

BUSINESS WEEK ONLINE  
FEBRUARY 2006

"THE KOOLHAAS KIDS COME OF AGE"

## Joshua Prince-Ramus explains why disciples of Rem Koolhaas are moving beyond the iconic Dutch architect's ideas, with a more collaborative style

Rem Koolhaas, the Dutch architect famous for his coy theories on cities -- and, more recently, for dramatic and cerebral buildings such as the Seattle Central Library -- casts a long shadow. No one knows this better than Joshua Prince-Ramus, the majority owner and lead partner of the New York branch of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), the firm Koolhaas founded in Rotterdam in 1975. Prince-Ramus and his colleagues are currently designing a theater for the Dallas Performing Arts Center, an art museum and mixed-use complex in Louisville, and an academic building at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

But they are also engaged in creating a new paradigm for architecture firms -- one that forcefully questions the mantle of fame bequeathed to them by Koolhaas, and with it the idea of architecture as an art form defined by independent geniuses. Instead, they are creating a methodology that fosters innovation with a collaborative, highly conceptual approach they describe as "hyper-rational." More importantly, it argues that dramatic, energizing, eye-popping architecture need no longer be the exclusive domain of celebrity architects and their indulgent clients.

BusinessWeek Online Contributing Editor Andrew Blum spoke with Prince-Ramus at OMA's office in New York, the week before the architect headed out to the TED Conference in Monterey, Calif.

### **The completion -- to incredible acclaim -- of the Seattle Central Library in 2004 highlighted your conceptual, research-based approach to architecture. Can you describe it?**

We believe in a hyper-rational process where you accept the constraints, conditions, and challenges of a project, and you attempt to engage them by going back to first principles. You don't accept any convention. If someone says, "This is how you solve that problem," you give them the bird. You just say, "I don't want to hear it."

### **Can you give me an example?**

A good example is the [Charles and Dee Wyly Theatre] in Dallas. The theater consultant kept saying that the fly tower has to be a concrete structure like this and this and this. But we said, "Don't give us predigested solutions. Tell us what it needs to do, and let us figure out how to build it." We truly wanted to go back to first principles: What does it mean to create an acoustic enclosure?

Our observation is that if you do this hyper-rational, almost dumb process of taking everything back to first principles, it's tiring as hell, but you start to construct something that has never been done before -- something that transcends convention. The [Seattle Central Library] is another example. I have never presented that project

on formal terms. I always take people through the logic of it, and every move in that project was obsessively rational -- to a fault, even.

**But isn't there some conceit in that? At some point, aren't you trying to make it pretty?**

[The] Seattle [Central Library] is ugly -- or some people think so. When we first unveiled it, it made people uncomfortable, because it had never been seen before. People also said the Sydney Opera House and the Eiffel Tower and [the Guggenheim] Bilbao were vile when they were unveiled. That's not to say if something's vile, that means it's good.

But with Seattle, we learned a really important lesson: Whenever we tried to make an ugly angle beautiful, it fell apart -- it didn't look good at all. The building started to look cute, and therefore didn't work -- it became just a silly shape. The reason we use the word "performance" to talk about our work is that form also performs. It's not to say that we don't look at it and evaluate it on aesthetic terms. But we don't start there.

**Did you learn this hyper-rational approach from Rem Koolhaas?**

I would say definitely Rem was the original author. And the reason I say "original" is because I don't think he's always that comfortable with the way we work in [the] New York [office]. Either he's changed or we've changed. But he often levels the critique that we build the argument so tight that there's no room for anyone to maneuver. And my response to him is: "You're starting to design more as a virtuoso, not as a thinker."

But there has been a very important reason -- aside from the fact that it happens to also be our affinity -- why we're doing what we're doing in New York. We couldn't get away with virtuosity! Rem can. Rem stamps his feet, throws a tantrum, and people are going to listen. If I do it, I'm going to get fired.

I have to have a different palette. People won't question his work. They will mine. I -- or whoever is presenting -- need to build up an argument that is undeniable, irrefutable, that cannot be toppled. And often that's when Rem levels the criticism that he feels straitjacketed by what we're doing. And I say, "That's because that's the only way that we, sans you, are going to get to this conclusion."

**But without Rem's "virtuosity" -- or at least without the fame he has achieved as an architect -- there's no way you'd be able to even get the projects you're getting. So can you really move past the "star architect" model?**

It's a good question. The danger we could fall into is that I will become the replacement for Rem. I'm one of the few Americans in the office, I'm more articulate in English, I've been here longer, and I own the company. So it's easy for me to do that. But if we're going to survive doing what we're doing, it can't happen.

**So you have to become the public face of the firm, while acknowledging the collaborative nature of the design?**

There will always be different roles here, but to be successful, it's incumbent on us that everyone sees themselves in a different role, not a better or worse role. So it's very important to me that you mention the others.

**Say their names now.**

Erez Ella, David Chacon, Gregers Tang Thomsen, Robert Donnelly, Selva Gurdogan, Tim Archambault, Vanessa Kassabian, Vincent Bandy. That's the core. That's the group that fights on a daily basis -- with each other, for the project, with the client, against the client.

**You recently revealed the design for Museum Plaza in downtown Louisville -- a combined art museum and mixed-use development. How did a speculative, developer-driven project mesh with your process?**

With Louisville, we had a very unusual problem. Normally a developer says, "I see an opportunity, and I want to maximize that opportunity. And then maybe I'm going to throw some culture at it to push it through." But this was the inverse. They started out with a kernel, which was about art. And to pay for that, [the project's speculative office and housing] had to be very efficient.

But when we first started talking about the project, we didn't know how big it was or how much it was going to cost or how big the museum was going to be -- nobody knew. So we tackled those things as a group. And the commitment we made early on is that we would take [the developers'] economic drivers very very seriously. Instead of resisting a developer's imperatives, we said, "Cool, interesting, let's make the best of their problem."

**So that means you're designing within those constraints?**

We're seeing constraints as opportunities. It's not like we're getting around the constraints. We're saying, "The project's just the constraints." If we can solve the constraints, that's where the form will come, that's where the beauty will come, that's where the logic will come. And more likely than not, you can get it built, you can get it financed, you can get it on budget.

**It's certainly different from an architect sketching a building on the back of a cocktail napkin.**

If it takes an unlimited budget and a client willing to walk off the edge, then architecture is only able to work in 0.1 of 0.1% of the projects in the world. That means that architecture will only happen when the skies open up and clients come from heaven. Architecture should be able to happen with a developer.

**What kind of projects does OMA New York want to work on?**

We want to work on kinds of projects we've never worked on before. We would be very nervous to do another library right now. Frankly, it would be hard. We truly believe we solved the problem last time.

But I would be equally concerned that we would be a bit bored, because we feel we already know the project well, and that we have so much conviction that we'd fail to go back to first principles. Until we get tired, that's the way we're going to do things. Maybe then we'll make some money and get the beach house, and the senior people will show up once a week.

By Andrew Blum

-----

View original article at:

[http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/feb2006/id20060223\\_523277.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/feb2006/id20060223_523277.htm)