

"THE RELUCTANT STARCHITECT"

Joshua Prince-Ramus separates from OMA to form a new firm and he's sure of REX's ability to attract clients without the Koolhaas star magnet.

Architect Joshua Prince-Ramus made his name with the completion in 2004 of the Seattle Central Library, a faceted jewel box of a building that one New York Times critic called "the most exciting new building it has been my honor to review." Prince-Ramus was the partner-in-charge of the library, which was designed by the Office of Metropolitan Architecture, or OMA, the well-known firm helmed by the even more well-known Rem Koolhaas.

But Prince-Ramus also has made a name for himself as a reluctant "starchitect," critical of the fascination with celebrity builders and adamant that architecture is a collaborative process between the architects within his firm and outside partners. "To be successful," Prince-Ramus told BusinessWeek Online in a recent interview, "it's incumbent on us that everyone sees themselves in a different role, not a better or worse role."

**EASY SPLIT.** His latest move appears to support that point of view. On May 14, Prince-Ramus announced that he would be separating from OMA, using its existing New York office to establish a new venture in partnership with OMA architect Erez Ella. OMA's two offices were already legally and physically separated, and a minority of the architects in New York had experience in the Rotterdam office. "At some point, we took stock and realized that we were better off being two offices that collaborated when it was mutually beneficial," says Prince-Ramus. The new firm will be known as REX, or Ramus Ella Architects. ("It's indeterminate," he says of choosing the name REX. "You can read a hundred different meanings into it.")

In the split, REX will continue working on a performing arts center in Dallas (above), a multidisciplinary building at CalTech, and a mixed-use development in Louisville, Ky. (below), while a campus building at Cornell University will be run by OMA. The two firms will continue to collaborate on current and future projects.

Prince-Ramus and Ella intend to change little about their approach to architecture or their organization. For the last year, both have been acting in an overseer capacity to all of the office's projects, with other members of the team taking the lead on individual buildings. The firm's highly collaborative process -- "we try to create an environment where the strongest ideas prevail," says Prince-Ramus -- will continue. And Prince-Ramus and Ella will continue trying to create an atmosphere that's somewhat more balanced than the grueling hours for which architecture firms, and particularly OMA, are known.

**PROFIT-SHARING.** One change they are considering is a profit-sharing arrangement for the other young architects in the firm. "One of the things we're investigating is divorcing issues of ownership from issues of crediting," says Prince-Ramus. "Historically, you have a person whose name is on the door and that person makes the

profit and that person gets the credit. Everyone else is kind of in service to them -- they refer to everyone else as just their draftsmen. If you operate that way, which some people do, you don't create an environment that everybody wants to contribute to or invest their lives in."

They believe the change will force them to step back and analyze the practices they have developed within their office. For example, Prince-Ramus and Ella lead meetings that bookend the week -- Monday morning meetings about business, and Friday afternoon meetings about the office's culture. They don't always adhere to the process, and see their new venture as a chance to reflect on their habits -- recommitting themselves to some and changing others. "As of [May 14], no matter what crutches we used to use, they aren't anymore," says Prince-Ramus. "Any habits that we currently have or perpetuate, they're ours.... That goes for everything from what music we play in the office to how we hire to how we work."

Their new offices will maintain the open seating plan of their current Soho location (none of the architects, including Prince-Ramus or Ella, have offices) but will be larger and add private conference rooms for meetings. One other key addition? "Central air conditioning," says Prince-Ramus.

**LOYAL CLIENTS.** So far, he says, the loss of the Koolhaas connection hasn't appeared to deter new candidates. "We've been interviewing literally hundreds of people for the Louisville project," says Ella. "Three weeks ago, when we knew that the reconfiguration was going to happen, we [started being] very direct with the people who came in." To his surprise, every single candidate said it didn't matter to them, and said that they were there for the project.

Likewise, Prince-Ramus says he doesn't worry about REX's ability to attract clients without the Koolhaas star magnet. Current clients have been supportive. Still, he also admits that clients' fascination with celebrity architects continues to grow. "We don't spend any energy worrying, 'are we doing the wrong thing to get work?' We're just trying to do good work, and if we do that, we've got to assume more people will come." That confidence, he realizes, is mixed with a healthy dose of optimism. "We're still really idealistic about this whole thing. Talk to us in 20 years."

By Jena McGregor

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