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“MANY ARCHITECTS ARE STUCK IN THIS MINDSET THAT DOING GOOD BUSINESS IS SOMEHOW ANATHEMA TO DOING GOOD ARCHITECTURE. I THINK THAT’S BULLSHIT.”



Four years ago, Joshua Prince-Ramus left his partnership with Rem Koolhaas at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in New York to start his own venture, REX, a generic moniker that stresses the “re’s,” as in “redo” and “regenerate.” REX has recently completed the Vakko Fashion Center and Power Media Center in Turkey; and the Dee and Charles Wylie Theater at the AT&T Performing Arts Center in Dallas (with OMA). The firm is now working on realizing another project, Museum Plaza, a 62-storey commercial and residential complex that promises to revitalize the skyline of Louisville, Kentucky. *Azure* senior editor Catherine Osborne met Prince-Ramus last December at Construct Canada, the Toronto building and construction behemoth, to talk shop – and baseball.

Catherine Osborne: Was it a friendly divorce when you parted ways with Rem Koolhaas to start REX?
Joshua Prince-Ramus: There’s all this debate about there being controversy, but there’s no controversy; we’re still friends. In fact, OMA’s New York office is next door to REX, and we talk all the time. It ultimately came down to the offices in New York and Rotterdam becoming more distinct. The Seattle Public Library was a New York office project entirely. At that time, Rem was becoming ever-more famous and able to express himself individually. But because of the airtightness of our approach and argumentation, he couldn’t insert himself by showing up a year into the process and saying he wanted it done differently. It became apparent that the offices were based on Rem’s and my relationship, and we realized that wasn’t a reason to stay together.

CO: What did you learn from the experience?
JPR: The first thing I learned, and it’s something we’ve attempted to retain at REX, is that anything is possible. I don’t just mean in design. I mean that in Rem’s mind there’s no reason why you can’t call up someone who has already told you, “It can’t be done,” and not hang up. Design isn’t only about experience; it’s about a constant, almost dumbed-down and determined questioning. Rem believes in chaos, and his chaos generates the best things. I can understand

why the person at the top thinks that’s true, but as someone who worked his way up through that environment, spending 20 hours a day there, I can also see how that made us shallow. We had nothing else in our lives.

CO: How is REX different?
JPR: Well, OMA has a high turnover rate, which is insanely inefficient. Yes, you get young talent willing to work 24 hours a day, but they burn out. I don’t see why you can’t have those young talents and also older people who can shepherd a project through. Actually, that has a lot to do with the slow evolution of OMA in New York separating. We were on our own, doing work that our age and experience level didn’t warrant, and, just due to geography or authority, I didn’t have the clout to go into a presentation and say, “This is my vision.” The only way we could meet expectations was to build argument.

CO: As a result of this experience, was it necessary to create a less chaotic environment at REX?
JPR: It’s from before OMA. When I was a student, I was obsessive about understanding processes and scared I wouldn’t understand. I’m actually not interested in being pragmatic but in getting my way, which means knowing the rules of the game. Students I lecture don’t understand that an architect’s drawings are a general road map and that contractors build from shop drawings. If you think they’re going to build your computer line, you’re playing baseball without knowing what a strike is. On the other hand, if you know the rules you’re going to hit it out of the park way more often. I don’t buy the idea that angst creates art. Many architects are stuck in this mindset that doing good business is somehow anathema to doing good architecture. I think that’s bullshit.

CO: You’re very articulate, and I suspect effective communication is part of REX’s identity.
JPR: Absolutely. Architects have an agenda, and we’re very interested in advancing technologies. If you want a new library, then we want to reinvent the library, so it’s social engineering. You have to develop a common language. That’s a skill set that’s weakening with architect students. You can’t start designing until you’ve communicated a problem and defined your position. I’m dumbfounded that students at a graduate level can’t do that. In fact, we’re increasingly not hiring architects at our firm.

CO: Who are you hiring?
JPR: People with chemistry degrees, economics degrees, because they can think and communicate. For me, design is the process of discovering; you’re unveiling it, and you don’t know what the conclusion is. Design currently means form, and so much about architecture school these days is finding your “inner form voice.” On that level, what students are doing in the first semester resembles what they are doing in their final semester. The worst thing a student can do is study with a famous architect and come out designing like him.

CO: How is your identity different from where you’ve come from, specifically a firm with a famous principal at the helm? What defines REX?

JPR: One thing is a belief that richer, more exciting and innovative architecture comes out of authoring a process in which you don’t know the conclusion but you have enough passion and intelligence around you that the conclusion will come. I’ve just seen this happen too many times to doubt it.

CO: Is that the process that led to your design for the Museum Plaza towers in Kentucky?
JPR: For that project, the developer was not interested in form at all; he was more interested in making it happen. Without us asking, he went to Congress to argue that the project would create X number of jobs, and he got the Senate to change the flight path of planes to have the towers built. Not once was there a debate about form. As a firm, we don’t talk about beauty in public; we only talk about it in private. We beat the hell out of things until we’re down to the survivors. Only then do we enter into the discussion of aesthetics and start asking, almost sheepishly, “Which one is more beautiful?”



CO: Have you come across clients who put the brakes on halfway through that process, where they suddenly say, “Wait a minute...”?

JPR: It doesn’t happen that often, but when it does it usually builds up with a certain anxiety, and then we say, okay, let’s sit and talk about it. I have no problem starting over with major components, because you will have all the experience of the first round to inform the second round, and you will do the thing better. And the clients are able to finally articulate something they previously weren’t able to, and you suddenly get a new piece of information. Sometimes a little tweak will fix the problem, and frankly it’s often the one thing that makes the project sing. It’s the anxiety that can make an entire project really tight. We’re not afraid of those moments.