Shigeru Ban: 2015 Austin College Posey Leadership Award
Founder of Voluntary Architects’ Network

Shigeru Ban was born in Tokyo to a businessman and couture clothes designer. As a child, Ban became mesmerized by the work of carpenters, hired by his parents to renovate their wooden house. Fascinated by the craftsmen’s tools and pieces of wood, Ban began building small structures. Before entering high school, he decided to become an architect—and a rugby player. Fate pointed him in the direction of architecture school. And a magazine article about John Hejduk, then-dean of Cooper Union’s School of Architecture in New York City, led him to the United States.

Architect in the Making
In 1977, he headed first to California to learn more English—and establish residency; Cooper Union did not accept students from abroad. So, Ban enrolled in the newly established Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), located in a Santa Monica warehouse. Ray Kappe, founder of SCI-Arc and a pioneer of prefab housing, accepted Ban as a second-year student.

Ban encountered case studies of post-World War II houses that mixed modern styles of Frank Lloyd Wright and Kappe, among others, with traditional Japanese influences. Students studied tent-making and built Buckminster Fuller-style geodesic domes. They even took a cue from German architect and engineer Frei Otto, constructing bisected paper tubes for mailboxes. Ban remained at SCI-Arc for almost three years, then transferred to Cooper Union.

Before graduating from Cooper Union in 1984, Ban took a year off to intern in the Tokyo office of architect Arata Isozaki, one of Japan’s most prominent architects. While working for Isozaki, Ban also curated design shows at the nearby Axis Gallery. It was time well spent; he experimented with new installation materials—paper tubes. Upon return to Cooper Union, he completed his formal learning experience in America. In the course of his studies in California and New York City, Ban found himself amidst many of America’s leading architects of the 20th and 21st centuries—Frank Gehry, Thom Mayne, and John Hedjuk, among others.

Getting Down to Business
Ban established his own practice in 1985 in Tokyo. In his first year, he designed multiple structures made with paper tubing, which debuted at an exhibition featuring work of Finnish architect and designer Alvar Aalto. While experimenting with his new paper work, he began accepting commissions for houses. The buildings required materials of every sort—wood, glass, and stone, but not paper. He realized that traditional commissions for private residences or
public buildings might lead him away from the sustainable materials he preferred. But like a pendulum, he could swing back and forth, perhaps even influencing the traditionalists in thinking along environmental lines.

**Serving Others Through Innovation**

In 1994, while looking at photographs of the Rwandan Civil War aftermath, Ban learned that two million refugees were forced to live in poor, challenging conditions. He contacted the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva to propose his paper tubing for shelters. Not only was his suggestion accepted but the UN hired him as a consultant for the next five years. One year after aiding Rwandan refugees, a natural disaster west of the architect’s Tokyo home captured the world’s attention. Japan’s Kobe earthquake killed over 6,000 people. Ban addressed the plight of Vietnamese immigrants in Kobe, who were unable to secure temporary houses provided by the Japanese government. Ban used paper tubes to design the “Paper Log House,” benefiting dozens of families.

The Kobe natural disaster prompted Ban to establish the non-profit Voluntary Architects’ Network (VAN) to address disaster relief efforts. Subsequently, VAN built temporary housing in Turkey (1999 earthquake), western India (2001 earthquake), and in Sri Lanka (2004 earthquake/tsunami). In response to the 2011 New Zealand earthquake in Christchurch, Ban created the “Cardboard Cathedral” to temporarily replace the city’s damaged Anglican church.

As requests for new buildings—art museums, pavilions, corporate offices—grow in the New York, Paris, and Tokyo offices of Shigeru Ban, the architect’s humanitarian spirit shows no signs of faltering. When he was awarded the 2014 Pritzker Architecture Prize, one of the architectural world’s highest honors, the Pritzker jury praised his abilities to see new use for common materials and to invent new structural systems. But they also noted in the prize’s citation: “Where others may see insurmountable challenges, Ban sees a call to action.”

**BOOKS:**
- Paper in Architecture (November 2009)
- Humanitarian Architecture (October 2014)

**MORE INFO:**
- TED Talk about emergency shelters made from paper
- Vogue on New York’s Cast Iron House
- Interview with Tom Pritzker and Shigeru Ban
- TIME on the Pritzker Laureate
- The New Yorker: “Paper Palaces”

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