

Thomas J. Pritzker 2014 Laureate Shigeru Ban Ceremony Speech

Ladies and gentlemen, first I'd like to thank our jury for their dedication to the Pritzker Prize. They've put their time, focus and energy into establishing a standard in the world of architecture. More specifically, I'd like to thank our chairman Peter Palumbo. In many ways we would not be here tonight without Peter's vision and leadership. I wanted to state my appreciation because this year's effort makes a statement and sets a standard that in my view is timely and very appropriate to the times in which we live. In an era of globalization, it's expected that the celebration of the Pritzker Architecture Prize travel the globe from city to city and from country to country. Architecture after all, affects the lives of more people than any other art form. The Pritzker Architecture Prize has celebrated this in Beijing, Buenos Aires, St. Petersburg, Jerusalem, Rome, Prague, London, Berlin, Tokyo, and in my family's hometown of Chicago.

Our celebration this evening in Amsterdam is especially fitting for its role in an important period of globalization. After all, the 21st century is not the first century to experience this particular phenomenon. We're surely in the 21st century but we're here in large measure because of the gifts bequeathed to us by the golden age of Amsterdam, in the 17th century. Beginning in the late 16th century and on into the 17th century, Dutch commerce, science, philosophy, and art were acclaimed throughout the world. The Netherlands became the world's most formidable maritime and economic power, with it came efflorescence of high culture which it exported to the world. Amongst the factors that contributed to this golden age were a significant migration of skilled workers to the tolerant Netherlands from other, less happy places in Europe. Huguenots from France, the Pilgrim Fathers from England, Jews from Portugal and Spain made their way to the Netherlands. Thanks to peat and windmills, the Netherlands had cheap energy sources. Thanks to visionary exporters and importers, modern corporate finance was born. Skilled labor forced cheap energy and forward-thinking economics; 400 years later, nations are still trying to emulate this same environment.

Globalization in architecture means far more than designing buildings and structures situated in many cities and countries. Globalization in architecture means awareness of — and a response to — the new ideas and the new challenges presented by our global sensibilities. Shigeru Ban, the 2014 Pritzker laureate, whom we celebrate tonight, is truly an architect of this globalized era. We're in a world where climate — and geopolitical — instability are growing in frequency. They create real and devastating hardships for those least able to endure these buffeting forces. Shigeru has forged a path by which architecture can address the needs of communities struck by disaster. This year, the Pritzker Architecture Prize recognizes and celebrates a laureate who has articulated the importance of the built environment and of the challenge of hundreds of millions. In celebrating Shigeru Ban we are affirming that architecture must touch a heretofore largely ignored segment of our human family. Shigeru has established his reputation through a blend of structural and material innovations, his work in building emergency shelters to house victims of some of the most devastating recent natural disasters, from earthquakes at Kobe, Japan to the tsunami in Southeast Asia.

It's not easy to identify the beginning point of Shigeru's artistic creativity. Shigeru in 1991 designed the library of a poet — an annex to a private house. In his building, the delicate tubular structure becomes the walls that support rows of bookshelves, making the tubes both form and content. He then transferred this to his first big experiment, his own summer home on Lake Yamanaka, in which the cardboard tubes snake around a rectangular podium to enclose simple spaces, more like a romantic forest clearing than a cardboard city. In this project as well as others, Shigeru has demonstrated that the walls can be permeable and thus ever welcoming.

Thomas J. Pritzker, 2014 Laureate Shigeru Ban (continued)

His system sylvan idyll led to the designs for a radical different scale — housing for the more than two million Rwandan refugees fleeing genocide in Tanzania and Zaire in 1995. Simple cardboard tube frames were draped to create tents. Sadly, this design had to reappear again and again in Turkey and India in the wake of earthquakes in 1999 and 2001.

He is an architect of spaces instilling a resident quiet in places where chaos reigned. As noted in the jury citation, Shigeru Ban has expanded the role of his profession. He's made a place at the table for architects to participate in the dialogue with governments and public agencies, and philanthropists in the affected communities, by offering to these complex problems the power of design. Shigeru Ban presents a new and evolving commitment of architecture to humanity and in the process, has made a significant contribution to the aesthetics and arts of architecture, itself. As the citation notes, his great knowledge of structure and his appreciation for such masters as Mies van der Rohe and Frei Otto, have contributed to the development and clarity of his buildings. Noteworthy among them is the Nomadic Museum made out of cargo containers stacked in a grid like a giant child's toy block structure that can be put together almost anywhere in the world and just as easily taken apart. The Nomadic Museum took over Pier 54 in Manhattan a couple of years ago; its latest and largest version, composed of a 153 blue, grey, red, orange, and green containers stenciled with some of the great global container brands of the world. It's now in Tokyo. It's adorned with colonies of recycled paper tubes that create the equivalent of twin church naves inside, with immense hanging curtains, like banners, of exquisite Indian fabric that decorate the entrance and exit. This work meets the test of sustainability and beauty.

Shigeru Ban is an architect in the words of one critic, "who seems to share his distaste for conventionality in how he constantly rethinks something as basic as walls." His walls can be enclosed by — and made from — billowing double-story curtains, to cardboard tubes, from corrugated plastic to paper, transforming the mundane into something beautiful and sublime. Ban has established his reputation through his ability to blend structural and material innovation in a way that serves those in need of emergency shelters.

This prize is about leadership, creativity, and built environment, and the impact that architecture has on the lives of people. With this award we're lifting up the awareness that architecture touches humanity in all of its diversity. Not just those who regularly benefit from the great built work of our civilization in metropolises redolent with culture and art. Shigeru Ban's architecture summons us to acknowledge the importance of architecture to people at all stations of life and in all parts of the world. Shigeru Ban teaches us that architecture must touch the earth ever so lightly and embrace the human family ever so firmly. Shigeru, can I ask you to come up here, congratulate you, and thank you for what you do.

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