrificing one for the other. I hope to follow her example and continue leading the firm in a way that supports both professional growth and personal well-being.

BE: How do you see the conversation on sustainability going in our industry?

I see this as both a challenging and hopeful moment for sustainability in our industry. While recent shifts in regulations and priorities can create uncertainty, the importance of protecting our environment remains clear. What has been especially encouraging is seeing industry leaders step forward to champion sustainable practices and advance the conversation. There has also been a meaningful shift toward framing sustainability in more inclusive terms, highlighting not only environmental benefits but also the economic resilience, performance, and social value that sustainable design can deliver. This broader perspective is helping sustainability become more embedded in everyday practice rather than treated as an optional add-on.

BE: What advice would you give to young women or girls who are considering a career in architecture or the broader AEC industry?

Build a strong network early, especially while you're in school. The women I went to graduate school with remain a lifeline for me today. We are constant cheerleaders for one another and an invaluable professional and personal resource. We stay in close touch, often exchanging advice on everything from career decisions to balancing work and family life. Many of these relationships, including with former classmates now working in allied fields such as architecture and planning, have also grown into meaningful professional collaborations. Having a trusted community like this not only provides support during challenging moments but also reminds you that you don't have to navigate this industry alone.

KEYWORDS: [DEI \(Diversity, equity, and inclusion\)](#) / [landscapes](#) / [mentors](#) / [networking](#) / [sustainable design](#) / [women in AEC](#)