

HELP IS ON THE WAY

# Esquire

THE  
**GENIUS  
ISSUE**

PLUS:  
**VINCE  
VAUGHN**



brings the happy (even if he is a little worried).

28 of the **Best** people and their **Brightest** ideas—like the

doctor who can

**Fix a Heart Attack** and a

scientist who can

**Raise the Dead** and brilliant innovators who are tackling

**Energy, Water, Terrorism,** and

—about time!—  
video games,  
*Lost*, and

**Cheap-Ass Beer.**

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MAN AT HIS BEST  
DECEMBER 2008  
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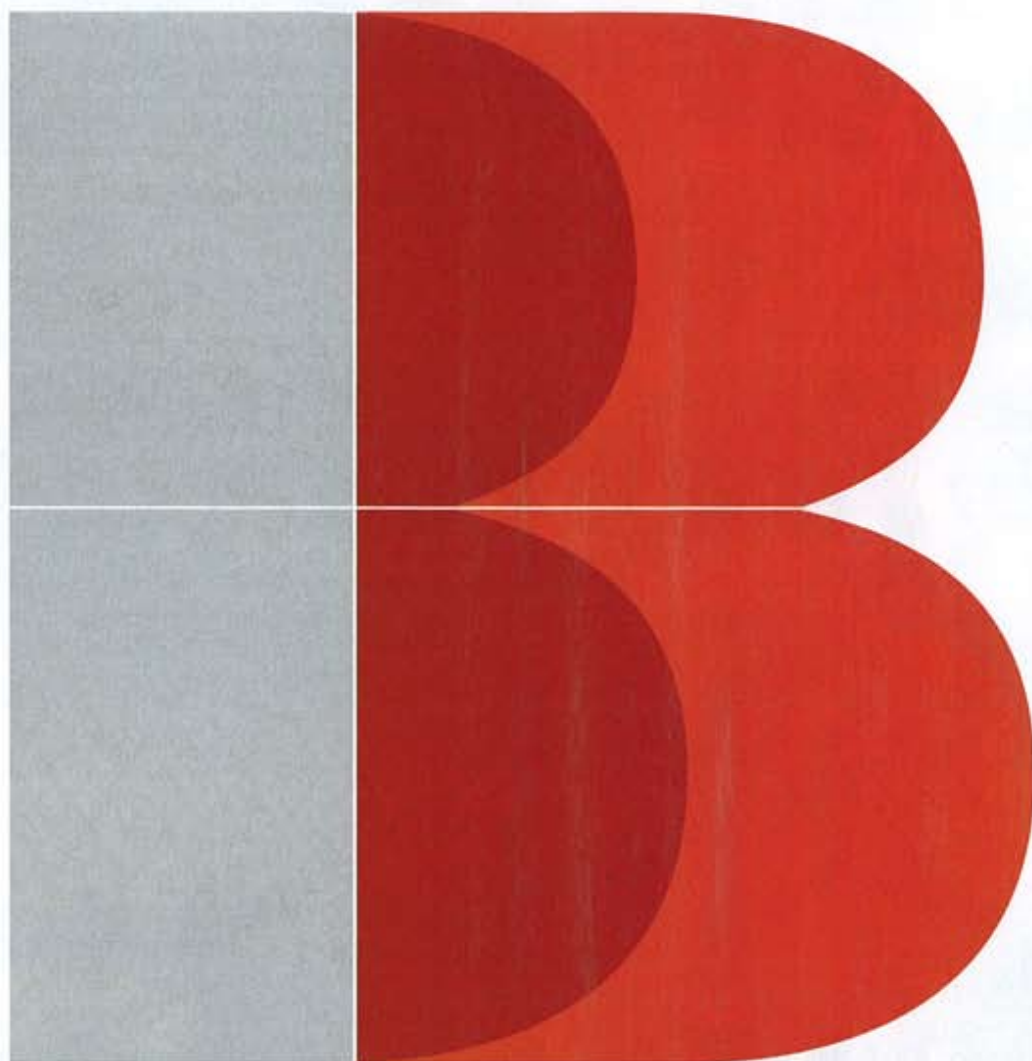
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ON THE COVER: VINCE VAUGHN PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR ESQUIRE BY JAKE CHESSUM. PRODUCED BY EMILY ROTH FOR PRODUCTIT. STYLING BY ALIX HESTER FOR THE GERSH AGENCY. GROOMING BY CHERYL NICK. PROP STYLING BY FI CAMPBELL JOHNSON. TWO-BUTTON WOOL SUIT BY BOSS BLACK; COTTON SHIRT AND SILK TIE BY HUGO BOSS; LEATHER BELT BY ALLEN EDMONDS.

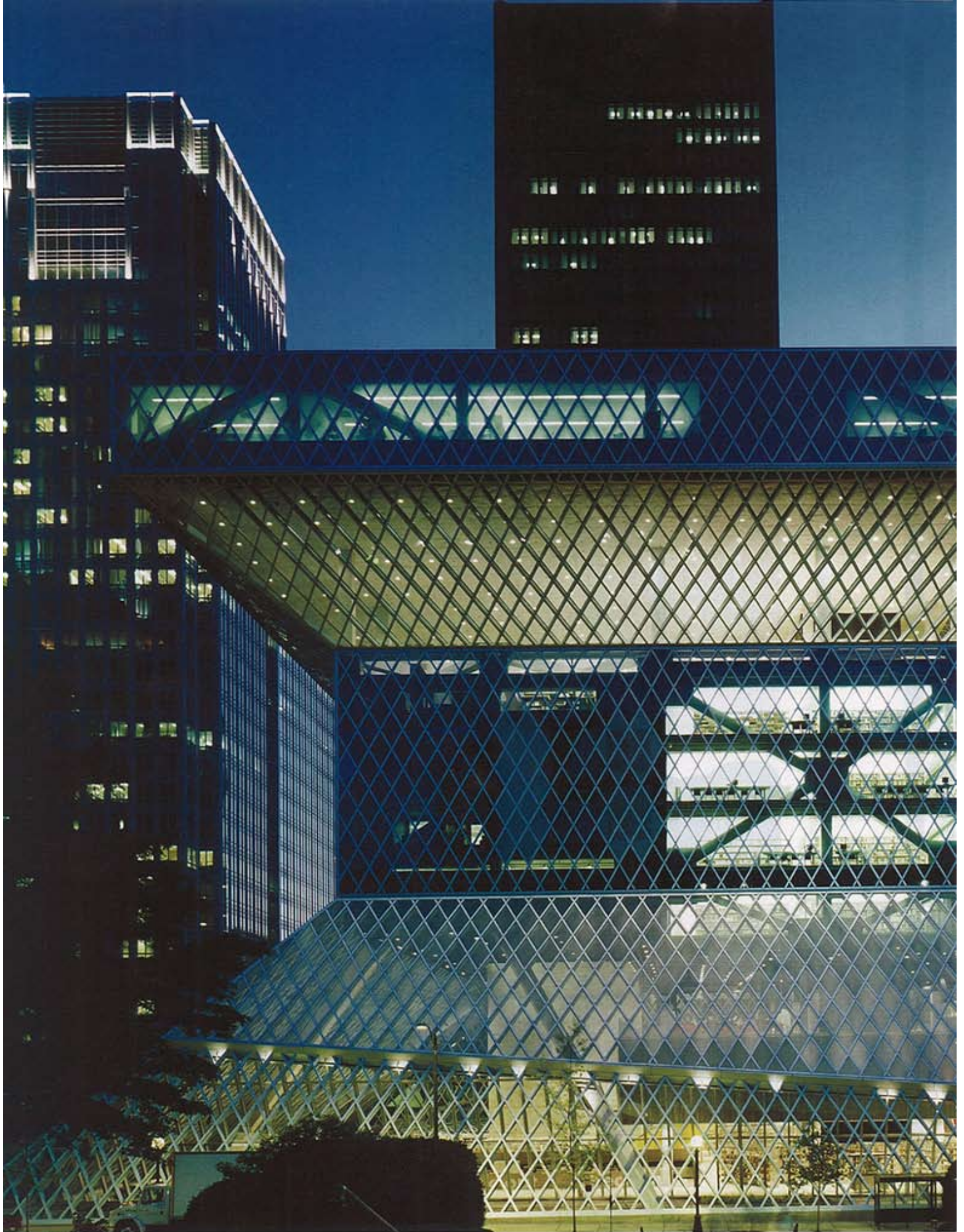


Best and Brightest  
2008

POLITICS | CULTURE | SCIENCE | TECHNOLOGY

The world looks troubled. And yet there are reasons for hope. A new president. A new century. A new start. And these two dozen dreamers: They are making water from air and oil from algae. They are using mosquitoes to prevent disease, cell phones to cure poverty. And their buildings and novels and maps and even hearts—rejiggered, rebuilt, reborn—are unlike anything you have ever seen. Radical and beautiful monuments to everything right and inspiring about American innovation.





**The Seattle Central Library** "The whole skin of that project was designed to keep that building standing, and to build the building for a low cost. It was great engineering. It's not about making a beautiful skin. It just so happened to make a beautiful skin. It's a beautiful piece of engineering; it should not belong on the cover of an architectural-theory book about the autonomous language of architecture and the evolution of the skin. That has nothing to do with it."

**B**2008  
POLITICS  
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# Burying Frank Gehry

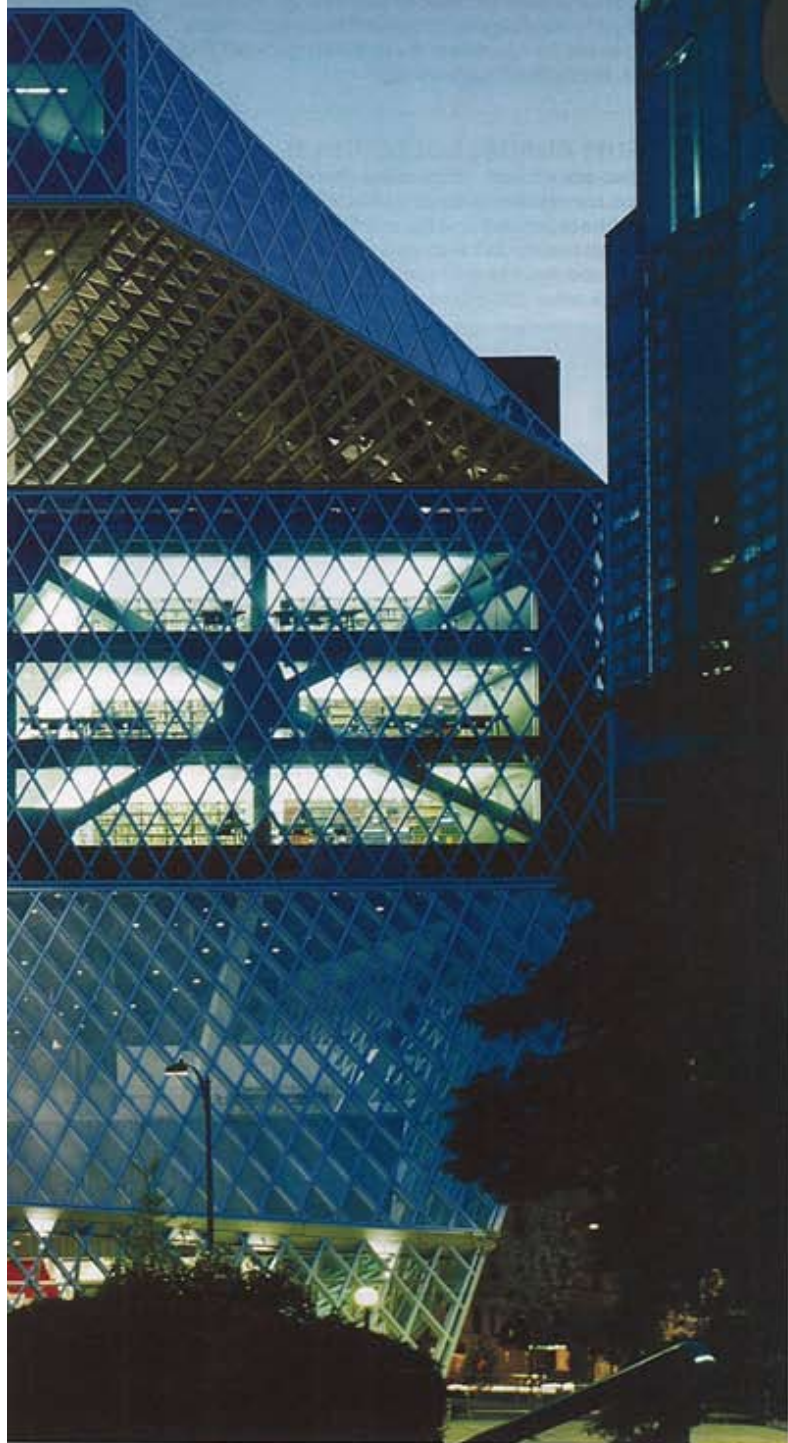
**Joshua Prince-Ramus** is waging a holy war against the sculptors, starchitects, and fey theoreticians of his profession. And in the process, he's actually building things.

By **SCOTT RAAB**

**The written history** of Western architecture dates back more than two thousand years, to Vitruvius Pollio's *De Architectura*; architects have spent the past millennium debating whether his three fundamental goals should be properly understood to mean "commodity, firmness, and delight" or "durability, convenience, and beauty"—mainly because architects love nothing more than arguing about theory and the varieties of architectural experience.

Meanwhile, they studiously ignore Vitruvius's groveling preface, wherein he fellates his client—some emperor named Caesar—for everything from his "divine intelligence and will" to the "splendid achievement" of subjugating much of the world, by way of unintentionally illustrating the most vital tenet of architecture: *No client = no work*.

Joshua Prince-Ramus can lecture for hours about making great and essential architecture by serving a client's needs first—



and he often does, trying to right the wrongs done by the squishy theorists and squiggly scripting programs of academia.

"All the great architects—every one of them—says, 'It represents...' I say to students, 'Don't you think it would be great if architecture just started *doing* again? Why are we *representing*? Do—it's much more powerful. I've never seen a client give a shit about my personal vision. I had to figure out how to piggyback what my vision was onto *their* issues. I've never been comfortable"—he grabs a sheet of white paper, uncaps his pen, and starts whorling in black ink—"doing Frank Gehry. I would never suppose that someone would look at my sketch and go, *Aaahhhhhhhhhhh*. No wonder architecture's dead—because that's what everyone thinks architecture is now. When Calatrava and Gehry die, it's done—no one's gonna pay us to do that. So it's terrifying for me to look at schools trying to *bring out your personal vision*."

**I'VE NEVER BEEN COMFORTABLE DOING FRANK GEHRY. I WOULD NEVER SUPPOSE THAT SOMEONE WOULD LOOK AT MY SKETCH AND GO, AAHHHHHHHH. NO WONDER ARCHITECTURE'S DEAD...**

His voice rises, wobbling with passionate disdain. At thirty-nine, working in a craft whose stars are two or three decades older, Prince-Ramus is a formidable embodiment of cool intellectual rigor—he majored in philosophy at Yale and received his Master in Architecture degree from Harvard—and hard-nosed ambition, Hegel in tight jeans and a black T-shirt, with a vintage Italian diver's watch and a tattooed line from e. e. cummings—"always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question"—snaking up one arm.

"Starting in the 1920s, the modernist agenda made a schism between form and function. Terrible idea—*terrible* for architecture. They sided with functionalism; they failed. Architects in their infinite wisdom didn't stitch them back together; we went all the way the other way, to formalism. And now we're at the height of a formalist agenda—total failure, terrible idea.

"You need to heal two things as an architect. You need to heal form and function. It's a useless, irrelevant distinction. Form *performs*, function *performs*—forget about it. And you need to heal the whole concept of the design architect—the sketching artist—the executive architect. It's a totally unproductive distinction. You can't design without knowing schedules and contracts. You can't do schedules and contracts without knowing how to design."

In fact, Prince-Ramus sees designing contracts as a quintessential aspect of the process of designing and building buildings.

"If you can't design a great contract, it doesn't matter how good an idea you have—you won't build it. It's as simple as that. With this other schism, architects started to act more and more like artists—and to treat the business as beneath them. And I find

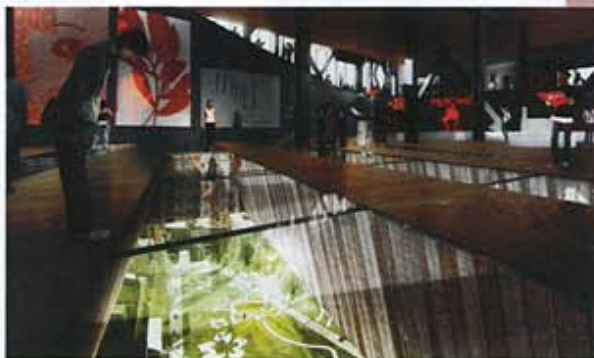
## PRINCE-RAMUS'S MISSION:

**"We very much** care about form and aesthetics, but we see them more as a component of a solution, not as the solution. The vision is about reinventing something. When we do a library, we want to make sure it redefines what a library is. When we do a contemporary art institute in the middle of a for-profit development, we want to do great architecture within the constraints of for-profit development.

"In a meeting with the client in Louisville, they said, 'Wait—so what you're saying is, a kid in a bathing suit will come down from the luxury condo and have to walk through the public space to get to the swimming pool next to people in black tie going to see the opening of the de Kooning show?' And we're like, *Yesssss!* Isn't that exciting?"

### MUSEUM PLAZA, LOUISVILLE

A sixty-two-story mixed-use complex—hotel, commercial, office, and residential towers, and contemporary art museum (the broad center of the buildings, floors twenty-four through twenty-six), with views looking up between the towers and down twenty-four stories to a park. Broke ground in October 2007; to be completed in 2011.

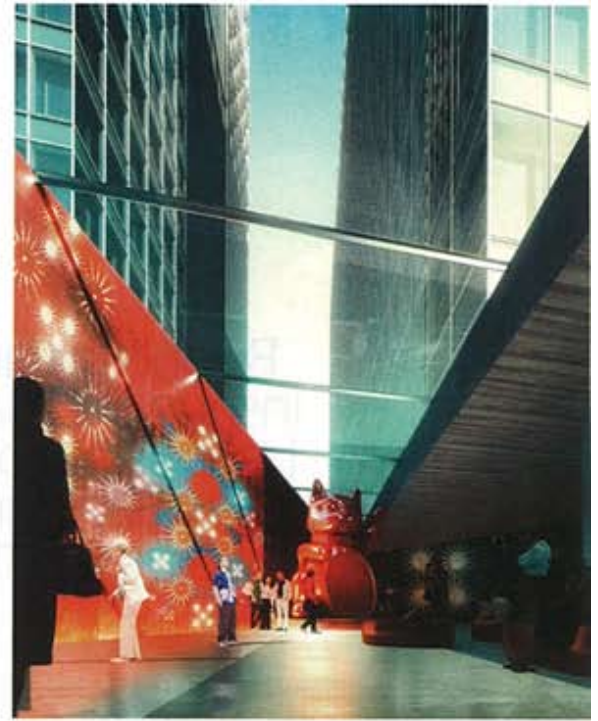


**The problem:** "It sits on the wrong side of a thirty-foot-high concrete flood-wall. The Ohio River floods into the zone sometimes as much as twenty feet, two or three times a year. That's one shitty location. Put a contemporary art museum into the middle of a floodplain, as well as retail that can't be seen because it's on the wrong side of the floodwall—it was a nonstarter."

that absolutely absurd. No wonder we're so impotent."

Working with his colleagues at Rex, the New York City studio he runs, with architects based in the places where the projects are built, and with a consortium of engineers and consultants—as with the "genius sketch," Prince-Ramus derides the prevailing concept of authorship in architecture: "Author a *process*; if you author a process, you actually are losing control; you don't know what's gonna evolve"—he'll often take months to research and workshop a design.

"To go through this thinking process, to work with our clients, accepting constraints—'What are your problems?'—making constraints the opportunities, we set up the rules. Our agen-



**The solution:** “Pick the whole thing up, spin two of the towers underneath, reposition these to improve the views and the relationships, and then make circulation connections to it. That building is not the way it is just because someone wanted to make a profit—it’s that way because someone wanted to reinvent a contemporary art institute.

“Forget our ambitions about culture—this is the vehicle that we had to design, as architects, to understand development, to give a solution that would make the thing pencil out so we could earn the right to do something amazing with contemporary art. That thing is a machine; it’s a tool, a development tool. It’s architecture solving a development problem. You never would think of doing it—it’s too weird. But it makes something really remarkable.”

da is maximizing the client’s agenda—to design a process that will lead to a conclusion. No *willful* design—it’s just problem solving. What you know is that you’re going to go to first principles, challenge convention, and if you *really* stick to that, something will come out that you simply can’t imagine, something that will transcend what any individual could sketch. It allows more voices and tangents—it allows the thing to go through an evolution, to arrive at something that transcends what any of us could have imagined at first. The thing designs itself.

“We don’t care who authors something—if it’s the most senior person on our team, a student who just came that morning, or the janitor. We don’t care where the idea comes from. The ideas

get torn apart, and the more interesting an idea, the more aggressive the tearing apart gets. Authoring a process is much more successful than authoring an object—regardless of the project. If you look at our work, you’ll see an underlying current of thought, not an underlying current of architectural solutions.”

Ask Prince-Ramus to define his own aesthetic and he growls. Literally.

“Dumb. If it ain’t dumb, don’t do it.”

Having thus resolved the thousand-year debate, architecture’s anti-star heads over to a diner down the block, to deconstruct a Reuben sandwich.

“Every Monday,” he says. “It gets my week off right.”