

top firm: koning eizenberg architecture

Hank Koning and Julie Eizenberg emphasize affordability and livability in every project they design.

by cheryl weber

If Hank Koning, FAIA, were living in a single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel on Skid Row, here's what would be on his wish list: "What I want is pretty simple, but I want a window that's big, and it has to be double hung so the top and bottom can open, or I won't get good ventilation," he says. "I want to feel safe, so I'd like an elevator that has a glass back so people can't do drugs. OK, you could stick a camera in there but it would last about a week, and the nice glass elevator feels like someone cares. And I'd want to have the lounge near the street, so I can see what's going on."

Play acting—phantom living in the design, he calls it—is part of every project Koning Eizenberg Architecture takes on, whether it's a hip boutique hotel or an SRO, a multimillion-dollar home for a Tinseltown hotshot or subsidized apartments for the disabled. In fact, the slightly iconoclastic Santa Monica, Calif., firm, founded in 1981 by Koning and his wife, Julie Eizenberg, AIA, has made a name for itself designing just such extremes in project types. Unusually versatile for its size—there are 18 on staff—KEA's award-winning portfolio also includes affordable middle-class housing, schools, community centers, a children's museum, and mixed-use projects. Currently, the firm has more than \$177 million worth of projects on the boards or in construction.

As natives of socially progressive Australia, Koning and Eizenberg grew up



Danny Turner

thinking about design with a capital D—not just the kind that appears in glossy magazines, although the firm's meticulously crafted custom homes appear regularly in the national consumer press, but of the caliber and scope that improves whole communities. It simply never occurred to them that one type of building would have more status than another, or that they should specialize in one area. Eizenberg, in fact, is annoyed when potential clients ask if they've done a particular project type. "It's an artificial division, and it's simplistic," she says. "You want to fit with someone because they think about housing the same way you do. It's more about sensitivity and attitude."

What KEA's buildings do have in common, though, is their commitment to Modernism, their intense practicality, and



Tim Street-Porter

This 1995 addition to a 1920s Spanish colonial reflects KEA's deference to the house's history and casual charm. Bedrooms and art studios occupy two buildings, one of which forms an edge to the pool courtyard (far left).

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—julie eizenberg



Tim Griffith

This addition to a 1930s cottage bridges old and new. Its simple stucco forms recall the region's Modern and Spanish architectural traditions.

a sense of joy and ease. The firm's 3,800-square-foot office/studio illustrates its genius for delivering solidly innovative work on modest budgets. Constrained on time and budget by a Small Business Administration loan, they finessed the limitations in several ways. In lieu of an underground garage—the typical West Los Angeles solution, and an expensive one—cars are parked at grade under the building, so the studio floats lightly above it. The swooping roof funnels rainwater to a single spout, eliminating the need for gutters. A monitor window that rises from the third floor ceiling adds space and light without violating the city's building height restrictions. Texture comes from corrugated metal siding, a floor of high density fiberboard, and a plastic membrane ceiling with whitewashed joists as wood battens. And when they ran out of money to install vertical sunshades on the west side, they put up a big blue curtain that can be pulled over the windows on summer afternoons. Inside, Eizenberg says, it's like working underwater.

social and spatial connections

At the helm of a thoughtful practice that's determined to raise the bar on housing while keeping costs down, Koning and Eizenberg's blend of talents serves them well. Although they both design, Koning's strengths are on the technical side. He is the expert on materials, costs, and structural codes, whereas Julie is the visionary, focusing on what's going to feel right and look good. Fortuitously, they met on the first day of architecture school at the University of Melbourne. After receiving bachelor's degrees and practicing for a few years in the late 1970s, they went on to graduate school at UCLA. There, classes taught by Charles Moore had a humanitarian bent that appealed to their sensibilities. So did the climate and the Modernist traditions of Eames and Eichler, with their natural connections between indoors and out. “What appealed to us was a certain modesty, not in terms of compromising experience but

a modesty of ease, not trying to show how clever you are,” Eizenberg says. “It was setting things up so people look good.”

The broader social aspects of design hadn't yet caught on with their peers, however. “People were shocked that we wanted to take classes in the planning school,” Eizenberg says. “There were few students who crossed over. We weren't doing it to make any political point, but we didn't see that social housing programs would not be an area where you could do interesting architecture.” She adds: “To a certain extent, being from somewhere else was liberating. You didn't have to do things the way other people did them.”

Indeed, the firm consistently seeks out projects that are viewed as pedestrian and steps them up a notch, making them unexpectedly fresher, smarter, and more valuable to the end user. Zoning codes and standard cost-conscious practices are frequently called into question, since the firm vows not to create something they wouldn't want to live in themselves. At Harold Way Apartments, a 51-unit affordable housing complex in Hollywood, Calif., that meant ruling out double-loaded corridors in favor of units with windows on both sides and pushing for sliding glass doors that go from floor to ceiling, which were only marginally more expensive than standard 6-foot, 8-inch openings. The design team also lobbied to relax setback requirements so it could cluster the four-story buildings on the edges of the property and vary the scale with smaller buildings and courtyards in the middle.

Fortunately, the firm has a single-minded perseverance nurtured by Eizenberg, whose role is to guard the design idea through session after session of value engineering and on into construction. “You're on site, and the contractor has done something wrong,” she says. “Even though we could save time, someone has to say, ‘This is important,’ or ‘This isn't.’ Someone has to fight to keep the quality. Doing Modern architecture in multifamily housing means you have to do more management on site to make sure things line up. Punched



Renderings courtesy Koning Eizenberg Architecture

On the boards is a \$30 million condominium project in Venice, Calif., that includes 10,000 square feet of retail and underground parking for 581 cars. The 204 living units will range in size from 800 to 1,250 square feet and are designed to capture sunlight and ocean views and breezes. The project's layout blends with the urban fabric, reinforcing existing pedestrian street patterns.



Asked by *The New York Times* to develop a scheme for rebuilding Lower Manhattan near the World Trade Center site, KEA responded with a concept that includes a bookstore, a day-care center, and a coffee shop on the ground floor. The upper floors would hold a senior citizen center, retirement housing, and a public gym and pool. The "country club" color scheme was inspired by the big striped awnings on boardwalk rec clubs that Eizenberg observed while visiting relatives in the New York City boroughs. A folding sunscreen would shade the building's west side.



An adaptive reuse project in L.A.'s downtown loft district illustrates the firm's commitment to creating people-friendly, mixed-use neighborhoods. Its design for the \$32 million conversion of an old Nabisco bakery includes 3,000 square feet of retail, 109 condos, and the addition of 120 new units.

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—hank koning, faia



Tom Bonner

Electric Art Block, a 20-unit loft building in Venice, Calif., illustrates KEA's commitment to providing options for how people live and work.



Benny Chan

The Boyd Hotel (1996) draws on L.A.'s stylistic traditions from the 1930s and features exterior window shading and plenty of natural light.

openings are very forgiving, but they won't give you that continuity between inside and out and increase the amount of space you think you have."

livable cities

Their ability to create unique spatial experiences with limited square footage, combined with a bold practical streak, also attracts developers of mixed-use infill projects. KEA has become increasingly engaged in how to meet housing demand while making the city a pleasant place to live and work. Now, most of its residential projects are being built on land zoned for commercial or industrial use.

"There's such a stigma against density in L.A.," Koning says. "I've lived in Santa Monica for 20 years, and I think it's a more interesting place to live now, despite some horrendous buildings. The culture, arts, street life—everything is so much richer. We need the density to encourage and sustain public transportation. But architects have to do beautiful projects to make people feel good about this stuff."

One recent success is Birch Street, a mixed-use neighborhood made from whole cloth. The project was unusual in that it created an entirely new street in northeast Orange County, which had no significant urban fabric or rental market, says developer John Given, a principal with the CIM Group, which has partnered with KEA off and on for more than 20 years. KEA's contribution was 32 moderately priced loft-style apartments above 12,300 square feet of retail space. Built for \$65 per square foot, virtually all of them leased before they were finished.

"They were bold in putting in a large commercial window and providing the kinds of small touches and simple solutions that when residents moved in, they said, 'This really works,'" Given says. "Koning Eizenberg fundamentally understands the building process yet continues to strive to make a higher-quality living environment out of every unit, largely by the quality of indoor-outdoor space. They will not let go of what it's like to live there."

a new checklist

Fortunately, KEA has not left the suburban middle class out of the loop entirely in the quest for affordable design. Its multifamily dwellings cross-pollinate the design of budget-minded single-family homes. One strategy is to spend money on one or two gestures that light up a simple box, like the oversize doors and louvered pop-out window on the firm's so-called Crate & Barrel house, which won an award in this magazine's annual design competition (May 2004, page 65). KEA also experiments with common materials that create layers and texture: cement boards that lap in different patterns or, even more inexpensively, a tree that throws a shadow. "We don't think of architecture as the complete product," Eizenberg says. "For us, it's a combination of the landscape and the building, even in an urban context. There's always a setup."

In the best of all worlds, such an approach would spread from design-savvy homeowners to the public at large. But fundamental changes are needed in the way houses are appraised for real estate value, Eizenberg says. She would overhaul traditional checklists and introduce new categories, such as natural light and, yes, that indoor-outdoor connection. "You must spend the resources on creating something that has longevity, that has an enhanced sensibility of the elements of being alive—nature, light, air—and is conducive to social behavior," she says. "It's not about the pretension of 'I have one of these and one of these.' You don't need a lot of space, but it needs to be considered about how it may be used, and used alternatively. The vocabulary of design could also be fresher. Does it all have to look like Cape Cod or Spanish style?"

Modernists that they are, the architects are beginning to think about new ways to build houses even more efficiently, whether it's with pattern books or through the use of prefabricated components. "Other countries have a lot more prefab than we do," Koning says. "It's another area that I feel needs to shift. It's very romantic to have these guys out there pounding nails, but



it's not particularly efficient. We don't make cars that way anymore; no one wants to spend \$100,000 on a car."

firm foundation

Ever mindful of the future, the firm recently restructured to get to the next level of practice. Koning and Eizenberg promoted longtime employee Brian Lane, AIA, to managing principal. His job is to encourage collaboration among employees and create opportunities for professional growth. "There's a kind of synergy between Hank and Julie that's also being developed in the office between staff," Lane says. "They both have a very good eye, and many of the people here are bridging Hank and Julie's skill sets to become good designers and also technically very competent." From them, Lane has also learned what it means to be a leader. "It's about leadership within the office, with clients and contractors, but also within the community at large," he says. "For me, that's been a nice eye-opener."

With the firm's growth has also come the appointment of four new associates to head up different areas of practice. Ian MacDuff looks out for large-scale commercial and public sector projects. Julio Zavolta will expand his role in business development and the firm's knowledge of schools and sustainable design. Jason

Kerwin is keeping an eye on the Los Angeles Department of Recreation & Parks and spearheading materials research and public relations, and Oonagh Ryan leads the custom residential work.

That frees up Koning and Eizenberg to accept larger and more diverse projects and to take more risks with design. Eizenberg is particularly excited about their design for the expansion of the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, now under construction. Rather than featuring bright colors and patronizing graphics, it tracks the movement of light and wind across a fluttering translucent screen the firm designed with an artist. "Getting something like that made is hard work. It doesn't fall into traditional construction categories," Eizenberg says. "We're fighting harder to do things like that." She's also exploring how fabrics can be crinkled and pleated to organize forms. More so than an object, fabrics can resonate emotionally with people, she believes. "We're not so much into objects," she adds. "An object may come out of it, but that's not where we're starting. We don't always know why we do what we do, but what we do is personal, and that's when you have a better chance of making contact from one human being to another." *ra*

Cheryl Weber is a contributing writer in Severna Park, Md.



Photos: Benny Chan



Built in 2001 for \$160 per square foot, the "Crate & Barrel" house offers well-crafted stock materials and just a few special effects, such as oversize glass doors and the louvered master bedroom bay. The kitchen corridor opens up views from the front to the back of the house.