

*Shigeru Ban*

by Shigeru Ban

Forward by Emilio Ambasz

Introduction by Shigeru Ban

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*Reviewed by Paul Devlin*

Shigeru Ban is a young architect whose enchanting structures are the topic of this beautiful book. Ban has pioneered the use of incredibly strong recycled paper tubes as building material. Among his captivating paper tube structures are *Paper Arbor* and *Paper Church*, as well as *Paper Arch*, a massive structure which covered the sculpture garden at MoMA in the summer of 2000. A larger paper arch was used to support Ban's breathtaking *Japan Pavilion* at the Hanover Expo in Germany in 2000. One of Ban's first uses of recycled paper tubes was in the Alvar Aalto exhibit at MoMA in 1986, when the tubes were used to reduce the costs and waste of using wood. Since then, Ban has developed the art of building with recycled tubes into an extremely very fine one.

Recently, Ban has used recycled paper tubes in working with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Before Ban came along, when earthquakes and disasters occurred, the United Nations would distribute aluminum poles to the refugees, who were supposed to be building tents with them. Understandably, the destitute refugees would then sell the aluminum poles, which brought a high price in most of Africa. Then they would use saplings from the local forests as tent poles. This was causing deforestation in many parts of Africa. Ban's idea was to use recycled paper tubes instead of aluminum poles, thus saving the U.N. money and saving forests. The tubes are made of fiber so dense that they cannot burn, and they are coated to make them waterproof as well. Yet this episode in Ban's career, bright as it is, does not tell a fraction of the story, and is only mentioned twice: briefly in the introduction to the book, and there are two pages about his emergency shelters toward the end.

This book is not a chronicle of his work with the U.N., although that might make a good book too, but is full of magnificent photographs (mostly by Hiroyuki Hirai) and diagrams of Ban's stunningly elegant, disarming, subdued, cool, and calm structures, built from 1986-2000, along with brief but informative and often technical commentary by Ban. He is certainly working out of the rich Japanese tradition, although he received his degree from Cooper Union in the 1980's and surely has western influences. Also included in this book are the furniture and exhibitions he's designed, his early houses, certain case study houses, and his public buildings.

Among Ban's most famous buildings are *Library of a Poet* and *Curtain Wall House*. *Library of a Poet*, built in Zushi, Kanagawa Prefecture in 1991 was featured in *The New York Times Magazine* several years ago (1998?). The bookshelves themselves double as the walls of this light, clean structure. The building is freestanding on the property of a Japanese poet who has remained anonymous in connection with the building. If this book has any conceivable flaw, it is that more pictures of *Library of a Poet* were not included. *Curtain Wall House*, which is featured on the cover of the book, comes out of the Japanese tradition of using screens and curtains as walls. It is a house in Tokyo elevated from street level by columns, with the two sides of the house facing the street using *huge* white curtains as their walls. (There is a set of glazed doors which can be used instead of curtains in cold weather.)

Some of Ban's other unique buildings included in this book are the magnificent *House with a Double Roof* ("on a sloping site overlooking Lake Yamanaka" where frequent snowfall demands strong roofs), *Furniture House 1, 2, and 3* (each of which use specially manufactured furniture for structural support), and *Hanegi Forest* (an apartment complex in Tokyo, which was built around 10 trees without damaging them). Another interesting structure, is his *Paper Dome* built for a construction site in Japan in 1998. *Paper Dome* was commissioned by a contractor so that work could "proceed even in inclement weather, but the structure had

to be simple enough for the crew to spontaneously assemble by themselves". It was of course, and photos show a large amount of wood protected from ubiquitous snow by the substantial dome.

Ban was a member of the Rafael Vinoly's THINK Group, which submitted a design for re-building the World Trade Center site. Their design for a World Cultural Center, with two lattice work towers as the centerpiece was a finalist, but did not win. If it had won, we might have seen Ban's first permanent structure in the United States, indeed outside Japan. But do not expect to find any permanent buildings built from recycled paper tubes in the United States, or anywhere outside Japan, any time soon. All of Ban's permanent paper tube structures exist in Japan, where he has to get special (often not easily obtained) permission from local zoning boards to build them, although he says the permission is becoming easier to obtain over time. Maybe someday, we will see a house or public building, or several houses and buildings, designed by Shigeru Ban (whether built of paper tubes or not) in the United States. Until then, those of us who cannot travel to Japan any time soon will have to make do with this wonderful book.

For Further Interest:

*Immaterial/Ultramaterial: Architecture, Design, and Materials*. Edited by Toshiko Mori. George Braziller/Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2002. \$23.50, paperback. (This book explores the uses of new materials in architecture and construction, and contains an educational interview with Ban [and other architects and some scientists], as well plenty of other interesting information.)