



**Top, from left:** The founder of Shigeru Ban Architects. Woven bamboo, which inspired the roof structure for the Centre Pompidou–Metz in France, 2010. Photography: courtesy of Shigeru Ban Architects.

**Bottom:** The Metz museum's protruding gallery pods. Photography: Roland Halbe.

**Opposite top, from left:** "Alvar Aalto: Furniture and Glass" at Tokyo's Axis Gallery, 1986; photography: Yukio Shimizu. A temporary elementary school in Chengdu, China, 2008; photography: Li Jun. **Opposite bottom:** The laminated-timber roof structure at the Metz museum. Photography: Roland Halbe.



# Shigeru Ban

text: craig kellig

**To truly understand** Shigeru Ban, you have to dig into his quarter-century love affair with paper tubes. Architectural innovation, as he likes to note, often follows the discovery of a surprising material. In his 20s, after studying at New York's Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, he began to experiment with lengths of ordinary cardboard tubing as if they were noble planks of solid wood. Compared with actual timber, however, the tubing cost little and weighed less. It was also spectacularly earth-friendly. With the very first of what he terms his "paper architecture" projects, a lyrical Alvar Aalto exhibition at a

Tokyo gallery, he cleverly proved it was possible to avoid "wasting precious material for a temporary installation."

Skeptics, conceding on short-term advantages, might still wonder whether something so improbable and ephemeral as cardboard could endure. In response, he contrasts cardboard with concrete, which can seem solid until it crumbles suddenly in an earthquake. That example is particularly pertinent to Ban, whose paper architecture has come to the rescue several times for disaster relief. Following the earthquake in Kobe, Japan, he designed a paper-tube church built in just five weeks ➤

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by 160 volunteers. And he responded immediately when *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member Calvin Tsao reached out for help following the recent earthquake in Chengdu, China. "It immediately hit me that we needed someone like Shigeru. He's really a great sport," Tsao says. The connection ultimately resulted in Ban designing a temporary elementary school.

He even used paper tubes to build a studio for his own staff on a terrace at the Centre Pompidou in Paris after being hired as part of the design team for the museum's first satellite location, the Centre Pompidou-Metz. (And deciding that he could not afford office rent in the City of Light.) When he disassembled the studio, it became part of the museum's permanent collection.

Ban delivers this news, with the minimum possible drama, while sitting in an apartment at the pristine Metal Shutter Houses building that he designed for a New York site near modish structures by Gehry Partners and Ateliers Jean Nouvel. The exterior of the Metal Shutter ➤

**Left:** *The Nomadic Museum on its New York stop, 2004 to 2005; photography: Michael Moran. Right, from top:* *Imai Hospital's day-care center, Odate, Japan, 2001. Tokyo's Curtain Wall House, 1995. Photography: Hiroyuki Hirai.*







**Top:** A computer rendering of the Metal Shutter Houses apartments in New York, 2010; image: Dbox. **Center top:** Shigeru Ban's temporary Paris studio, 2004. Photography: Didier Boy de la Tour. **Center bottom:** Shigeru Ban, Complete Works 1985-2010, published by Taschen. **Bottom:** The Papertainer Museum at Seoul Olympic Park in South Korea, 2006. Photography: courtesy of Designhouse.

Houses is defined by perforated steel security gates that roll down at the push of a button, transforming them from purely practical to improbably poetic. "I hate to be influenced by a fashionable style," he says.

His speaking voice is soft enough that listeners often have to lean in to catch his comments. There is, however, a lighter side to this serious man. Take it from his New York business partner, Dean Maltz, who also practices independently as Dean Maltz Architect. Maltz has known Ban since they were students at the Cooper Union, and Maltz later pitched in on Ban's Nomadic Museum when it stopped at a pier in the Hudson River en route from Venice to Los Angeles.

Over the course of three years, the traveling structure was built and rebuilt by stacking shipping containers like bricks to form walls, then topping them with paper-tube trusses. Identical containers were available in both Italy and the U.S., so the installation could be re-created rather than transported—talk about free shipping. Or consider the drily named Curtain Wall House. Instead of the expected facade of glass and steel, wind-whipped curtains billowed from edge of the roof. It turns out that, beneath the Zen calm, Ban is a secret wit who loves a sophisticated joke. 🍷

