



Game-changers

Anthea Gerrie meets a duo of design innovators

It was the best of times – young Israeli architects Etan Kimmel and Michal Eshkolot had graduated from the Technion in Haifa, married and set up their studio together – and the worst of times: “In 1985, hyper-inflation was roaring through Israel, and there was very little work,” remembers Kimmel, the male half of Kimmel Eshkolot, now one of Israel’s most distinguished building design practices.

But luck was on their side – after their first project, a stylish Italian restaurant, attracted attention, the couple successfully advertised for co-investors in a plot in then-rundown and under-valued Neve Tzedek and built five town-houses in what would become one of Tel Aviv’s most sought-after neighbourhood – including the home they still live in today.

“The area was then very affordable compared to north Tel Aviv,” remembers Kimmel and the development won them their first award of many and saw them catapulted on to the cover of design magazines.

“The Rokach Prize, awarded in Tel Aviv every few years, was not only for these homes but other work we did in Neve Tzedek, including a community centre.”

What Eshkolot, who like her husband is as involved in interior design as well as creating the bones of a building, finds most satisfying is the way they managed to create a home which has adapted over nearly 40 years, opening and closing like a Jack-in-the-box.

The home has adapted like a Jack-in-the-box

“We renovate every three years as our needs change,” she explains.

“Being light, open and transparent was great when we moved in with a baby and had our second son a couple of years later but, as the children grew we all had a need for more privacy, so windows closed up or disappeared altogether, and when they moved out everything opened up again.”

What was an airy playroom when the family moved into the split-level house in 1988 thus became a child’s bedroom closed off to the world in 1994, and since 2018 has been opened up again to function as a study and a television room: “There is no TV in our living space,” she says.

The couple also designed a few spectacular items of furniture for themselves which were picked up for production, including a metal-framed sofa which converts into a bed – “I called it Michal, designed it as a present for her and it now lives in our office,” says Kimmel.

There is also a teardrop-shaped coffee table, still in use in their living room, and a fabulous



Kimmel and Eshkolot and above their own kitchen as it is today



monumental stainless steel kitchen island set on an oak base.

Wood and metal feature heavily in their signature palette of materials, which they have carried through into the public commissions that followed the enthusiastic reception for their residential work.

These include the Steinhart Museum of Natural History in Tel Aviv, wrapped in a huge angled overcoat of Spanish wood engineered to be sustainable for exterior use, and the spectacular World War II Museum in Gdansk, where the collision of wood and metal represents conflict, warning and hope.

They won a competition to design the Davidson museum of archaeology near the Kotel, and they have also created a new entry and galleries for Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum.

As for their interior use of metal, the couple harnessed a spectacular pre-rusted variety from South Africa for Chateau San Lorenzo, a Swiss chalet for which they designed the interiors for a Russian family: "It's a kind of rust which acts as a protective layer," explains

Spectacular pre-rusted metal acts a protective layer

Kimmel of the corten steel the couple used to surround and clad the fireplace wall of the living room.

They recently built a four-storey house in Tel Aviv incorporating a lift, for a British family who wanted to equip it to live in for life, but perhaps their most audacious residential project in the city is the pair of striking oriental-style houses on Allenby Street which they transformed into a complex of 21 apartments, harnessing a contemporary extension sitting above and behind the two landmark buildings.

"It was a complicated planning process, but we got permission to demolish the derelict



Clockwise from bottom left
 Restored historic houses, Allenby; San Lorenzo house; Kimmel and Eshkolot's home after renovation; their own-design sofa featured on a magazine cover; their home before renovation

shops in front of the houses which did not belong on a residential street, as well as for the renovation and extension," says Kimmel.

The project they are perhaps proudest of is the multi-award-winning Mount Herzl Memorial Hall in Jerusalem, which they completed in 2017.

"It contained the names of each of more than 23,000 soldiers who died during the foundation of modern Israel and names are still being added," says Kimmel.

They have poured daylight into this commemoration site and created steps outside on which to sit and reflect, around and on top of the building dug into the mountain.

And the public commissions keep coming; Kimmel Eshkolot are busy in Tel Aviv with both the Eretz Israel museum in the north of the city and the Gesher Building in Jaffa, for whom they are designing a theatre.

"But we do like to return to residential work whenever we have time," says Eshkolot, an ambition which may be helped by their younger son, also an architect, coming to work with them in the practice.

