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GROUP DYNAMICS

THE EMPHASIS AT **REX** IS ON THE COLLABORATIVE NATURE OF ARCHITECTURE. THE RESULTS UNDERLINE THE PANACHE OF JOSHUA PRINCE-RAMUS AND EREZ ELLA

The plot is classic Hollywood: A young, handsome, Harvard-trained architect and aspiring Olympic rower begins his career at a famous European architecture firm, a hothouse place known for producing outlandish, attention-getting buildings. One day he gets a phone call from his mother back home. She has read a newspaper article about a plan to build a new city library.

"I said, 'Well, Mom, tell me what it says,'" recalls Joshua Prince-Ramus, now 37 and a principal architect in his own year-old New York firm. "And she said, 'It says something about a mandatory meeting tomorrow.' So, I think Rem was in Korea and I couldn't reach him. I literally just went to the airport and got on a plane." That is how Prince-Ramus, who was 29 at the time, became the partner-in-charge on the Seattle Central Library for the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, the firm headed by Rem Koolhaas, the thorny polemicist who emerged in the 1990s as an architectural rock star. Completed in 2004, the angular, geometrically perverse glass-and-steel creation has the effect of making the rest of downtown Seattle look like a relic. It has become as significant an architectural touchstone for the early twenty-first century as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao was for the late twentieth. ▷

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JASON SCHMIDT

In the offices of REX, everyone, including Ella, in front at left, and Prince-Ramus, works in the same room in an effort to break down hierarchy and emphasize collaboration.



While working on the library, Prince-Ramus opened the New York office of OMA to manage the firm's U.S. projects, including a couple of Prada stores and a campus center for the Illinois Institute of Technology. Then, last year, together with Erez Ella, an Israeli architect who had also spent his career working for Koolhaas, Prince-Ramus broke away. "It wasn't so much a decision as it happened by matter of course," he explains. "Over time, we started to attract our own clients, and the only glue between the New York office and Rotterdam was Rem's and my relationship."

Prince-Ramus and Ella now operate as REX in a large, sunlit, white rectangular room where 45 conspicuously young architects and designers—some are still students—sit at long, double-sided rows of desks. The bosses work at desks indistinguishable from those of the employees, a symbol of their insistence that architecture is about collaboration rather than celebrity.

Sitting together in one of the firm's simple conference rooms, Prince-Ramus and Ella look as much alike as two physically dissimilar men can; both have shaved heads on which the hair has grown out slightly and artful stubble on their chins. As they explain their approach to designing



buildings, they each doodle on sheets of white paper. Ella, who speaks infrequently, draws little schematic office towers, while Prince-Ramus, who delivers whole paragraphs whenever he opens his mouth, unconsciously diagrams his spoken words, as if he is hooked up to an internal polygraph.

Like many architects, Ella and Prince-Ramus have evolved a secret language, a way of articulating the complicated thinking behind their work. They resist talking about style. As Prince-Ramus says, "Style freaks us out, the very word *style*." They're more interested in how their buildings work. Prince-Ramus, for instance, has explained the strange shape of the Seattle



Models for REX projects include, clockwise from top, a rendering of the Dee and Charles Wyle Theatre in Dallas, which originated at OMA New York, the firm Prince-Ramus founded with Rem Koolhaas; a rendering of the chairlike shape of the Museum Plaza in Louisville, which will include apartments, a hotel, and recreational and office space, in addition to the museum; and a gallery view of the Louisville project.



Central Library—it looks like a monstrous mechanical jaw—by showing a diagram made by the library's administrators of all the functions they required in the new building. Prince-Ramus claims the architects translated the librarians' chart directly into architectural form. He has called this method "hyper-rational," as if they simply did what any logical person would under the circumstances. He now acknowledges that aesthetic judgment plays a role in the designs.

To explain why the Museum Plaza complex they have designed for a group of Louisville developers looks like a 61-story chair, with a museum and recreational spaces housed in a 125,000-square-foot horizontal seat some 25 stories up, Prince-Ramus talks about "maximizing performance." It looks like a chair with towers for legs because that was the most viable approach. Again, it's as if this wild thing is the embodiment of pure reason. Except that now Prince-Ramus admits that after endlessly scrambling the variables, they ultimately

called on something like a sense of style: "Why did we do this one? Because we like it."

And even back at the Seattle Central Library not everything was so rational. "This is a balcony at the very top of the building, so it has this kind of panoptical view of the tenth-floor reading room," Prince-Ramus says, while drawing a feature of the library he designed with his then girlfriend, the Dutch model Annemarie Prince, in mind. "I brought her up there during the party for the opening, and I proposed to her." And because this is a Hollywood story, she naturally said yes.

—KARRIE JACOBS