FALL ARTS GUIDE | 78 HOTTEST BARS

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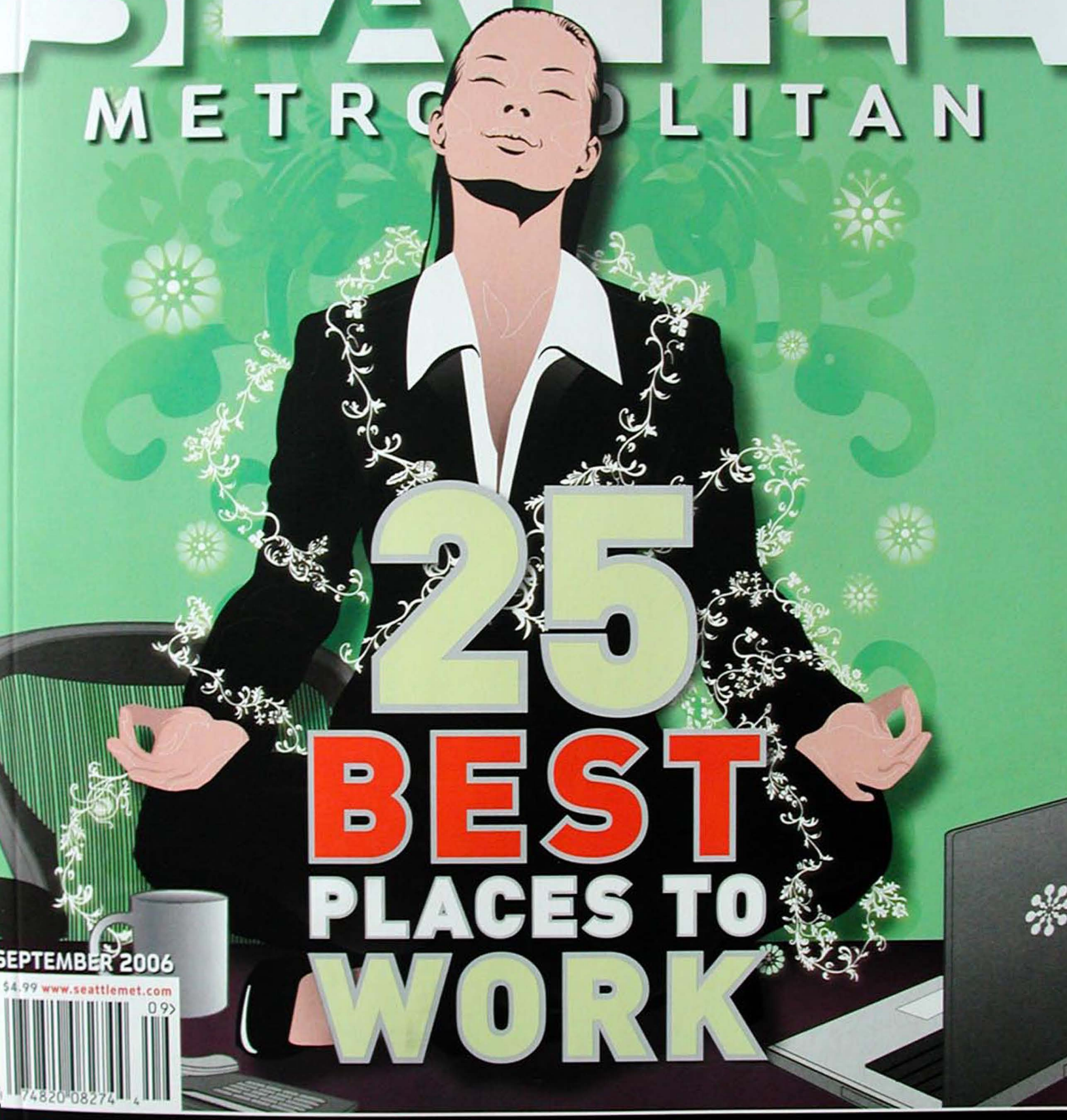

25 BEST PLACES TO WORK

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Indiana Jones of stone design

Back to school with an inner-city principal

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ALL ROADS LEAD TO HOME

INITIATED IN THE SECRETS OF MASONRY IN SIENA AND INSPIRED BY ANCIENT CHINESE TOWNS, RICHARD RHODES ETCHES STORIES IN STONE FOR HIS CLIENTS' HOMES.

BY DAVID LASKIN

To say that Richard Rhodes earns his living selling stone is a bit like saying Rem Koolhaas is in the construction business. Rhodes, the 45-year-old founder and president of Rhodes Architectural Stone, is our local Renaissance mason—a literate, thoughtful, ambitious, visionary artist who happens to express himself through granite, limestone, and sandstone. A Rhodes wall, whether it's surrounding an overlook on Cayuse Pass or sheathing a Kirkland lakeside mansion, is like a mosaic in four dimensions—or maybe five: In addition to texture, color, mass, and weight, every stone has a story that continues to be shaped by time and place. "Working in stone," Rhodes told me recently in the high-ceilinged stone conference room of his Capitol Hill office, "is a gift and a privilege. You're free to express the highest aspiration of your time—and you're working with a material that will outlive you, and very likely outlive your civilization."

This may sound like a lofty mission statement for a career largely devoted to realizing the shelter fantasies of billionaires and celebrities. (Though Rhodes doesn't divulge their names, according to press reports clients include Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey, and Oracle founder Larry Ellison.) But it made perfect sense as I stood beside a retired Wall Street wizard's 36,000-square-foot (give or take a few thousand) palace under construction in Greenwich, Connecticut, and ran my hands and eyes over the gorgeous earth-toned antique limestone that Rhodes's company has imported from abandoned Chinese villages. It was lunch hour, the masons were playing soccer under a grove of rustling maples on the 47-acre former farm, and the sun had just burst through clouds in the humid southern New England sky to ignite a slow, hard fire in the five-story-high

stone walls. "There's 22,000 square feet of stone on the surface of this house," Rhodes's project manager Andrew Grisafi told me as I watched the limestone change color from shades of gray to bisque and sage and honey, "another 5,000 square feet on the gate house, and a couple of thousand more is going into the garden walls and service structure. And there will be 15,000 square feet of pavers, along with various fountains, rills, and garden features. It's one of the largest stone houses currently under construction in America—and one of the largest ever built."

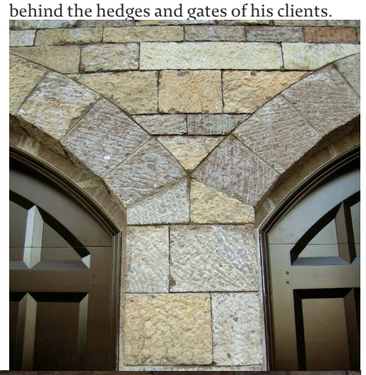
Grisafi gestured toward the arch that surrounds the front entrance like the blades of a fan bent into a semicircle. On the architect's drawing this was just a schematic placeholder—some blue pencil lines capping a doorway. It was Rhodes who supplied what he calls "the exterior vocabulary"—adding the detailing, deciding how the stonework of the arch would relate to the courses of stone that abut it, determining the design and placement of the plinths, lintels, sills, and eave blocks that articulate the rest of the facade—and every one of the scores of facades that clad this structure. Owners Steven and Diana Steinman had instructed their architects to model their home on the stately Edwardian country houses by British master builder Sir Edwin Lutyens; but the look of every square inch of the project's stone skin, down to the size and shape of each individual stone, came out of Rhodes's office in Seattle.

I'd seen a few sheets of the plans in Seattle so I had some idea of the scale and ambition of the multimillion-dollar project—but nothing prepared me for how beautifully the weathered limestone expressed the crisp, classic design. I let my eye roam from stone to stone—each was subtly different in hue and shape and thirst for light, and yet they all melded richly together like threads in an old tapestry. Rhodes has found a way to make a timeless material live again, and the Steinmans have given him a colossal stage to act on.

"Richard is an artist in stone," says Brad Jones, past president of the board of trustees of the Tacoma Art Museum who served on the building committee that presided over the 2002–03 commission of the granite *Wave* that Rhodes created for the courtyard of architect Antoine Predock's new building. "He has a unique understanding of the properties of stone and a unique ability to see the artistic and aesthetic potential of the material."

Rhodes's *Wave* does indeed look like water sloshing up one of the dark glass walls of the interior courtyard. "When it was first installed, people thought that there was a wave machine in the stones," says Janeanne Upp, former director of the museum. "Everyone loved it right from the start. They'd walk in and go 'wow' when they saw the Chihuly installation, and there would be another 'wow' with Richard's stone garden. People have always been drawn to it." Created from granite originally used as road pavers in the Fujian region of China, the *Wave* was intended as a kind of visual palate cleanser, a respite from the high-intensity art inside. But in fact it's a stimulating work of art in its own right—a petrified abstract garden, at once static and kinetic, fixed and breaking, utterly still and constantly changing in the light and weather of Puget Sound. It's also one of the few Rhodes commissions that you and I can actually see: Most of his local work, and there's a lot of it, is hidden behind the hedges and gates of his clients.

THE OWNERS WANTED TO MODEL THEIR HOME ON STATELY **EDWARDIAN COUNTRY HOUSES**; BUT THE LOOK OF EVERY SQUARE INCH OF ITS STONE SKIN, DOWN TO THE SIZE AND SHAPE OF EACH INDIVIDUAL STONE, CAME OUT OF RHODES'S OFFICE IN SEATTLE.



Pluralist by design On this crisp Greenwich, Connecticut, mansion (a work-in-progress), Rhodes applied multihued antique Yangtze limestone. The 22,000 square feet of stone on the house's surface was salvaged from abandoned villages in China.

BOTH PAGES: RICHARD RHODES/COURTESY RAS

You think of people in the masonry business as rough around the edges," Grisafi told me, "but Richard is very cosmopolitan. He's got a real passion for what he's doing, and he has a way of drawing out excitement from his clients. Then there's the whole Indiana Jones persona—adventuring around the world, getting his hands dirty, researching the products and the process."

The Indiana Jones bit made me laugh. Rhodes does indeed have a touch of derring-do—he's utterly charming, boyishly handsome, low-key, hyperarticulate, eager to please, ready to smile. He's also a good listener and good company. He loves nothing better than to chat about his five young daughters (two sets of twins, ten and four years old, and an eight-year-old), his masters swimming workout, his laid-back family vacations on Decatur Island, in the San Juans. Rhodes's reply to my rambling speculation about why the same piece of marble looks so different in Italy than in Seattle: "It's all the wine you drink on vacation."

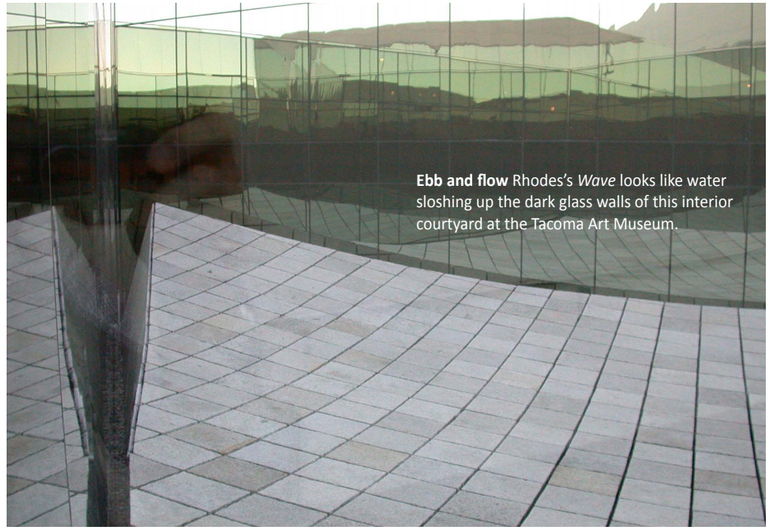
Rhodes is definitely the company's rainmaker, but he's also a team player in the creative process. On the major projects, like the Steinman house, he focuses on what he calls "the conceptual design," roughing out the big picture and determining the fundamental style and approach, and then his staff of engineers and technicians "convert that design intent into hard-line specifications capable of being manufactured." He currently employs a staff of 19 in the 8,000-square-foot Seattle office, which is housed in a circa 1909 former livery stable not far from the radio towers atop Capitol Hill. Rhodes lives with his wife and kids about two miles away in a big rambling house in North Capitol Hill, and he walks to work every day to clear his head. In the office he divides his time among e-mail, phone calls, the inevitable meetings—and usually about two hours a day of sketching. "I punctuate this office routine with intense travel—around the country and the world," he told me. "Last spring I was on the road for six weeks and clocked 40,000 miles."

So how did Indiana Jones end up being Seattle's rock star? "I started as an actor," Rhodes explains, launching into his well-rehearsed life story. Raised in Saratoga, outside of San Francisco, Rhodes caught the theater bug in high school and enrolled in acting school in Southern California, with a year's hiatus to study at the University of Washington. In 1980, when he was 20, he went to England to do graduate work at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. In London, Rhodes embarked on a thesis on ritualized male behaviors in Medieval drama and concluded that he needed to experience these behaviors firsthand. And so he traveled to Siena, Italy, and went undercover as an aspiring apprentice in the stonemason's guild—a bastion of Medieval masculinity if ever there was one.

"The Sienese masons were very suspicious at first," Rhodes recalls, "and they put me through a four-month Sisyphean trial of hauling sand and lime and cement for 14 hours a day." Thin to begin with, Rhodes shed 25 pounds and his hair began to fall out. He stayed sane by running through entire Shakespeare plays in his mind that he had memorized in London. Finally, after four months, the masons took pity on the half-dead American and initiated Rhodes as an apprentice. "It was like going from being a dog to an adopted son," he says. "They gave me a paper hat made from a cement bag—I still have it—and when I walked home at night all the women over 40 would call out to me, 'Eh, *muratore*!' [mason]. It was like winning the Palio," he says, referring to the famous horse race that electrifies the Tuscan city twice each summer. From the Sienese masons he absorbed the "Sacred Rules of Bond Work"—ancient principles governing the geometric relations, core attributes, correct proportions, and expressive qualities of building stone—along with a string of Technicolor Italian swear words.

Rhodes was made a journeyman in the mason's guild after 14 months as an apprentice. He departed Siena in 1981, having spent a total of 18 months with the masons, returned to the Bay Area, got married, and tried to make it as an actor. "Not until I left Italy did I realize how profound this experience had been," he muses. Three years later, with a $1,200 advance on his first credit card, Rhodes quit auditioning and started his first company—Rhodes Masonry. Then in 1986 he moved to Seattle. "The Bay Area already had a number of high-quality masonry firms," he says. "I realized I'd be an old man by the time I got the bigger jobs there. I'd lived in Seattle for a year and I'd seen that it was a wood culture with a weak stone tradition. I figured I could really make a mark here."

Rhodes landed a commission to create eight "paintings" in Pennsylvania blue stone on the floor of a downtown penthouse belonging to one of the Nordstroms—and after that the work came steadily. At the other end of the spectrum are the relatively humble folks who have hired Rhodes's company to design a driveway, patio, bathroom, wine cellar, or fireplace surround.



Ebb and flow Rhodes's *Wave* looks like water sloshing up the dark glass walls of this interior courtyard at the Tacoma Art Museum.

STONE PALETTE

RICHARD RHODES SHARES HIS THOUGHTS ON COMMON APPLICATIONS OF UNCOMMON STONE FOR THE HOME, INSIDE AND OUT.

1. Application: pool 2-inch tiles cut from scraps of road pavers from China. Rhodes says, *"It's like swimming in a cloisonné jewel box."*

2. Application: exterior veneer Salvaged from abandoned villages in China's Three Gorges region
"Since the stones are taken from buildings of many different ages, there is an incredible variation in color and texture. To me there is something exciting about building with recycled materials and giving them new life."

3. Application: fireplace surround A warm almond-colored limestone with grayish undertones
"For a fireplace the material must be subtle and never upstage the hostess."

4. Application: landscape retaining wall A toast-colored stone with a warm glow
"Walls are barriers by definition, but building them in warm inviting materials lessens the impact and the obstacle."

5. Application: fountain A beautifully textured material with small egg-shaped fossils embedded in the stone
"Fountains, like fireplaces, need to be as compelling when the water is not flowing as when they're in full function."

6. Application: driveway A black limestone with white veining
"After all this is a roadway, but the color and texture work together to hide oil stains and tire marks."

TOP, RICHARD RHODES; BOTTOM, EDEN PALMER. BOTH COURTESY RAS

Written in stone This Mercer Island home has Rhodes written all over it—from the fireplace made of antique pewter granite and Ankar firebrick (left) to an antique salmon granite patio bordered with golden granite (above).

Indiana Jones Rhodes The designer (above, in his office) punctuates his Seattle schedule with intense bouts of travel abroad. (below) His father snapped this photo of Rhodes inspecting a veneer with local fabricators in China.

"YOU'RE WORKING WITH A MATERIAL THAT WILL OUTLIVE YOU, AND VERY LIKELY OUTLIVE YOUR CIVILIZATION."

From the start he was clear that he had no interest in constructing freeway sound walls or sheathing Fred Meyer outlets. "I always viewed stone as an expressive medium," he says, "and I was determined to go right into the most expressive projects. My stone of choice was high-density limestone, because it's warm and deeply textured and it quickly acquires a soft patina from wind and weather and acid rain."

It was the discovery of a vast cache of this very stone that changed everything for Rhodes. In 1998 he visited the Three Gorges region of China's Yangtze River, where one of the largest hydroelectric projects in history will ultimately inundate 1,600 to 1,700 ancient villages and displace between 1.1 and 1.9 million people in an area larger than Los Angeles. When Rhodes learned that these villages—built over hundreds of years out of the beautiful high-density limestone he adores—were being abandoned by the Chinese government, he recognized the business opportunity before him.

Not just business—but art and history too. In the course of a millennium or more of daily use and weathering, these stones have taken the deep imprint of human civilization. Generations wept, prayed, bled, and loved among these stones. Every scored and pitted surface holds a thousand intimate narratives. "In our country, especially on the West Coast, there is an aching for history," Rhodes told a reporter for MSNBC in 2003. "And these stones have it. They have a life."

It took two years of negotiation, but eventually Rhodes and the Chinese came to an agreement that allowed him to purchase limestone from entire doomed villages and finance factories in China where local masons cut and carved according to specifications made in Seattle. The system has evolved over the years and now hums along with smooth Web-based efficiency. The Seattle office transmits drawings to China over the Internet, and the Chinese e-mail back photographic progress reports. Currently Rhodes Architectural Stone has 15 full-time employees in China to coordinate the acquisition, fabrication, and transportation of the stone. Every project is fully assembled and photographed in China, and once the Seattle staff signs off, the stones are numbered, crated in reverse order, and shipped across the Pacific. American masons unpack the stones on site and fit them together like a giant puzzle—only a puzzle with a detailed key.

Rhodes fervently believes that his business reflects what's best about the global economy. "All the fabrication is done where labor is most affordable. All the drawing and specification is done in Seattle, where the quality and the wage of knowledge workers is much higher. We're using twentieth-century technology to drive twelfth-century handwork. There are two factories near the Three Gorges dam project where all the salvaged Yangtze limestone is fabricated, and we have 13 other factories spread around China. Not only is the product cheaper than if it were fabricated here, but the process is faster even though the factory is 10,000 miles away. This, in my opinion, is a home run—a classic example of doing good by doing well."

Rhodes acknowledges that the Three Gorges dam is a tragedy for the people of the region, the environment, and the civilization that has flourished here for thousands of years, but he says "it is a fact, and to ignore the fact that it's happening would be magical thinking. I'm trying to make the best out of what might be considered a tragic situation." Steven and Diana Steinman, the clients on Rhodes's largest job involving Three Gorges limestone, have no problem with the provenance of the material or Rhodes's handling of it. "The dam was well on its way and villages had already been flooded when our job started," says Diana. "Richard only uses the top three inches of the limestone and he is giving back the rest so that the Chinese can use it to build new homes. He has provided many jobs and instruction to very talented Chinese masons."

TOP: MELISSA O'HEARN. BOTTOM, RICHARD L. RHODES/COURTESY RAS

RICHARD RHODES/COURTESY RAS

At the moment, Rhodes has too much momentum to linger over the moral tangles of balancing human rights issues with a once-in-a-lifetime business opportunity in the global economy. His company has a couple of multi-year, multimillion-dollar jobs in various stages of completion, including an elaborate three-and-a-half story "ruin" designed as the centerpiece for a soaring mowdernist house on 8,000 acres in Colorado, and a compound of houses on a private beach in Kona, on Hawaii's Big Island. Rhodes's book, *Stone Expression*, about the art and craft and history of stonework around the world, is due out in fall 2007. "I'm just beginning to do my best work," Rhodes said as we strolled through a pocket park clad in golden granite at the intersection of 20th & Madison that his company designed, supplied, and installed.

After 20 years in Seattle, Rhodes retains a touch of California cool—the graceful insouciance masking fierce ambition and competitive drive. But, as an artist and entrepreneur, he's also alert to the mix of beauty, talent, and money that make this town special. "I travel the world and I'm always relieved to come back," Rhodes says. "We live in a world-class landscape."

He should know.

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