

## Lord Palumbo 2014 Laureate Shigeru Ban Ceremony Speech

Your Royal Highness, your excellencies, the Governor, the Mayor of Amsterdam, the Queen's Commissioner, distinguished guests, "'Begin at the beginning' the King said, very gravely, 'and go on 'til you come to the end, then stop.'" So wrote Lewis Carroll, the author of *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, one of the greatest dream stories in the history of British literature. Now it would be discourteous, to say the least, to disregard the advice of the king when celebrating the achievements of the man of the moment, Shigeru Ban, the winner of this year's Pritzker Prize for Architecture, which must be the dream of every single member of his profession. But in reality, the province of the very few.

To begin at the beginning then, he fulfills the criteria of the prize to perfection. You would expect nothing less of a man who claims such impeccable antecedents, such incontrovertible influences as Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto, Louis Kahn, Buckminster Fuller, Frei Otto, Yukio Futagawa, and his mentor at the Cooper Union in New York, John Hejduk. Shigeru Ban has done them all proud. His talent is prodigious, his vision stretches to the far horizon and way beyond, his work is otherworldly, yet his contribution to humanity and the dispossessed is as great as any in the world of architecture today. Ban also has the courage of a lion, once again you would expect no less from a man who packed down for several years at number eight on the rugby football field until injury put paid to his playing days. Plus, an indomitable will to overcome problems, with little or no funding, waist deep in mud, whatever the weather, in conditions that would overwhelm others of lesser mental fortitude, in Rwanda, Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, China, Italy, or Haiti to name but a few.

And yet, in private life he is gentle, unassuming, beautifully mannered, ego free, and the best of company. Like Mies before him, the still waters of his soul run deep and true; and like Mies too, he is a quiet man. When he does speak, his words are delivered calmly and with measured authority. For me and for the jury for whom I speak, he ticks all the boxes as a human being and as a brilliant and innovative architect. He is also incidentally a master of a different art form, that of cooking, at which he excels. But this too should come as no surprise — with shared foundations in function and pleasure, architecture and cooking have a good deal in common.

It has been said falsely, I believe, that his work as a designer of museums, exhibition spaces, pavilions, homes, office and apartment buildings is a sideshow to his real passion as a voluntary worker for the dispossessed — those hundreds of millions worldwide who have no roof over their heads, let alone a home to call their own, against the natural disasters of earthquake, volcanic eruption, tsunami, mudslide, flooding, or the man-made disaster of refugees. The truth is that Ban always gives of his best, whatever the task before him, whether at work in Tokyo, Paris, or New York, or in the depths of disaster areas such as Fukushima, Japan, or Christchurch, New Zealand, and the desperately urgent need of the latter for a cathedral to replace the one destroyed by earthquake a few months ago. Shigeru Ban duly obliged, designing a new cathedral in no time at all, made from cardboard.

The fact is that he uses architectural thinking and appropriate materials to house those made homeless, but only off undertaking wide ranging consultations with the occupants to be, and making those consultations a condition precedent to his design, which then incorporates their needs, wishes, and desires and not least, the restoration of human dignity, pride, and hope. As a result he has given the dispossessed commodity, firmness, and a very welcome dollop of delight. Ban shows that simple does not mean commonplace. His use of recycled paper tubes is not mere scavenger chic — it is both the product of radical economy and radical thinking.

## **Lord Palumbo, 2014 Laureate Shigeru Ban (continued)**

Throughout history the best design has invariably been the design that works to constraints of time, materials and budget. But his inspired originality shows that constraints are not at all the same as compromises, in a great designer, constraints inspire genius. There are many layers of meaning in his work, even as he travels the world, Shigeru Ban is aware of the great Japanese architectural tradition. The ingenious use of cardboard reminds us that the sliding walls you find in a ryokan are made of paper. Moreover, there is Ban's beautiful concept of invisible structure, a design that does not yet exist, at least not materially; then his interest in found objects recalls both the Surrealists as well as Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World*, a book that predicted recycling nearly 40 years ago. Papanek, like Shigeru Ban, and Hejduk, was also a student at New York's Cooper Union.

Back to cooking, let's make an analogy between Ban's insistence on moral responsibility and the contemporary Italian slow-food movement, whose demand for seasonality, locality, and authenticity has undermined the heavy-handed food monopolies.

But this attractive humanitarianism would count for less if Shigeru Ban lacked an aesthetic sense. On the contrary, elegance and beauty are ever present. He shows this architecture is about solving problems, not creating them. In the words of the novelist John Updike, he is giving "the mundane its beautiful due." He shows that beauty, utility, and humanity can be present as equal partners in the same project. He shows what applied intelligence can really achieve in disaster relief and low-cost housing. But he believes in elegance and exceptionality too.

At Biel in Switzerland, Ban has made a headquarters for the Omega and Swatch company. His astonishing light-filled structure uses engineered wood to express simultaneous passions for renewable materials and precision. So Shigeru Ban can be practical and inspirational simultaneously. He is simply a great architect as well as a beacon of life pointing the way forward for others in his profession to make this all for the best in this best of possible worlds. His simplicity is rare, precious, and inspirational. This is Shigeru Ban on hearing the news of this year's award: "Receiving this prize is a great honor," he says, "and with it I must be careful. I must continue to listen to the people I work for in my private commissions and in my disaster-relief work. I see you, the prize, as encouragement for me to keep doing what I am doing, not to change what I am doing, but to grow." His fellow architect Lee Mindel pays tribute to him in 15 words: "Shigeru Ban," he says, "is the conscience of our generation of architects, manifest in the built form." What a fitting epitaph those words would make. No one could ask for more. For this and for the other reasons that I attempted to identify, we're proud to honor Shigeru Ban today as laureate of the 2014 Pritzker Prize for Architecture.

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