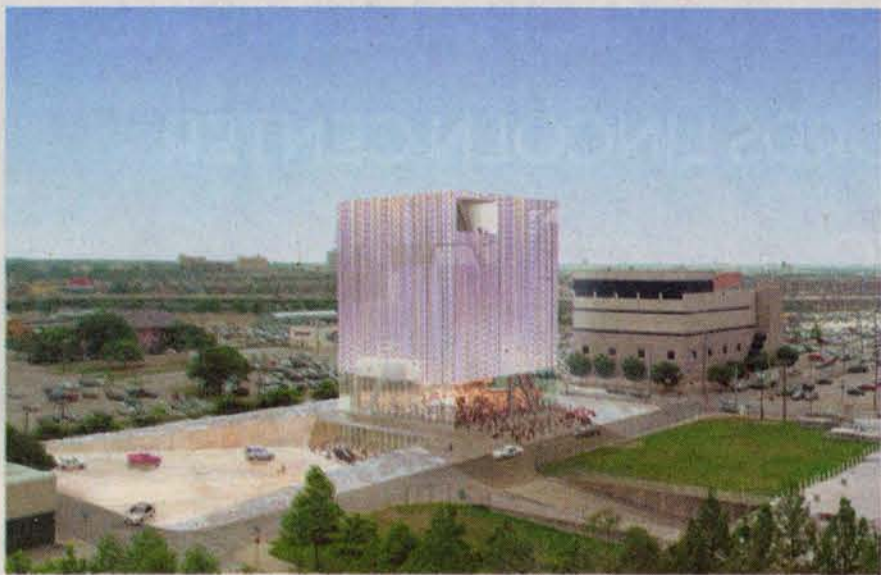


## ARCHITECTURE



O.M.A.

## Go With My Blessing. And My Staff, While You're at It.

Can a protégé's split from a mentor ever be amicable?  
Rem Koolhaas's New York partner is finding out.



O.M.A.



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

By ROBIN POGREBIN

SITTING on a stiff couch at the Mercer Hotel in SoHo the other day, across the street from the Prada store he designed, Rem Koolhaas — the Dutch architect who has been called perhaps the most influential of his generation — was happy to talk about the huge television headquarters he is building in China or how his Seattle Central Library has been a turning point for his firm, O.M.A. (Office for Metropolitan Architecture).

He had less interest in discussing the imminent departure of his partner sitting next to him, Joshua Prince-Ramus, who has been running O.M.A.'s American operations from its New York office. And no wonder: after a decade with the firm, Mr. Prince-Ramus is going out on his own and taking the entire 35-member New York staff with him.

"So little happened, it isn't even interesting to say this happened and this happened," Mr. Koolhaas said. "It is straightforward. We think it is in both our interests."

So, no hard feelings, no intrigue?

No, both men insist, their parting is simply a response to unfolding circumstances and an attempt to clarify issues of authorship and control. "It ultimately became a clear decision, but not an easy one," said Mr. Prince-Ramus, 36.

"The sadness is something we deal with in private," said Mr. Koolhaas, 61.

However sticky or smooth the situation actually is, it's one that a number of firms face, as younger professionals raised in the era of "star-architects" decide it's time to work under their own names. Can such partings be entirely amicable? Can a protégé ever really leave with his mentor's blessing? How do a senior and junior architect manage the division of clients?

Mr. Prince-Ramus will run his new firm with Erez Ella, 35, who joined O.M.A. in 1999, calling it Ramus Ella Architects, or REX. "In the spirit of a collaborative office, we will generally go by REX," Mr. Prince-Ramus said.

He has been the principal architect on three projects run out of New York — Museum Plaza in Louisville, Ky.; the Dee and Charles Wylie Theater in Dallas; and the Annenberg Center for Information Science and Technology in Pasadena, Calif. — and he will continue in that role. Millstein Hall on the Cornell campus in Ithaca, N.Y., will remain an O.M.A. project, with Mr. Prince-Ramus as part of the team.

"New York was always a separate entity," said Mr. Koolhaas, whose firm is based in Rotterdam. "Ramus has been leading that entity in a way that is very impressive, very successful."

"The issue becomes, how should that work be credited. On his part there is interest in sole credit for the work because he is sole author of the work. My interest is to clarify, so we don't get a blur between what is the work of Joshua Ramus and what is the work of O.M.A."

Mr. Prince-Ramus said: "It's an issue that as an office we're struggling with. Rem is very clear we're a partnership, and we have multiple voices. The media's desire to make everything about an individual doesn't reflect our reality."

"It's about a Darwinistic approach to ideas, not where they come from," he added. "The issue of authorship becomes less and less important."

Mr. Koolhaas's status in the design world makes the issue of credit a particularly difficult one. After winning the Pritzker Prize in 2000, he became one of the anointed architects for projects

like the Prada stores, the Seattle library and the immense headquarters for China Central Television, now under construction in Beijing. But he said that he didn't seek this status, that stardom had been pressed on him by a media culture that craves major figures. "In America the cult of celebrity makes the reality of a partnership harder to maintain," he said.

Many architects who got their start with him have gone on to establish successful firms, including Winy Maas of MVRDV; Bjarke Ingels and Julien De Smedt, who ran PLOT together before going their separate ways this year; Farshid Mousavi and Alejandro Zaera Polo of Foreign Office Architecture; and Xaveer de Geyter in Belgium.

"There's a kind of worldwide network of ex-O.M.A.'s who are working really well," said Dan Wood, who left in 2003. "It's a testament to Rem's ability to hire the right kind of people."

Mr. Wood had a rocky break with O.M.A., which he left to start Work Architecture with his wife, Amale Andraos, also an O.M.A. alum. "It was very difficult because we had a quite intense relationship over a long time," said Mr. Wood, who worked closely with Mr. Koolhaas for 10 years. "I do feel he felt I was letting him down. We've since reconciled. It kind of worked itself out after a few years." He added, "At the time, it's not how I wanted it to end."

Mr. Wood had hoped to continue working on some of the projects he had started with Mr. Koolhaas, but that proved to be out of the question. "Rem drew the line and said, 'Pick a date, and that will be the end,'" Mr. Wood said. "In the end it was a good thing. It forced us to reconceptualize who we were going to be and what we were going to be outside of O.M.A."

Mr. Koolhaas would speak only in general terms about those who had left him. "Sometimes it happens amicably," he said. "Sometimes it's painful to go through a formal separation."

MR. PRINCE-RAMUS and Mr. Ella, his new partner, said they were aware that Mr. Wood's departure had been painful. "Of course we thought about it," Mr. Ella said. As a result the two were careful to try to make the terms of their exit acceptable to Mr. Koolhaas.

And Mr. Koolhaas said he was careful too. "That is why it is crucial that we have an amicable situation," he said. "So no one will have their loyalty challenged."

In some ways the split sneaked up on everyone. A routine project meeting in March, which was expected to take about 30 minutes, became a three-hour discussion of their working relationship. Because the New York office had gained more and more independence, Mr. Prince-Ramus said, it had become something of an anomaly within O.M.A. (The firm has six other partners: five in Rotterdam, including Mr. Koolhaas, and one in Beijing.

"It seemed it would make more sense to be two offices that collaborated, rather than one office," Mr. Prince-Ramus said. "More and more we were operating as two offices. I think everyone welcomes the clarity of it, but it's also an emotional thing. We've worked together for a very long time. I've worked with the other partners every day of my professional life."

The job at O.M.A. was Mr. Prince-Ramus's first after graduating from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, where Mr. Koolhaas teaches and frequently does his hiring.

Mr. Prince-Ramus — he joined his wife's last name to his when they married two years ago — joined O.M.A. in 1996. His first assignment was working on Mr. Koolhaas's first American commission, a new corporate headquarters for Universal Studios, which was never built. Then he became the point man for the Seattle library.

In 1999 Mr. Prince-Ramus's mother, who lives on Bainbridge Island, off Seattle, read in The Seattle Times that all firms registering for the project's selection process had to appear in Seattle the very next morning. She called her son in Rotterdam, and by that evening he was on a plane to Seattle. O.M.A. registered and won the commission; the project, completed in 2004 to great acclaim, earned him partner status.

Along the way he moved to Manhattan to help run the New York operation. From the office on Varick Street, Mr. Prince-Ramus has been largely in charge of an 11-story vertical theater building that is part of a new Dallas Center for the Performing Arts.

The design places the theater's ancillary spaces above or below the auditorium, allowing the stage to morph into various configurations, including a standard proscenium theater with wings and a thrust format with the audience on three sides. The building's sides can be raised to provide views of the city skyline as a backdrop.

Mr. Prince-Ramus will continue overseeing this project, but the Dallas clients emphasize that the design work was completed by Mr. Koolhaas. Construction is to start this summer. Clearly the name Koolhaas matters to the Dallas clients, as does the name Norman Foster, the British architect who is designing an opera house for the same complex.

"We're going to have a Koolhaas-O.M.A. theater," said Bill Lively, president and chief executive of the Dallas Center for the Performing Arts Foundation. "Josh played a major role in that." He added, "We feel good that we got this building designed while they were partners."

Mr. Prince-Ramus has also overseen the Louisville project, now in schematic design, which includes a 50,000-square-foot contemporary art museum, offices, condominiums, a hotel and space for the University of Louisville's M.F.A. program. He said the ambitious project was fueled by the developers' desire to create a top-tier cultural institution downtown. "We start

with the art," he said, adding that he and Mr. Ella was personally approached on the \$380 million Louisville project. "We interviewed for it on our own merit," he said.

Steve Poe, a managing partner of Museum Plaza, said: "Our initial mission was to find the next up and coming architect, the guy who's cutting-edge. When Josh came to town with Erez, there was just immediate chemistry."

Mr. Poe and his colleagues said they were less concerned with having a name architect than having someone they could work with on re-making downtown Louisville. "The Koolhaas name obviously led us to the firm, but as I've learned over the years, you're working with individuals," Mr. Poe said, adding, "I think Josh is a celebrity in his own right."

AN established firm like O.M.A. affords young architects a haven where they can work without having to worry about corralling clients, building a reputation or paying the bills. Mr. Wood said he was mystified by Mr. Prince-Ramus's decision to go: "He was marketing himself as part of O.M.A., yet getting big projects."

When Mr. Prince-Ramus's holdover projects from O.M.A. are completed, he will have to make his own way.

"There was a period of transition and kind of floating," Mr. Wood said of his early days on his own. "It's going to take some time to separate what is the Ramus aesthetic and what is the vestigial O.M.A. It's important for him to figure that out and find his own design agenda."

Mr. Prince-Ramus could not articulate how his aesthetic might differ from that of Mr. Koolhaas and said he shares O.M.A.'s belief in the importance of research over form, approaching a project in terms of the programmatic and structural problems that need to be solved.

He and Mr. Ella also have to decide if they want to replicate the culture of O.M.A., which is famous for exhausting every possible option and working people hard. Mr. Ella studied architecture in the Netherlands and initially came to O.M.A. as a student to build models.

They decided to work together because "we just 'partner' in the real sense of the word," Mr. Ella said, "sharing everything."

Mr. Prince-Ramus said he has always had a high dose of self-discipline. As an undergraduate at Yale, where he studied philosophy and sculpture, he rose at 5:30 each morning to row and at Harvard Architecture School trained for the 1996 Olympic trials. (He was knocked out in the semifinals.) "Training and working gave me a lot of balance," he said. "I was more regimented than most people out of necessity."

Architecture and rowing are very similar, he added, because rowing "is a sport that relies a lot on natural talent to a degree, and after that it really has to do with determination, focus and discipline."

Meanwhile Mr. Koolhaas must now build his New York office all over again. To some extent he has had a bumpy relationship with New York: his design for an addition to the Whitney Museum fell through; a downtown hotel for Ian Schrager didn't work out.

Yet Mr. Koolhaas said he was committed to keeping a presence in the city. And he insisted that he was not bitter about his apprentices leaving him. "I've tried to be philosophical about every parting," he said. "If people had stayed, I would be surrounded by people who now would be 55. It forces me to remain fresh."

The architects Rem Koolhaas, left, and Joshua Prince-Ramus, right, renderings of the Wylie Theater in Dallas, top, and the Museum Plaza in Louisville, Ky.

At left, a rendering of the Olympic Village designed by the Dutch architecture firm MVRDV.

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MVRDV