

ISSUE 058 APRIL 2008 £4.50

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## The 20 essential young architects

Guest editor  
Dunne & Raby

Herzog & de Meuron in Madrid

Stefan Diez

Obsolete technology returns

Plus work by Valerio Olgiati, Thomas Heatherwick and Office for Subversive Architecture



"We've made a recent rule:



Left: Joshua Prince-Ramus (left) and Erez Ella  
 Right, from top: Museum Plaza, Louisville; Dee and Charles Wylie Theatre, Dallas; Vakko headquarters, Turkey

# we don't talk about OMA anymore,"

says Joshua Prince-Ramus, co-founder, with Erez Ella, of REX Architects. The practice, which used to be the New York branch of Rem Koolhaas' Office for Metropolitan Architecture, seceded in 2006 in what was effectively a bloodless trans-Atlantic coup. Prince-Ramus and Ella went with their mentor's blessing, apparently, but their relationship to Rotterdam is still a sensitive subject.

REX, it has been frequently pointed out, did not have an average start in life. Young American practices have few challenging outlets: a loft conversion here or a beach house there. As part of the most reputable practice in the world, REX cut its teeth on the design for the Seattle Public Library, one of the most important pieces of American architecture of the new century. Now independent, these 30-somethings have huge civic projects on the go, and so it's fair to suggest that they were springboarded into the big time. "That's a strange way of putting it," says Prince-Ramus, in his office overlooking Manhattan's West Village. "That if you don't suffer you've had an unfair advantage."

In a tight black T-shirt, Prince-Ramus cuts the figure of the varsity jock. He is the front man – the talker – while Ella is quiet and watchful. They are architects with a very clear agenda, a mission almost, and that is to make the profession relevant again after what they see as years of marginalisation. "It's our own damn fault," says Prince-Ramus. "Architects have become stylists, people who do window dressing. We're taught to say 'that's my vision', and the client says 'but that's not what I need'. Meanwhile, all the important stuff that has a moral or social agenda, we have no involvement in anymore. That gets carried out by developers."

Their solution – one born of America's conservative, risk management architectural climate – is to become tough, Machiavellian businessmen. They talk in terms of "liability", "control", "negotiating hard on contracts" and above all, putting the client's needs first – "Once you do that, the client's totally fine to be pushed way outside of their comfort zone." This is the stuff, they feel, that architecture students need to be taught, not deconstructivist literary theory.

A true child of OMA, REX specialises in identifying and then distinguishing a building's

different programmes. They call it "hyper-rationality", which clearly suggests a functionalist, or performance-based, logic at the expense of anything else. In the vast and controversial Museum Plaza scheme in Louisville, due to complete in 2010, residential, business and cultural elements are all separated and piled on top of each other in what appears to be a precarious stack of skyscrapers. The interesting, and perhaps ironic, thing is that this hyper-rationality (as in the Seattle library) produces a form that is even more iconic than your average aesthetically minded icon. Its clunkiness has a kind of anti-aesthetic far more powerful than mere elegance.

Picturing cities full of this stuff is scary. But REX is super-ambitious and driven, and with a large project finishing in Turkey this year and Louisville in two years it has momentum and, almost certainly, staying power. **JM**

