

Living in Los Angeles for more than three decades hasn't dented Australian architect Julie Eizenberg's larrikin spirit, which imbues her architecture with a sense of social responsibility that is more rebellious than righteous.

Words **Rachael Bernstone**

Portrait by **Peter Bennetts**

JULIE EIZENBERG

Julie Eizenberg and her work and life partner Hank Koning are rare architectural role models. Originally from Melbourne, they have built an award-winning architectural practice in Los Angeles over the past 30 years, but they are not 'starchitects'. Their buildings are considered and considerate, but they don't always aim to be iconic. Instead, this thoughtful, passionate and energetic couple bring a sense of Aussie larrikinism and a spirit of generosity to architectural practice, resulting in buildings that are context- and user-driven, and always approachable and welcoming. "We design everything from social principles first," Eizenberg says. "I'm not demeaning form or ornament, but that's our starting point mentally."

The couple studied architecture at the University of Melbourne and worked part-time before moving to the United States in 1979. They launched Koning Eizenberg Architecture (KEA) in 1981 after completing post-graduate studies at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA). Across the USA, they are well known for their innovative work in the affordable housing sector, and they also design other types including public, institutional and commercial buildings and single-family homes.

Speaking to Steel Profile in Adelaide, where Eizenberg was a keynote speaker at the Australian Institute of Architect's 2016 National Architecture Conference, she observed that her peers in the US and Australia face many of the same challenges. These include how to maintain housing affordability

in the face of massive population growth, and the rise of more complex bureaucracies and ever-increasing regulations within the building industry.

In an attempt to tackle the latter issue, KEA approaches rigid frameworks with a "Yes, and" mindset, instead of from a "No, but" position, Eizenberg says. "If you are like me, you are completely frustrated by too many regulations," she asserts. "We are changing the game from being one of competition, and priority of who is in charge, to one of attacking the issue as a team. There's a kind of slyness at play: how do you get what you want? It's an issue of seeing the whole to do something more."

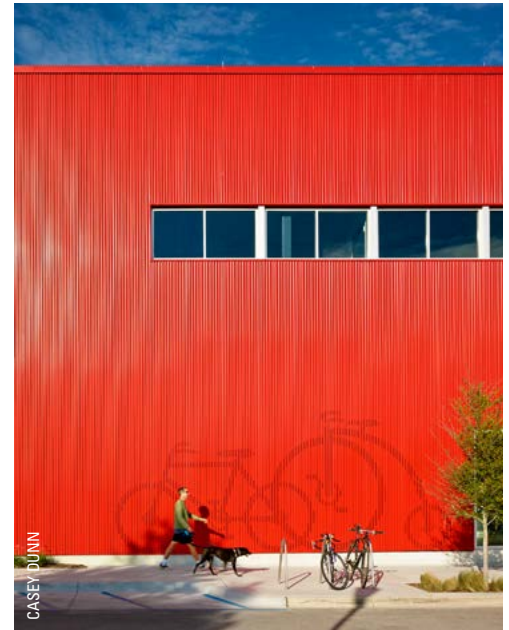
It means the firm approaches every new commission from a curious and open-minded vantage point. "We have a reputation for working with affordable housing but I want to make it clear we are not saints," she says. "We like people, and we don't really care what's in their pocketbook (wallet).

"By the time you make a building stand up, you count everybody as your client, not just the people in power," she says. "I don't really care who I'm working for: we are income-blind. I think it's really important to treat all people as if they are entitled to the building, and you apply the same set of sensibilities and criteria for success as you would to any project."

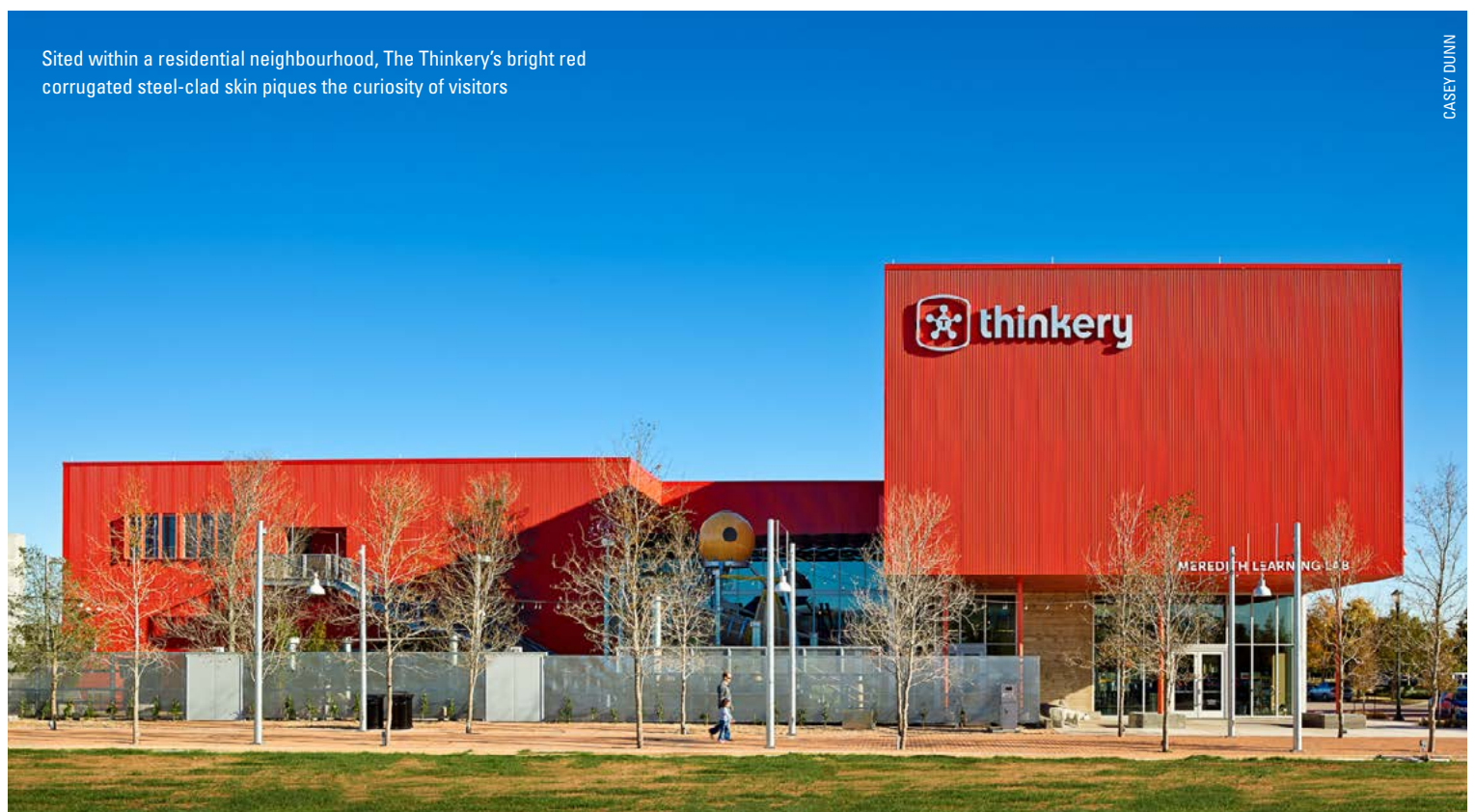
In the case of KEA's 28th Street Apartments project in Los Angeles, the needs of the building's intended users were equally as important as those of the broader community. Dating from 1926, the rundown but heritage-listed YMCA was designed by a prominent

early African American architect, Paul R. Williams, and is a rare example of its type from the era of segregation. The design for its adaptive reuse – into a supportive housing facility and community centre for youth transitioning out of foster care and special needs adults – had to highlight the building's history while bringing the facilities up to contemporary standards.

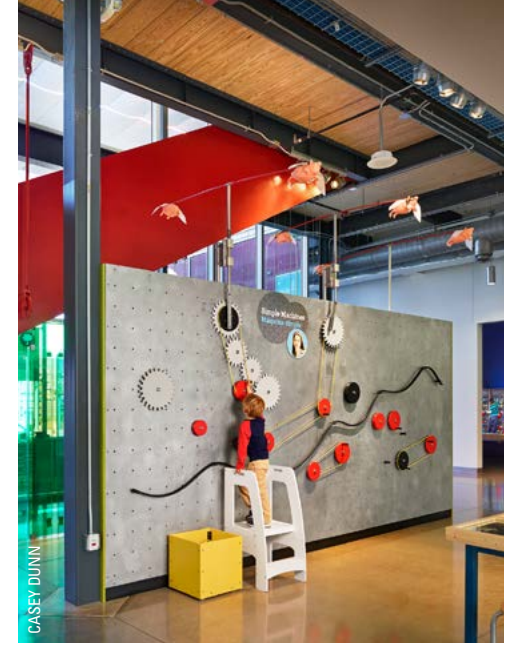
The new addition to the rear of the 28th Street Apartments features a series of steel screens on its northern and western facades which provide a thought-provoking connection. ➔



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Sited within a residential neighbourhood, The Thinkery's bright red corrugated steel-clad skin piques the curiosity of visitors



ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: The Thinkery encourages children and their families to explore and invent new ideas, and promotes the ideal of lifelong learning

BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: The Otis Booth Campus typifies KEA's approach to design, which aims to always be informal and inclusive

"Communities often think that the way you dignify the past is by imitating the old, but we realised we could make the historic building's heavy masonry feel more distinctive with a new section that had a resonant but different identity," Eizenberg says. "We decided to enclose the new section in lightweight screens to contrast with and emphasise the heft of the original. The screens incorporate a secondary pattern based on the historic building's filigreed medallion reliefs, which feature famous African-Americans, to create a connecting narrative.

"The screens were not produced using a fancy water jet-cut system, this is punched steel," she adds. "We found out that for a very small upcharge you could punch out but not punch through the panels and those projecting pieces make the filigree

patterns enable us to impart a sense of richness to the building in an affordable way."

The 28th Street Apartments are typical of KEA's projects, which often combine multiple stakeholders, complex tax offset and financial arrangements, and heritage overlays. Doing so has helped Eizenberg to refine her ideas about where to find joy in the practice of architecture. "We really like the strategy part that sets up what you can do, and we really like making places that make everyone feel welcome," she says. "Informality and inclusivity is the starting point for how we think about things. The authority is taken out of it."

She says that a recent project – one that has been hailed for its sense of openness and approachability – is a prime example of KEA's approach.

"I guess I am still romanticising about the Australia of my youth. I'm very anti-authoritarian, I got that from my dad, he was a larrikin"

pattern. The angle of the light makes the projections appear and disappear, creating an ephemeral effect.

"These punched steel skins are made with a simple machine," Eizenberg continues, "but in projects with tight budgets, where the default inexpensive material is texture-less stucco, which would look weak relative to the masonry original, these

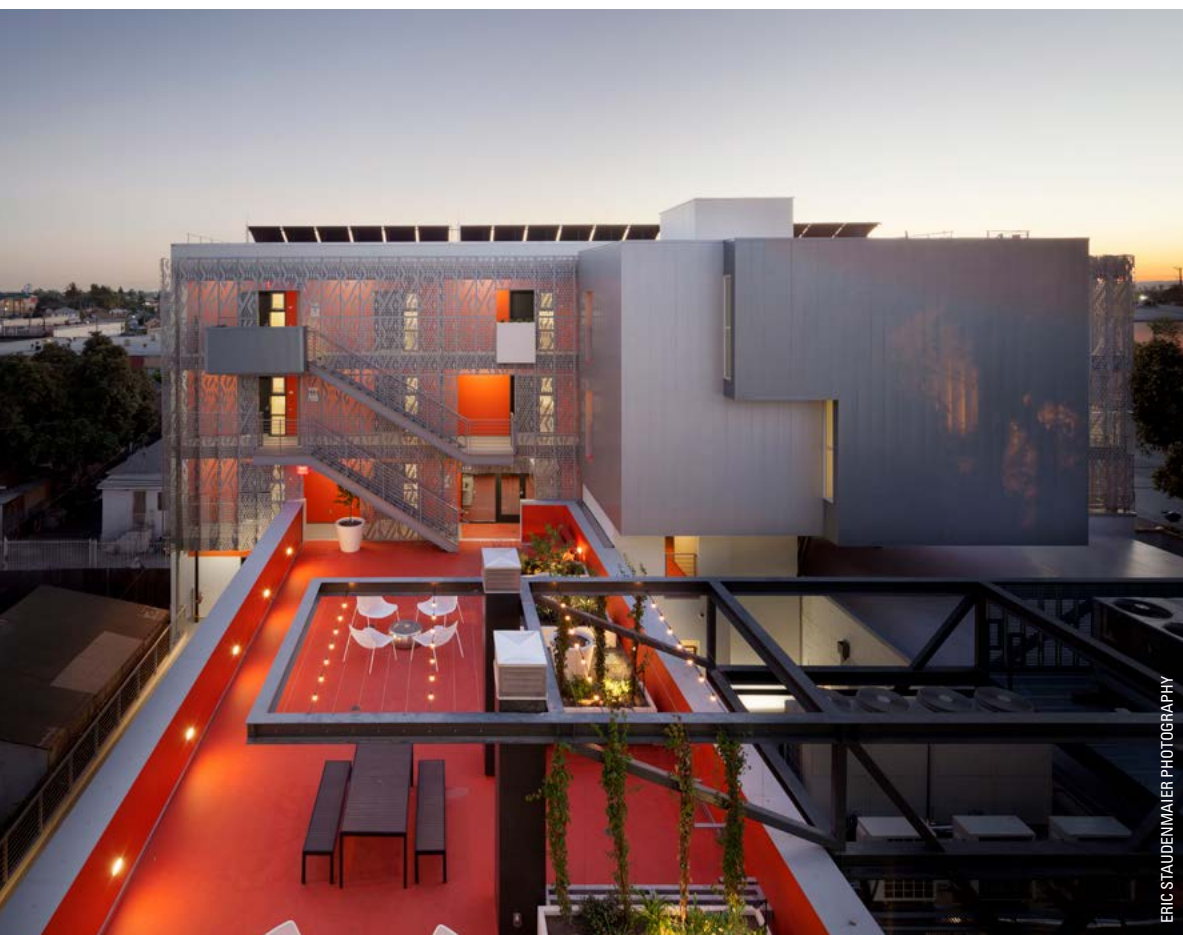
"As architects we can't do it all: we need to understand how all the processes and regulations work to use the system to our advantage," Eizenberg says. "The best example of how we think is the Otis Booth Campus [which provides services to children and families exposed to violence]. We wanted to work out what the real issue was, and then re-frame it from a user point of view, not just start from a brief





ERIC STAUDENMAIER PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE AND BELOW: The inexpensive punched steel screen on the 28th Street Apartments both contrasts with and references the adjacent heritage YMCA building



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that said: 'We need to make a building and these are the spaces we need.'

"When you flip the right switch: you turn something that's just about fulfilling what's expected into something that does so much more," she says. "And it's not us working alone towards that goal: for example in this case we were working with savvy people who wanted the most they could get for the kids, but they were not yet clear on what was possible. You sense it when you get that kind of client."

As Eizenberg announced at the start of her presentation, KEA also produces work outside the social welfare sector, and the firm's free-spirited approach to design can be gleaned from observing two museum projects. The Children's Museum of Pittsburgh (with Perkins Eastman) and The Thinkery in Austin, Texas (with STG Design) both prioritise concepts of exploration and invention.

Described as "a place where science and families play side-by-side", The Thinkery claims to be "a foundry for a new generation of innovators and creative problem-solvers... and a heck of a good time". Located in a residential neighbourhood beside a playground and a lake, the building's attention-grabbing red corrugated steel-clad form aims to ignite the imaginations of young visitors.

The corrugated red metal cladding draws on a factory and creative workplace sensibility to provide an exploratory setting that appeals to all ages. "I think the Thinkery has accomplished a whole change of mindset about what's cool," Eizenberg says. "Often parents feel they have to have the answers, but here the staff can help with that – not to have the answers, but to prompt the right kind of questions. The building is a backdrop for that kind of learning. And we're all learning, all the time."

Having built projects all over the US, Eizenberg admits that different cities necessitate different approaches – downtown LA is not the same as Santa Monica (20 kilometres away), which is dissimilar to Austin, Texas – but says there is an element of Australian-ness that pervades her design thinking, no matter where KEA is working.

"I think Australians have changed culturally since we left, when I was 25," she says. "I'm not sure if the change is to do with me or Australian culture, but I think Australia now aspires to be thought of as important rather than free-spirited, which is the attribute I continue to cherish. I guess I am still romanticising about the Australia of my youth. I'm very anti-authoritarian. I got that from my dad; he was a larrikin."

She says that her father, who immigrated to Australia in 1924 with his parents from Russia when he was two years old, was more "Australian" than his children who were born there. "My dad left school at 14 and he was self-made; he did very well and I was very proud of him," she says. "He was always very conscious of people, and I think that humanitarian aspect has stayed with me."

"It is not surprising that I'm re-framing the issue of social responsibility not as a 'we should' or 'we must', but as an issue of 'why not?' I don't understand why it's considered a do-gooders thing." **SP**