

# starchitect

## Renegade

**Shigeru Ban** is one of Japan's best known architects, with a string of eye-catching cultural projects to his name, from the Pompidou Metz and Nomadic Museum's to, a decade earlier, the Japanese temporary pavilion at Hannover's 2000 World Expo. These projects illustrate Ban's ongoing fascination with what he calls, 'weak materials'; including wood, cardboard, bamboo and container crates.

Unlike the majority of his celebrity colleagues, however, Ban has developed a parallel path: a long-term commitment to working in post-disaster emergency contexts. Ban and his team have turned this materials knowhow towards temporary shelters, housing, schools, and churches in the aftermaths of some of the worst floods, earthquakes and tsunamis around the world for over twenty years.

FDR talked with Ban about the origins of his interest in, and overlap between these different aspects of his work and the repertoire of weak – and natural – materials to which the architect repeatedly returns.

### 1 Rue Beauberg

On weekdays the traffic along Rue Beaubourg is unremitting. Cars, lorries, and buses, plus the occasional Velib hire bikes, crash along the Parisian boulevard, past the backside of the Pompidou Centre, the side you never see in the architectural and tourist pictures. Walk a short distance along the Rue and you will come to the anonymous ground floor entrance where the Japanese architect, Shigeru Ban, has relocated his small Paris operation after moving out of the temporary structure – built with paper card on the external rigging of the Pompidou Centre's fourth floor. It is still within easy walking distance to the public face of



Caption

France's contemporary art world for this Japanese architect who has been umbilically linked to the Pompidou Centre since winning the international competition for their first museum in Metz, in the east of the country, back in 2003.

Today, over seven years later, Shigeru Ban is winding down what has been, by various accounts, one of the more difficult and protracted of his projects, taking up much of the last decade. Pompidou Metz, which opened in May 2010 to much pomp and ceremony, has been easily his most high profile and in itself, a major European project for Japan's, arguably, most recognisable architect. His competitors working in the West are Kenzo Tange, Tadao Ando, and, stars of the moment, SANAA.

In some ways Ban is an oddity among the elite high-flying club of stellar architects. In a number of respects he does not fall cleanly into the brackets of the alpha star architectural firmament, such as Herzog de Meuron, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind or Britain's own Norman Foster. As Ban is keen to say, he was one of the first Japanese undergrad architects studying in the US (New York's Pratt School of Architects, at Cooper Union University.) There, under one of Post Modernism's leading theoretical lights, John Hejduk, he was well on the way to settling into what would have likely been a predictable orthodoxy-producing career of the time. But Ban's journey has taken several different paths, setting him against the grain of parts of fashion-conscious contemporary architecture. There are



Caption

few other high profile foreign – let alone Japanese – architects who so completely absorbed the lessons of the great Finnish regionalist, Alvar Aalto, taking to heart the role of context. While his contemporaries were immersed in hi tech, for Ban, context led to a journey into and exploration of archetypally non-modernist materials: wood, paper, bamboo – what he came to refer to as 'weak' materials. To add to this, an interest in recycling and reusing materials as part of an aesthetic focused on minimising waste is a principle passion. These were all off the radar of those who have come to comprise architecture's core celebrity membership, whether the New Labourite Richard Rogers, or the nihilist Rem Koolhaas. Lastly, Ban committed himself to a cause with a social agenda, which is generally absent in today's builders for the rich and powerful: that of disaster victims. Since 1995, when he visited post civil war Rwanda, Ban has been a resourceful and energetic campaigner for the cause of emergency architecture. "What I could do with ten Shigeru Ban's", mused *Architecture for Humanity's* Cameron Sinclair, during a phone interview I did with him some years

ago, when the subject turned to the Japanese architect. And the day I meet all the way back to those formative post-student years, after Ban in the Rue Beaubourg, the interview is serially interrupted by phone calls concerning logistics for working with his Harvard Architecture School students in post-earthquake Haiti. It is not completely surprising, however, that the roots of his involvement in emergency relief work go first graduating from college.

"Actually," he begins, some way into our Rue Beaubourg conversation, "after I began working as an architect I was very disappointed about what we can do. We mainly work for and to help the privileged display their power and money through modern architecture. Historically, it's the same. Today we work for rich developers and Governments to make monuments for them. I'm not saying that this is all negative, when you can make wonderful monuments for cities that people can be proud of. But when I see doctors and lawyers, and even though some just make money, there are also some who are working for people without money. But architects are always working for people at the happiest