

# METROPOLIS

ARCHITECTURE < CULTURE > DESIGN

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At the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, artist Ned Kahn and architects Hank Koning and Julie Eizenberg made the facade a wind sculpture, with fluttering acrylic flaps that create abstract patterns like passing clouds.

# Project: PLAY

Photography by Albert Večerka  
for *Metropolis*

The climbing wall (opposite page, left and center) doesn't make for your typical circulation spine (this page), but at a children's museum it's all about making kids "walk in and say, 'Wow, look up!'" executive director Jane Werner says. Parents prefer the good sight lines and natural light, which is filtered through artist Ned Kahn's building-size wind sculpture (opposite page, right).



At the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, Hank Koning and Julie Eizenberg weren't afraid to make a mess.

By Andrew Blum

**The Children's Museum of Pittsburgh** feels more like a birthday party than a field trip. Rather than expanses of explanatory text and artworks behind glass, there are climbing structures, water tanks, and interactive video installations. Eight-year-olds launch parachutes into the air, five-year-olds scramble through crawl spaces in walls, and the pungent odor of mashed animal crackers and baby wipes wafts everywhere. "Sometimes I think we should be called the Messy Children's Museum," executive director Jane Werner jokes, raising her voice over the squeals of kids that echo through her office.

Disorder attracts Hank Koning and Julie Eizenberg, principals of Santa Monica-based Koning Eizenberg Architecture and designers of the 80,000-square-foot expansion and renovation of the museum, which opened last November. For the architects, designing for kids means engaging them, not controlling them.

Instead of structures that thwart vandals and assuage insurance inspectors, buildings that encourage messy vitality are their specialty. In the museum, as well as a handful of other commissions for schools, parks, and community centers, the architects demonstrate a healthy disrespect for authority. They believe that if buildings are to succeed as social spaces, they must be armatures for discovery: not dictating specific responses but providing opportunities for the widest range of experiences. “Any setting that is about control bugs us a lot,” Eizenberg says with characteristic bluntness.

This philosophy was a match for the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, whose mission is “to nurture joy, creativity, and curiosity.” But, as Werner explains, this necessarily puts them in opposition to the testing-based education the Bush administration pushes: “We’re saying that it’s good to have the arts and it’s good to have play, because if you learn to play then you’ll be able to learn concepts later.” The museum’s in-house team of designers develops interactive exhibits meant to encourage meaningful parent participation in children’s learning. It’s an approach Werner brought from her time at the Exploratorium, a San Francisco museum that pioneered the use of hands-on exhibits to teach kids about science and technology.

As Koning Eizenberg saw it, the architecture should do the same. “Experiential stuff is missing from most institutional settings,” Eizenberg says, while Koning sits by listening. (He holds the pencil in this husband-and-wife team—both native Australians—and she does the talking.) She adds, “The value of being alive, and of enjoying the activity you’re doing, is considered secondary to almost every other thing architects can come up with. I think minimalist architects have awakened to an abstract idea of what experience is, but there’s also a social dimension to it. Koolhaas sees that, maybe. But I guess we’re doing it in a softer way.” In the lexicon of Koning Eizenberg *soft* means *easygoing* or *informal*—as opposed to the *hard* pure forms and big gestures of most contemporary architecture. Their

Below, the new building is inserted between two Pittsburgh monuments—an 1897 post office and a 1939 Art Deco planetarium. Right, an aerial photo of the post office and planetarium.

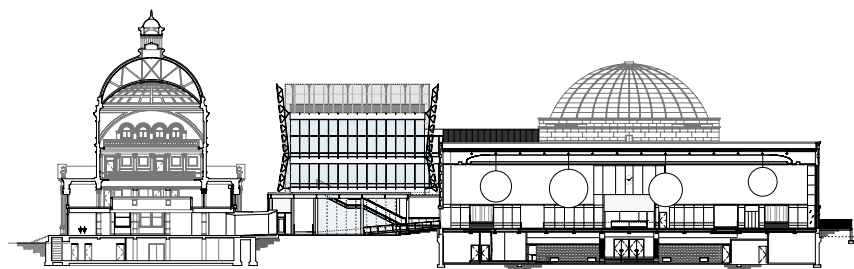
*“Experiential stuff is missing from most institutional settings,” Eizenberg says. “The value of being alive is considered secondary to almost every other thing that architects can come up with.”*

work is full of small moments. “None of the stuff we do is such a big deal,” Eizenberg admits proudly. “It’s just tweaking expectations of how things connect.”

The approach appealed to the museum not only because it values the rambunctious and unexpected but because it occupied a domed nineteenth-century neoclassical post office and had the opportunity to expand into the abandoned Art Deco planetarium next door. The connections were crucial—both to make the building work and to appease the historic-preservation watchdogs. The museum had embarked on the project in 1999, after a blockbuster show about the PBS fixture Mr. Rogers (a Pittsburgh neighbor) proved



Elevation and black-and-white photo courtesy Koning Eizenberg Architecture; others Albert Weerkamp/ESTO



Koning Eizenberg wanted the new entrance to be friendly while keeping pace with its historic neighbors’ sense of civic importance. The canopy cuts the scale of the steel frame; a porch swing provides a place to sit. Left, a section of the museum.



The planetarium dome (left) is now the “garage,” full of interactive exhibits, where Koning Eizenberg kept things simple. But the plan (bottom) required greater theatrics. “The challenge was to make this feel like one building,” Eizenberg says, while appeasing the preservationists, who were more worried about the

*Rigorous irreverence is a better approach to designing for kids than the tacked-on color that typically counts as playfulness.*

that there was an audience for a larger facility—and the rosy economic climate made them believe they could raise the \$25 million needed.

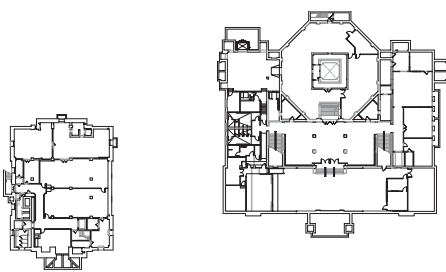
So with the help of a \$50,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant for a design competition, the museum put together a short list of architects including Reiser + Umemoto, Mack Scogin Merrill Elam, and Smith-Miller + Hawkinson—all adventurous small firms that were modern in their aesthetic despite a program that included reuse of historic buildings. This was also remarkable in a city whose glory days are clearly in the past. “We made a decision that we would be progressive, not reflective, and that we should honor the time that we live as much as [the old Pittsburgh barons] honored the time they lived,” Werner says.

When Koning Eizenberg got the commission, they wondered: How do you reconcile Architecture with a capital A, which has a purity of form, with messy use? From an architectural standpoint, everything about the project was messy. And the budget, originally set at around \$10 million for the museum building, was minimal. The historic edifices, both the post office and the 1939 Buhl Planetarium, were an unfortunate combination of beloved and full of asbestos. The museum had also commissioned \$500,000 worth of original interactive artworks and engaged a range of in-house exhibit designers for different parts of the space, as well as architect Paul Rosenblatt, principal of Springboard Design, a Pittsburgh firm known for programming, curating, and designing. Their trademark emphasis on letting many flowers bloom meant that the galleries would be filled with various quasi-architectural interventions.

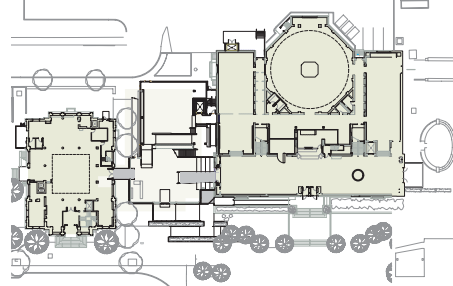
That may not be most architects’ idea of a good platform for bold gestures, but Koning Eizenberg was more worried about getting the sight lines right to avoid panicked parents. If the muddled waters



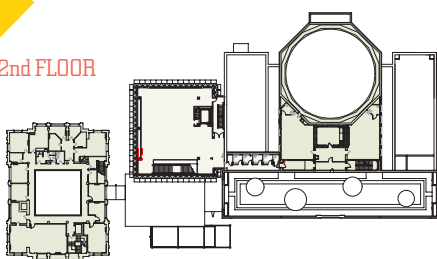
BASEMENT



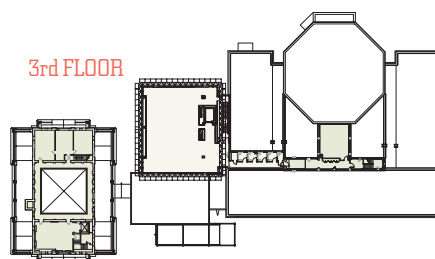
1st FLOOR



2nd FLOOR



3rd FLOOR





Innovative exhibits include architect Paul Rosenblatt's water feature (above and inset top). The museum's central spine (inset center) lets kids find their own way: "You can't have signs saying where to go for kids who can't read," Koning says. Ikea lamps and colorful carpet squares dress up a classroom (inset bottom).

bothered them, Eizenberg brushes it off: “If the design isn’t robust enough to stand up to it, you haven’t done your job.” Their first scheme conceived of the building as a white lantern folded like a Noguchi lamp, which punctuated the space between the historic buildings. Its simple rectangular plan would leave plenty of space for others’ interventions. But when the folded polycarbonate forms proved too expensive, they—characteristically—collaborated. Ned Kahn, a Sonoma, California-based environmental artist and MacArthur Fellow who had been commissioned for another work in the building, stepped up with an idea to apply one of his wind sculptures to the entire facade. “Most of my work is public art, where they dump the mistake—like an ugly parking garage that everyone hates—in my lap to distract everyone,” Kahn says. “But this we just incredibly integrated.”

The sculpture, called *Articulated Cloud*, has tens of thousands of hinged acrylic flaps attached to a space frame hung on the building’s glass curtain wall. The flaps flutter when the wind blows, registering the texture of passing air currents. The whole thing shimmers above a Miesian white entrance pavilion—kept from being too serious (in classic Koning Eizenberg form) by a wooden porch swing. Juxtaposing the gloriously pedimented and columned old post office with the floating new building became a lesson in abstraction. Their scale is similar, and they project a similar presence, even as their approach to history and architecture’s understanding of it are opposite. The whole thing appears ethereal, flirting with unreality, but in a way that’s as much *Alice in Wonderland* as *Light Construction* (the 1995 MoMA exhibit that heralded transparency and luminescence). It’s a monolithic form with a theatrical texture.

On the inside wide spaces in tough materials are sprinkled with color: lighting designer Anne Militello scattered vibrant little lights across the lobby as if the building itself were emitting playful energy. Paula Scher, of Pentagram, picked up on the theme with the signage, including a donors’ wall made from colorful suspended plastic panels. Rosenblatt’s exhibit designs—including an incredibly wet water feature that requires kids to don yellow slickers—fit into the space like art installations. The building has that sense of being an armature. Similarly Kahn’s sculpture is visible throughout the inside of the new building. With the light flickering as the acrylic flaps blow in the wind, the whole museum becomes a place of plural authorship—a metaphor for cooperation.

For Werner, this rigorous irreverence is a more appropriate approach to designing for kids than the typical tacked-on color that counts as playfulness. She insists that a building for kids doesn’t need childlike colors or cutesy animals to provoke joy and curiosity. “We don’t do cute,” Werner snaps. “We’re not dressing up a pig. We’re pretty straightforward around here, and the design reflects that. We try to be straightforward with kids too.”

It’s the triumph of children that being straightforward doesn’t mean being boring. Irony, after all, doesn’t go over so well with the under-ten set. Not coincidentally this is also the quiet triumph of Koning Eizenberg’s architecture. During a tour of the firm’s office, in Santa Monica, Eizenberg says, “I like buildings that are happy to see you.” And yet as design philosophies go, it doesn’t get much quieter. Where does all this modesty leave the iconic, the grand gesture, the provocation? Eizenberg’s response is typically direct: “If you’re talking to architects who are more interested in complete architectural concepts, then our work often looks soft. But to tell you the truth, we deliberately make it look soft. It’s not that we’re weak on concept, but abstract concepts aren’t the way we think. It doesn’t matter if it is kids or adults, you’ve got to think like a child—you’ve got to think the world is wonderful.”

▣ [www.metropolismag.com](http://www.metropolismag.com)

## PROJECT CREDITS

### Children's Museum of Pittsburgh

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