

# art on paper



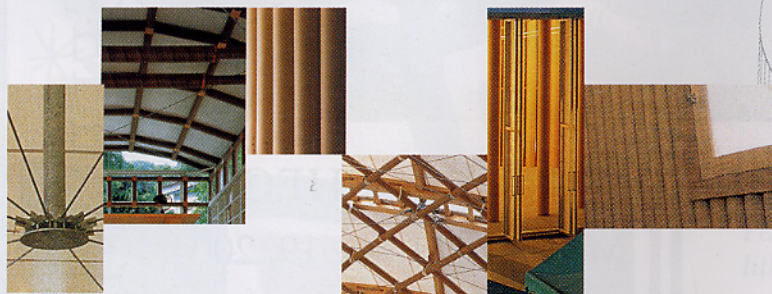
## **Shigeru Ban's Paper Architecture**

**Mangold's Column Paintings**  
**Parmigianino at the Frick**  
**Mona Hatoum's First Prints**  
**Mike Kelley the Curator**





# An Interview with Shigeru Ban



The architect discusses his new commission for the Centre Pompidou in Metz, the paper-tube buildings for which he is best known, and the role of drawing in his work

by Brett Littman

In March 2004 I met with Japanese architect Shigeru Ban to discuss his architectural practice. The past several years have been extremely busy ones for Ban. He has participated in competitions and building projects around the world—including the competition for the World Trade Center site, in which he was a finalist as part of the Think architectural group—and assisted Matilda McQuaid on her monograph of his work published by Phaidon in 2003. Ban is probably best known for his refugee housing made from paper tubes, including those built in Kobe (1995), Rwanda (1999), and India (2001) as part of humanitarian efforts to provide people with shelter after natural disasters. Ban's use of unusual building materials such as recycled paper and plastic challenges notions about the permanence and stability of such materials and the structures made with them. When we met, Ban had recently returned from a visit to Dia: Beacon.

**Brett Littman:** What did you think of Dia: Beacon?

**Shigeru Ban:** It was amazing. You know, I am working on the new Centre Pompidou in Metz in eastern France right now [with fellow architects Jean de Gastines and Philip Gumuchdjian]. Dia: Beacon really encourages me to make a great space for art as well as for the public. Curators and artists are saying that they do not need a famous architect to build a museum; they just need a simple, not overly designed contemporary building. I have to prove that an architect can do something better.

**B.L.:** I think it is a misconception that Dia: Beacon is such a pure, undesigned space. Robert Irwin's hand is in all of the details. These are easy to miss, but architectural choices are in the windows, in the landscaping, and the pathways through the museum. Did you find Dia: Beacon too reverential . . . is it too much like a temple for the artists?

**S.B.:** No, not at all. The proportion of the space is right for the



Opposite page (drawing):  
*Paper House*, axonometric view of structure, S-shaped arrangement of 108 paper tubes imposed on a 10x10-meter floor plan, 1995. Lake Yamanaka, Yamanashi, Japan. All images courtesy of Phaidon Press Limited.

Right: *Paper Church*, interior hall with ellipse-shaped space constructed of paper tubes, corrugated polycarbonate panels, and P.V.C. membrane ceiling, 1995. Nagata, Kobe, Japan. Photograph by Hiroyuki Hirai.



art. The natural light is nice, and it was amazing to see the Dan Flavin pieces without artificial overhead lighting. I think that they close the gallery at dusk, so they never have to turn on the overhead lighting. You know, the art looks different depending on the climate, the time of day, the season. Dia: Beacon allows the viewer to experience art in a more variable setting, which I like very much.

**B.L.:** What are some of things that you have had to think about in designing the Centre Pompidou in Metz?

**S.B.:** One of the main things we have to consider is that museums in general are becoming more interested in having the ability to show large-scale sculpture. One of the main goals of this project is to allow the Pompidou to have the ability to show installations of works from their collection. The

Centre Pompidou building in Paris is good but has serious limitations for the curators. The basic structure of the Pompidou in Metz consists of three sloped, intersecting, rectangular forms. These are proscribed spaces and will be not only climate-controlled for the art but will also be flexible to accommodate different-size artworks. Underneath these volumes, there will be space to exhibit art either in low-light or dark galleries, or outside.

**B.L.:** What will the main material be for this building?

**S.B.:** Steel and plywood. It is based on a traditional woven Chinese hat.

**B.L.:** Do you often find that you base your architectural designs or thinking on found objects?

**S.B.:** Well, I find many ideas from things around me, but I can-





*Paper House*, interior (with kitchen area at left), permanent building constructed of paper tubes, wood joints, and wood flooring, 1995. Lake Yamanaka, Yamanashi, Japan. All photographs by Hiroyuki Hirai.



*Library of a Poet*, permanent building constructed of paper tubes, wood joints, prefabricated bookshelves, steel rods, and wood flooring, 1991. Zushi, Kanagawa, Japan.

not say they directly affect my architecture. In the case of the paper tubes, they were lying around my office and I thought that they might have some other use. Also, the tubes were difficult to break by hand, so I started thinking that they might be good for building.

**B.L.:** In recent interviews, you have said that the role of the architect is to build usable structures, not monuments. I think this is an interesting statement.

**S.B.:** No, I have never said that I don't want to make monuments. For instance, I was very happy to do the Paper Church in Kobe. The people loved it, so I left it, and it has lasted for eight years. It went from something temporary to something permanent. It became a monument because the people really wanted it and felt that it was an important architectural structure in Kobe.

**B.L.:** Are any of the P.T.S. [paper-tube structure] houses still standing in Kobe?

**S.B.:** No, only one that is used as a storage facility for the Paper Church. There are, however, several in India that are still being used.

**B.L.:** How long do you think they will last?

**S.B.:** They are permanent and can last as long as they are needed. The tubes I used for the paper houses were 4 milli-

meters thick. One could make them even sturdier by increasing the thickness of the walls. I think it is important to note that in the Western world architects often associate masonry and stone with permanence. I want to make it clear that these P.T.S. buildings have a long lifetime, as the tubes can at any time be exchanged if they get damaged, and this will not undermine the integrity of the structure.

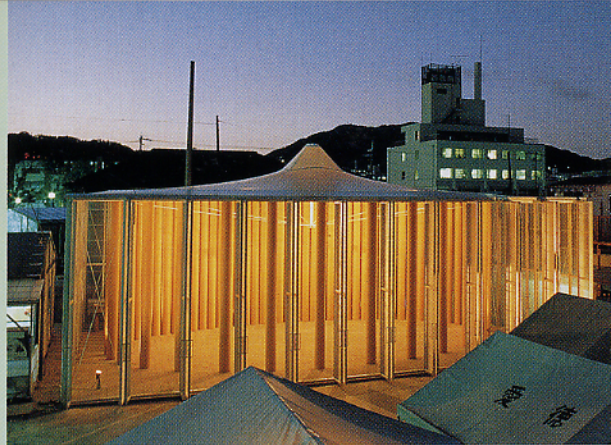
**B.L.:** Have you ever created your own handmade paper? Would you consider using paper sheets as a material for building?

**S.B.:** I am not interested in using paper everywhere. The tubes are useful in certain situations, such as when the structure is designed to be temporary.

**B.L.:** What then is the future of the P.T.S. buildings?

**S.B.:** The P.T.S. buildings are appropriate for simple, temporary structures. I recycle all of the paper tubes when a project is finished. Of course, most building materials can be recycled, but paper is quite easy to use again. First we take cardboard boxes as the raw material for the tubes, and then we macerate them and create the tubes. When a project is done, we can then use the tubes for another project or recycle them into new tubes. I try to take advantage of the materials the way they are. Paper is not as strong as wood, but it has other advantages. If I want to reinforce some-





*Paper Church*, 1995. Nagata, Kobe, Japan.



*Paper Log House*, living space in a completed log house, temporary relief shelter constructed of paper tubes, sponge tape, plywood, beer crates filled with sandbags, and a P.V.C. tent membrane, 1995. Nagata, Kobe, Japan.



*Japan Pavilion, Expo 2000*, upper level of main exhibition space, with roof constructed of paper tubes, fabric tape, wood arches, and paper membrane reinforced with fiberglass and laminated with P.V.C., 2000. Hannover, Germany.

thing to get more verticality, I would use steel. In the summer of 2003, I made a temporary theater in Amsterdam using the paper tubes. The next P.T.S. will be a temporary architectural office on the fifth floor of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This will be the base of operations for the Metz project. At the end of the project I will pack it up and take it away.

**B.L.:** What is the economic impact of using P.T.S. as a form of building?

**S.B.:** In 1986–87, when I started my research on paper tubes, it was the financial “bubble” period in Japan. No architects were interested in using new materials. They were not as concerned with recycling, environmentalism, or costs. Now it is easier to convince people that paper is a good material for building, as the economic health and natural resources of the world are in a poor state.

**B.L.:** Do you think of yourself as a Green Architect?

**S.B.:** No. I am not a Green Architect. I hate to be labeled as a Green Architect. I don't like wasting things, but I do not think that this alone makes me a proponent of this movement.

**B.L.:** In terms of your design process, do you start with a sketch or drawing on paper?

**S.B.:** I start with a hand drawing. Then I give that to my team to

create computer renderings. I then revise the hand drawings as we move through the design process.

**B.L.:** Do you exhibit the drawings anywhere?

**S.B.:** In a recent exhibition in Europe, I exhibited the faxes that I was exchanging with Frei Otto and the other engineers about the Hannover Expo structure. But usually I do not want to show these things. They are more a record of an exchange of ideas, not a final product.

**B.L.:** Have you done a lot of reading about nomadic and Bedouin cultures? It seems as though much of your thinking is in tune with the concept of yurts or tents which can be transported.

**S.B.:** I have recently been commissioned to design a Nomadic Museum here in New York that will open in 2005. This commission is from a Canadian photographer based in Paris. However, I am not studying these types of structures to incorporate them into my practice. I know yurts and tents quite well. If I were to build a nomadic home, I would base it on my own knowledge of the situation, not base it on how it was traditionally approached. □

*Brett Littman is an art and design critic based in New York. He is also the Senior Administrator at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, a MoMA affiliate.*