

Architecture can go beyond buildings -- and embrace branding, community, and teamwork.

Joshua Prince-Ramus was the partner-in-charge of the celebrated Seattle Central Library and heads up the New York outpost of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, the architecture firm founded by Rem Koolhaas. In the following excerpts from his first interview with FAST COMPANY's associate editor, Jena McGregor, Prince-Ramus sounds off about architecture's cult of personality, building a practice around his beliefs, and the day, midway through building the Seattle library, when he couldn't get off the plane.

Fast Company: What made you go into architecture?

Joshua Prince-Ramus: I've always really wanted to do it. But when I went to college, I thought I was going to become a professional musician. I was a French horn player, so I went to Yale to study with a very unusual French horn player. Somehow I didn't think I was going to do architecture. All I was taking was math, philosophy, and music, and then I took a sculpture course, and my professor encouraged me either to become a sculptor or an architect. I always wanted to do something creative, but as much as I'm creative it's in a really hard-core, right-brained way. For me, painting doesn't do it for me. There's no constraint.

FC: What was your first project at OMA?

Prince-Ramus: We got the commission for a new Universal headquarters, and we were totally ill-prepared to do it except we had a huge desire. Those of us who were working on the project were either directly out of school or shortly out of school. You're talking about a 700,000-square-foot building with a \$350 million budget in the Hollywood Hills. It's being run by two kids just out of graduate school, one with two years' experience and one with two days'.

FC: Were you in charge of the project?

Prince-Ramus: No, I was project architect, but of a team of six. It was like the blind leading the blind. But that's very much been the success of [OMA], because it takes people and puts them in surreal positions and -- to use an American phrase -- it's very much sink or swim. To Rem's credit, he's always able to make a space where these kinds of insane things can happen.

FC: Tell me about working on that project.

Prince-Ramus: It was out of this project that AMO [OMA's think-tank arm] was born because starting with Universal we were doing think tank work -- identity work, branding, whatever you want to call it -- but we weren't getting paid for it. The library was the first time we actually got paid for it. It was the first time we were explicit that we need to do the work. With Universal, we just did it because this is what we always do, but with Seattle

we did it explicitly. We said to them, allow us, as a group, us being the architect, you being the client, to think for three months. Before we get screwed up with architecture, before we start to put things before you that you may or may not like, before we get confused with that, let's just think and figure out what the issues are and make joint positions on those issues. Then we'll use that observation to start making a conceptual diagram of how it should all come together. The diagram may not look anything like architecture. Through the success of [the library thinking], we started doing that on even non-architectural projects.

FC: Why didn't the Universal building go forward?

Prince-Ramus: It has to do with the fact that AOL and Time Warner merged. The day that happened, all bets were off in the entertainment business. It threw such a tremor into the entertainment business. We still harbor some pathetic fantasy that we're going to convince somebody to build it. We were two months from breaking ground, totally on budget, totally ready. We spent four years of our lives obsessively working on this project, and it died. It's sort of like the death of a child. I almost couldn't start Seattle.

Up to this point, we haven't been building very much, [even though] the office is 25 years old. The office has a methodology that turns people over in a huge way. We have almost 100% turnover. The first five years I was in the [Rotterdam] office, we probably had on average 80 employees and we had 400 people out of the office in those four years. Some of that is because in Europe, you hire students. It's required of students in their [curriculum] to have practical experience. But even if you take them out, at the upper levels, [we were seeing] turnover every two years. There was no memory, no collective memory in the office whatsoever.

FC: When you say methodology, that sounds like a nice way of saying culture?

Prince-Ramus: Yeah, or cult. It's all part of the cult of the office.

FC: So it's not just the process?

Prince-Ramus: People were treating it like finishing school. They knew we worked like hell. They knew we were going to make them work 18 hours a day because we're obsessive. I knew that, too. When I first came, I was, like, I'm going to give it one or two years. I can do anything for one or two years, and it's going to be worth it. I'm getting an opportunity that most architects never get in their entire life. I was getting it in my first job, and frankly, if I fucked it up, it wasn't on my name. So why wouldn't you do it? If it had all gone sour, no one was going to write in The New York Times, Josh Ramus totally screwed the project up. Hey, I'm six months out of school -- who am I?

At OMA in Rotterdam, two things were happening. This new generation that started in '94-'95, that generation basically stayed. We didn't turn over at the upper echelons; we stayed. We started to develop real work, and so we started to think about longevity. So when I was faced with a situation where my staff [on the Seattle library] was about to go into construction, [I knew] it would mean they'd scatter to the winds. I'd have one guy in Boston, one in Seattle, another in Chicago, two in New York, and I can guarantee you, after that experience, no one was going to get on a plane and move back to Rotterdam. I knew that if things didn't change for me, I was going to leave because I couldn't spend my whole life on an airplane. So we decided to open the New York office, originally as a delivery [office]. We'd take all these projects and all these staffs to one single place and follow the projects through. That's how we started.

But the actual course is that I came here, I got greater independence, we started getting offers for work and so it started to grow. And I've been able to -- just as I would say Rotterdam has a flavor that is in a way dictated by Rem and his personal quirks and foibles -- I've been able to create the New York office more around mine. But what I feel strongly about is that to the extent that it's around mine it's that I feel strongly that it shouldn't be around mine.

FC: Let's talk about Seattle. I'm trying to understand the role of the partner-in-charge.

Prince-Ramus: I think the role of the media has done a huge damage to professionals like architects. Architecture is by definition a very collaborative process. I had a lot of great ideas in Seattle. They were all mine, and they're 10% of the great ideas in the building. If anything, the only claim to fame that I had on that project is that,

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per person, I had the most. But it's so minor compared to the total number that it's not worth talking about. The only reason I had the most great ideas is that I was the only one who was on the project from the very, very first day to the very, very last day.

FC: Are you including people outside of OMA when you say that?

Prince-Ramus: Yes. Crucial decisions were generated by our partner firm, LMN. But does the media like to talk about that? No. The media calls it a project by Rem Koolhaas. They don't call it a project by OMA. It's as though there was a firm called Rem Koolhaas. They didn't even call it OMA. The firm that actually did that project was legally a firm called OMA/LMN.

One thing that was said often enough is that people felt like I was willing to continue fighting when they would have given up. So to the extent that I have some great [role] on the project, it was being bullheaded, being stubborn to a fault. That was my great contribution, because when people said no, I said, bullshit, I know it can be done. I know it can be done because I can see what this guy, this guy and this guy said and I can see that they add up, and that what you're saying is bullshit.

Everyone wants to talk about authorship as who makes [a building] from scratch. It's really kind of irrelevant. The only relevance of authorship is who makes the space for something to happen. Rem made the space for some kid directly out of school could be put in a very important position on Universal. He made the space to put me on [Seattle] and I learned an enormous amount at an insanely early moment.

Rem has authored a process. On some of our projects, that means he's authored a process, but you see the individual hand of the project architect or other partner. Out of all the partners, Rem included, I think I'm the one who's most uncomfortable seeing someone's hand, particularly my own. I'm the most committed to having that process be carried down to every part of the project. Rem is undeniably the author of how our office works; he's the one who made the space for it.

FC: So do you feel you had an authorship role with Seattle?

Prince-Ramus: Imagine seeing a bunch of electrons flying around, and one happens to be in the picture the most. It's going to create a little bit stronger perception than the others all flitting around; one happens to be there more than others. If you do a time-lapse photo, you're going to see it larger than others. That's the partner in charge.

I don't have to tell [project architect] Erez [Ella] what to do, because he and all those people in that office know that what's important to me in creating this office is that we're not about authorship. That's something that, I think, is becoming more true in Rotterdam, too, but we're much smaller and much more mobile. When the buck stops, it only stops with me, and my intent is to make sure that it doesn't do that. People know that ultimately Rem and I [and OMA's other partners] own the company and that because I'm the only one here, my decisions will abide. But they also know that what's important for me is that we as a group have a future. And that unless it's not possible, my intent is not for the buck to stop with me, you know?

FC: Can you give me an example?

Prince-Ramus: We're working on the [Charles and Dee Wylie] Theater in Dallas right now. Say we're working on the balcony. Whoever's working on it will come back with four different options, and she'll present them -- one, two, three, four. For us, the word option is, like, the most important word, period. Whoever's available will begin to debate them, and she will present them almost like she's their attorney. She'll say "in defense of option one," "in defense of option two," and then the team will react. Now, as the only partner in the office and one of the people who own the company, I could come in the office every morning and say this, this, this, and this, but all I'm going to get out of that is something that's as good as me.

FC: Is that collaborative environment the way it works in Rotterdam?

Prince-Ramus: Yes, we've traditionally worked that way, which is why I went there in the first place. But New

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York is definitely an evolutionary step beyond. I'm trying to take it further, though I also have the luxury to take it further [because of Koolhaas' fame]. OMA is infinitely more collaborative than probably any other firm, but it's not pure, it's still not pure. Everything still gets bottlenecked around Rem.

What is unique about OMA is that it is fairly horizontal. It is always the case that we don't care where the great idea comes from. That's a different issue from how the results of that get portrayed to the public. And that's a separate issue because that has to do with how we portray it and with what the public wants to hear regardless of what you tell them.

FC: Do you think it's more horizontal here in New York than it is in Rotterdam right now?

Prince-Ramus: Yes, and that's what I'm getting at. It's more horizontal in the production, and it's also more horizontal in the face that goes to the public.

FC: So authorship is leadership?

Prince-Ramus: Only to the extent that I'm trying to create that environment. If someone wants to buy a cappuccino maker, I don't want to be bothered with it. If they want a cappuccino maker, let them decide. If someone buys a \$40,000 server, then I want to be involved.

But that example is just the same as the way we work with design. When there are really big issues, I want them to know that I want to be involved, so that I can raise my hand as the voice of the most experienced. But that often is a limiting factor, because in our office experience is usually the worst thing you can have. One of my greatest [roles]—it's exactly what Rem said in [a recent New Yorker article] -- the most important thing I can contribute is to undo certain things. Sometimes, I don't want to be involved in the initial conceptualization because I will carry so much baggage about. I see them doing something and I can see [what's wrong]. Someone will be working on the facades, and I could stop him and say I've done this so many times that I know that if you put something on the outside of the glass, I know [it won't work]. While I know all those things, if I infected him with that, he would shut down. And one out of five times, he's going to come up with something no one's ever done before and he's going to be right.

That's what our office deals in -- people and their talent. The people we collaborate with, first-time engineers, they go ape shit when they work with us. The first time we ever work with a new partner architect, they go nuts. They're, like, "Why do you always want to reinvent the wheel? It's always going to be round." And we're, like, "You're right nine out of 10 times. But one out of 10 times we will reinvent the wheel, and if you reinvent the wheel six or seven times out of the 1,000 decisions on a project, then it's a project that's groundbreaking." That's something.

For instance, on the theater, right now it's so predetermined that there's no space for an architect to actually think in a theater. Anything you attempt to do, and suddenly, you're trying to move the seats. Not only do people start screaming about sight lines, they start screaming about acoustics, and that's bullshit. It's only affecting acoustics because you don't go back to first principles. What we do is say uncouple these things. Make three or four or five lineages, and then let's trace back and see if really this is the way it has to be or could it have actually gone like this. That drives people bonkers. We go back to first principles. We're driving everybody nuts, but lo and behold, two out of 10, three out of 10 times, it works.

FC: Is rethinking first principles a way of getting at a building's truest function?

Prince-Ramus: The one kind of touchy-feely thing I will say -- and I truly believe it -- is that if you really are dogmatically rational, hyper-rational, the product will be something extraordinary. On those grounds, it will be sublime. It's hard to say, for instance, that the library is beautiful. It totally skews your senses and you can't get your head around it. [It's] the true definition of the word sublime, meaning your brain can't figure it out.

FC: Isn't that just "form follows function"?

Prince-Ramus: If you believe semantics are important, even using that phrase any more is irrelevant. Form follows function comes with so much baggage. It's a worthless phrase because you'll never take it for what it

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means. It's kind of like saying Kleenex. Kleenex has its own [meaning] now; it's not a proprietary brand of nasal tissues. You know? The moment you use the expression you will already have moved away from what you're trying to talk about. We often try to use a different word, which intentionally uses the word form in it. Not form follows function, but performance, the reason we say it that way is form also functions. You see a certain kind of opening, and it means something to you, or it doesn't. Form performs and it's just one of a kit of parts. There's form, there's programmatic relationships, there's high-level organizations of design, there are all kinds of things you can play with to make something perform -- and form is one of those things. If you really go back 60 years and talk about where that term actually comes from, I think unfortunately the term was a bad one because it implies that form isn't a valuable tool, that it's just a byproduct.

Now, I do believe that most often form is about function. The other partners in our office don't really share that feeling. I'm the one in the office who's the least comfortable with making a sketch or a form. If it looks like a form out of a rational process, I'm all for it. Others in our office are OK with having a clear concept but also massaging it for aesthetic reaction. I just can't do it. I can't bring my hand to do it. The people that I've been fortunate enough to get to the New York office also share that. They're also really good at keeping their hand from doing things [purely for aesthetics] and just digging and digging and digging and digging and digging until something comes out that you look at and go I have no idea what it is but I know it's doing everything it's supposed to do.

FC: Tell me more about the research project you were involved with in designing the Seattle library.

Prince-Ramus: We had a client that was very intelligent, from Deborah [Jacobs, Seattle's City Librarian] to the board. They made the space for us to do the thinking period, and the thinking period included tours [of other libraries] and a series of seminars on technology. And I think the basic observation that came, in particular from the other libraries, is that there were two simultaneous explosions that libraries were [experiencing]. One had to do with materials -- books and technologies and CD-ROM's and cassette tapes -- there's an explosion of media going on like this with time, and it's getting ever and ever bigger. There's another explosion that's much more recent, really in the last 100 years, which is an explosion of the social function [of libraries]. And from our observation, those things are going independent of each other. There's the question about the media -- Is the book here to stay, or is it going to disappear? Is the internet going to take over? -- but that only has to do with one explosion. The other explosion is, "What is the role of the library?" It's not just about getting access to media any more. There's a whole host of other [social functions]. Some of them, granted, they don't want, such as a de facto homeless shelter. Yet it's still a very real function, one that they don't want to encourage but that they cannot legally discourage, either. They have to treat everyone the same.

So we have these two different explosions, and what we noticed was, particularly in contemporary libraries, that because the media explosion is scaring everyone, no one seems to be aware of [the social explosion]. They're scared of the explosion of technology, so they're starting to create buildings that have a high modernist flexibility, a shotgun flexibility. Because the media explosion is what everyone's talking about, they were allowing it to manifest itself at the expense of the other. No one knows if books are going to disappear, no one knows about the technology, so they make the building such that bookshelves can go anywhere. It sounds great, but suddenly you start expanding, and now you're moving this entire [social] part of the building out of it, while ironically the social function is actually going to keep the library more relevant.

Say today you go on the Internet and type Finnegan's Wake. You're going to get 3,000 hits. In 10 years you're going to get 300,000 hits and in another 10 years you're going to get 3 billion hits. There's no process of curating except what Google presents. This is where curatorship happens. Why would you go to the library if you can get Finnegan's Wake in some bastardized form off the Internet? Not to get Finnegan's Wake, but to get someone to talk to you about what you should actually be looking for. How do you choose between those 3 billion potential possible hits? Well if the books have slowly grown to push [the curatorship piece] out of the building, they're not what's important. The real problem is that access to information is becoming so ubiquitous, but we need curators.

FC: So they weren't making the social spaces?

Prince-Ramus: That's why the Barnes & Noble example is so important. [People at the library were] all saying

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we're doing just what Barnes & Noble is doing -- why are they successful and we're not? Why are 100 more people per square foot going to Barnes & Noble than the public library? We're doing the same thing. We're both giving people books. They didn't get it. Barnes & Noble has already seen the paradigm shift and they learned it from you. They came and studied you; they came and did you better. They already figured out how much space is in libraries; what you're seeing is somebody's intelligent embodiment of what you're already doing, and you don't know it.

FC:How rare is it for the client and the board to travel with you to do that kind of research?

Prince-Ramus:I've never heard of it. We went to visit a whole bunch of other theaters to talk about what works and what doesn't. That way when we start, we start with a conceptual grounding that has nothing to do with a design. It's a framework that now when we show them, OK, your building is going to look like this, they can relate and we can all evaluate it on the same terms. They're empowered to say, "I don't think it works because of all these things we've agreed to," and I also am able to say, "Don't get hung up on what it looks like." It gives us both power to communicate between people who don't normally communicate very well.

FC:The Seattle Central Library was completed on an incredibly tight budget. Do you think creativity is helped when people are on a tight budget?

Prince-Ramus: To some degree, as point of fact, the projects we had the most problems on are the ones where we had too much money. We didn't know what to do because we had no problem. [OMA's] whole shtick is problems aren't problems, they're opportunities, and if you don't have any problems, we don't know where to find the opportunities anymore. At first, we didn't know what to do with Prada. The client was not giving us a lot of resistance conceptually because they knew who we were and they understood about the design, and they had generous budgets. We didn't know what to do with that.

That's one spectrum. The other spectrum is that the more you pull off unbelievable feats, the more people expect it. The success of Seattle was a culmination of an amazing client, an amazing design team -- both of whom were very committed -- and unusual circumstances where the money was in hand. There was huge public mandate for it. We had a lot of people who are smart enough to take educated risks. I just said an enormous amount, all of which, any one of those things are rare on a project. Now we have a lot of clients who say you did it in Seattle, why can't you do it again?

Why? I don't want to have another nervous breakdown. I've already been hospitalized for two weeks, I don't want to do it again. It was seven months after 9/11. I lived right next to [the World Trade Center], and I was home, and just saw too many things all at once. I saw people vaporize 100 feet from me. [About the same time], one of the most important Seattle board members died. She was one of the most amazing women I ever met. And then the pressure on the library was incredibly great. It was right at the hardest part of the project, trying to get it to be totally real, so that people would buy in and we could start building. It was also right when the Guggenheim [Las Vegas projects] were at the most intense point. All at the same time, we opened the New York office. I had just moved here [from Rotterdam]. I was flying 25 out of 30 days a month, and one day I got on an airplane and I couldn't get off. They landed and I was comatose in my seat. It was like my brain rebooted, and just went into shock.

Our Dallas client is fantastic. They're also committed, very passionate about it, and they give us a lot of space to work in, but they also know when to rein it in when we're going in the wrong direction. At one point one of them pulled me aside and said how do we know we're going to get something as good as Seattle? And I said because we need to prove Seattle wasn't a fluke. The first time you do a dog, you could lose all your credibility if you haven't done enough projects. That's especially true for us, because we're so new and small. People still don't know what this office is and how it's different from Rotterdam, why we're different. People still think we're a delivery office. People don't realize we're doing Dallas here, and that half of Seattle was done out of this office. We can't afford a dog. Right now we're in a very rare opportunity where we're just continuing on the same line [of credibility] that OMA has always enjoyed. OMA built that.

FC:How important is the success of this office on a personal level?

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Prince-Ramus: It's important for OMA, but it's crucial for us. Someday Rem's going to retire and die. We all are. He's 30 years older than I am. That means there's a lot of time that we need to be doing something after he's gone. We need to be able to legitimately say this is our work.

by Jena McGregor

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