



Tubular Cells

SHIGERU BAN TURNED THE ARCHITECTURE WORLD ON ITS SIDE BY UTILISING PAPER TO CREATE INNOVATIVE STRUCTURES. HELEN RUSSELL MEETS A TRUE 21ST-CENTURY PIONEER

TOKYO IS A CITY where modernity meets tradition and a place where people dare to be different. At its heart lies Ginza, Japan's oldest commercial thoroughfare and the location for Shigeru Ban's latest feat. The award-winning international architect has created an environmentally aware, gleaming white monolith in the centre of urban Tokyo. It is very stylish and supremely cool, but Ban's not interested in fashion: "It has to mean something and be a development," he says of his work. In stark contrast with the white-washed walls stands the feline-like Ban, dressed in his trademark black. At 50, he is still young for his profession, and he has already singled himself out as an architect of the future.

Born in 1957 in Tokyo, Ban studied architecture in the US for five years, before establishing his own agency in Tokyo and developing his unique outlook. "It has become the fashion to be environmental but I started working this way in 1986 before anyone else was using the tag, purely because I hate to waste material." Ban was inspired by the desire to solve problems. After experimenting with different materials in his early years, he began to think about how wasteful it was to use wood. Instead, Ban developed simple A-frame houses, with partition walls made from recycled paper tubes rather than wood. It was cheaper and

there was no waste. His planet-friendly designs took some getting used to in the architectural community but Ban's innovation soon paid off.

In 1994, there were more than two million refugees in Rwanda in substandard shelters. Camps were created by cutting down trees to build rudimentary tents, and the left over wood was used to make fires. But the deforestation began causing floods. After seeing news reports, Ban thought he might be able to help. He approached the High Commissioner of the United Nations and proposed using a new kind of shelter made from his cardboard tube structures. They were a

success and Ban created better living conditions for millions.

After the Kobe earthquake in 1995, Ban made temporary housing from cardboard tubes using a simple design that could be easily assembled and reassembled. The same year, he was made consultant to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Ban went on to be a finalist in the competition to rebuild Ground Zero in New York and helped disaster relief efforts in Turkey and Sri Lanka. More recently, Ban was responsible for the new Tokyo Nomadic Museum created entirely from recycled cargo containers.

He never goes anywhere without his sketchbook and gets some of his best ideas cruising at 36,000 feet (not great for his carbon footprint, but we'll let him off this once). "I have to travel all around the world and it's in the air that I

AT A
GLANCE

provenance
Tokyo

EDUCATION

Southern
California

Institute of
Architecture and
Cooper Union
School of
Architecture

FAMOUS FOR
Innovative
structures built
from paper

ON MODERNISM

"For years, we Asian people have typically felt that Westernism equalled Modernism. But, this century, we are finding that we can use a lot of the old traditions in a new way. Easternism might turn out to be the new Modernism."

feel really free. I don't belong to the time zone of any country. I know I'll be busy the moment I arrive but, in the air, I can relax."

Ban is also inspired by the design and engineering he sees around him when flying. "I often get ideas from the structure of the plane," he says. "The other day, I was transfixed by an interesting beaker in an airport – I am always watching out for things like that."

Inspiring it may be, but being constantly on the go can have its drawbacks. "Some years ago I built my dream house, 90 minutes outside Tokyo, made entirely from pape," he says. "It wasn't cheap to be green so we saved to build it for ages. Now, I can afford it, but I'm working so hard that I have no time to use it. I built it to go to for the weekend but I now have no weekends."

He flies to Tokyo twice a month to teach at the university and also has an office in New York. It's a nomadic life but Ban is a global child. He was born in Japan, educated in the US and now lives in Paris with his graphic designer wife. "I like experiencing other cultures," he says. "The Japanese have always been interested in travelling and learning about new things and ideas. It may be a cliché, but I don't think there is anything original in Japan; we just copy things and do them better, then sell them back to other countries!"

Ban's refreshing honesty isn't restricted to his

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own country. He is scathing of working practices in the US. "It's such a restrictive place to work. They have so many rules and liability procedures. Japanese architects are spoiled; they let you do anything you want here. Especially if you have won awards or are famous!"

And he's certainly had free rein with his latest project, the Nicolas G Hayek Centre. The centre is the new headquarters for the Swatch Group in Tokyo's famous Ginza strip, and a watch aficionado's dream. The staggering complex houses seven small boutiques and caters for prestige brands such as Jacquet Droz and Blancpain, as well as more affordable names such as Tissot and Swatch. On entering the building, visitors wander into what look like market stalls – one for each Swatch brand. Each brand has its own specially designed roofless hydraulic elevator, which carries visitors from the ground floor to one of the exhibition halls.

A vast wall of greenery that runs from top to bottom flanks the 14-storey building, creating a new take on the idea of a hanging garden. Each



above
Ban with an
intricate model of
one of his
environmentally
aware creations

level has large, open balconies that allow the natural flow of air, obviating the need for air-conditioning. "I didn't want to depend on air con, and it's much nicer to feel a breeze," he explains.

Ban's palate of green materials extends to the magnificent fifth floor and its Jardin du Temps, which includes slate fountains, tables made from Ban's cardboard tube structure and seating areas constructed from rocks in chicken wire, protecting the roots of the young trees that appear to sprout from the floor. "I wanted to include some greenery for the workers when they come out for lunch and tea time," Ban says simply.

So, is he pleased with his latest creation? He won't be drawn but gives the impression that he knows he's created something fabulous. "For years," he says, "we Asian people have typically felt that Westernism equalled modernism. But, this century, we are finding that we can use a lot of the old traditions in a new way. Easternism might turn out to be the new modernism." Whatever the new path for global design, you can bet that Shigeru Ban will be at the forefront. **T**