Finnish architect and designer, Alvar Aalto, is universally acknowledged as one of the most important figures of twentieth century architecture. His career overlapped chronologically, and for a while ideologically with those of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, but his commitment to a humanitarian ideal inspired by nature, set him apart from his purist Modernist contemporaries and lent his work a very distinct, personal touch.

The environmental and humanitarian concerns of the twenty-first century mean that Aalto's philosophical approach is more relevant than ever. Renowned Japanese architect, Shigeru Ban, is one of the leaders in his field carrying on Aalto's legacy today. In this publication, Ban looks back to the Finnish master for inspiration, and has chosen 15 key projects that chart Aalto's philosophical and conceptual development throughout his prolific career.

Featuring new writing by Juhani Pallasmaa and Sir Colin St John Wilson, an exclusive interview with Shigeru Ban, new translations of Aalto's own writings and a specially commissioned photo-essay by celebrated photographer Judith Turner, *Alvar Aalto Through the Eyes of Shigeru Ban* sheds new light on an architect whose work never ceases to inspire.

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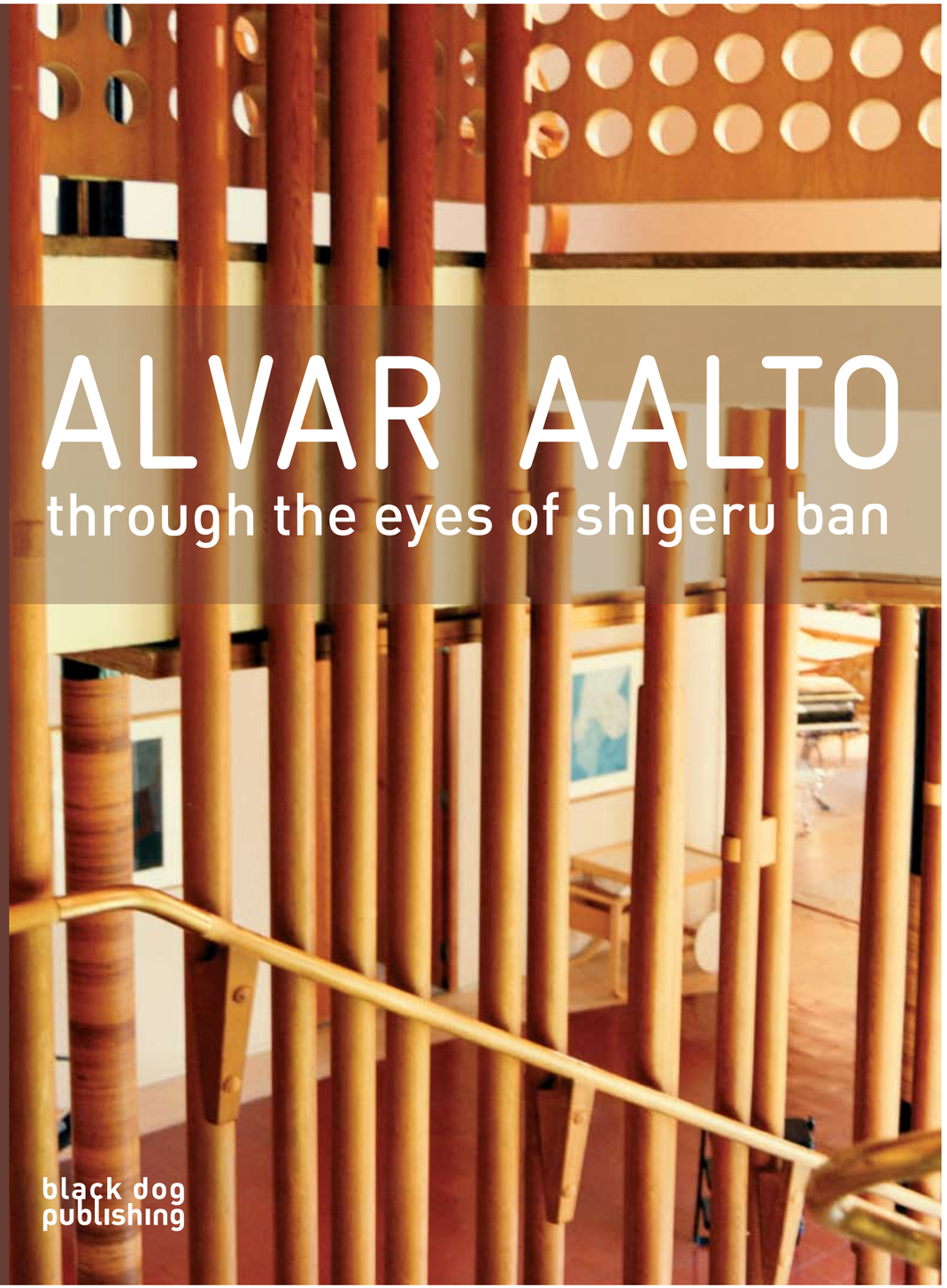

ALVAR AALTO

through the eyes of shigeru ban

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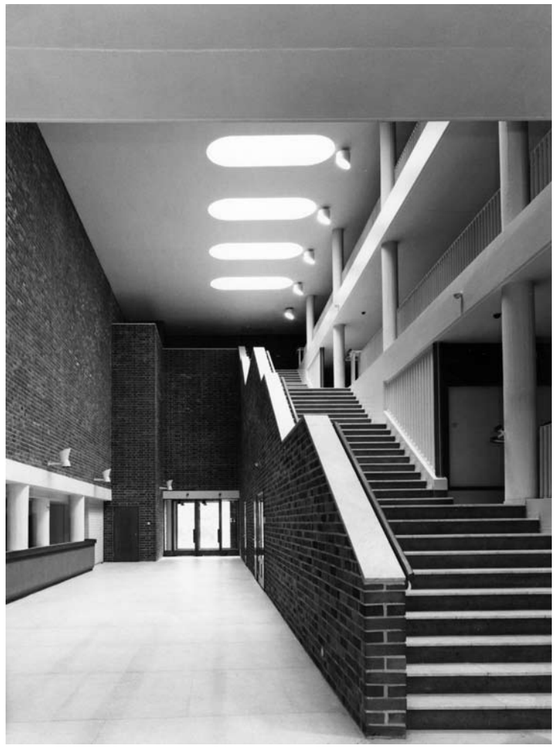
Aalto's buidings often blur the boundaries between indoors and out, creating plazas and forest spaces in living rooms and lobbies, and a sense of enclosed domesticity in gardens and grounds.

right
Jyväskylä Workers' Club, Jyväskylä, 1924–1925. Upper lobby and entrance to the theatre.

opposite left
Villa Mairea, Noormarkku, 1938–1939. Entrance hall, living room and main staircase.

opposite right
Jyväskylä University (formerly The Institute of Pedagogics), Jyväskylä, 1952–1957. Stairway and foyer.



Experimental House,
Muuratsalo, 1952–1953.
The courtyard as an
outdoor living room.

Aalto House and Studio,
Munkkiniemi, Helsinki,
1954–1956. The outdoor
space alludes to an
amphitheatre.

ALVAR AALTO THROUGH THE EYES OF SHIGERU BAN

One of the towering figures of twentieth century architecture, Alvar Aalto continues to inspire architects today. 30 years after his death, Aalto's legacy—not only his architectural style but also his visionary approach to architecture—still has a profound influence on his followers internationally, as well as in his native Finland. The exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery, which shares the same name as this book, presents the Finnish master's work through the eyes of contemporary Japanese architect, Shigeru Ban.

Shigeru Ban was born in Tokyo in 1957, when Aalto was at the peak of his career. That year Aalto's international recognition was consolidated with the award of the RIBA Gold Medal in London and several of his major post-war buildings were either completed or under way. In 1977, a year after Aalto's death, Ban set off to the United States to start his architectural training at the Southern California Institute of Architecture.

Ban never met Aalto in person. His first encounter with the Finnish master's work was in Finland in 1984, and his second was two years later, in 1986, when he worked on an Aalto exhibition project in Tokyo. This was the beginning of Ban's spiritual dialogue with Aalto across a geographical and generational divide. As he came to appreciate the extent of Aalto's architectural vision, he opened himself up to an influence which eventually changed the path of his career.

Although there are many differences between the styles of the two architects, and indeed, some aspects of their work even contradict one another, Shigeru Ban is acknowledged as one of the post-war generation of architects who carry on Alvar Aalto's legacy today. Like Aalto, Ban takes an organic approach to design and an innovative approach to materials, but perhaps the most important aspect of Ban's work linking back to Aalto is his compassionate approach to architecture, exemplified in his emergency housing made of paper tubes for displaced disaster victims and refugees.

Ban first developed the idea of using paper tubes whilst designing the Aalto exhibition of 1986 at the Axis Gallery, Tokyo. He then applied this idea to develop unique temporary structures using cardboard tubes: these include Paper Emergency Shelters for UNHCR in Rwanda, 1995–1999, and Paper Log Houses in Kobe, 1995, and Niigata, 2004, in Japan as well as in Turkey, 2000, India, 2001, and Sri Lanka, 2005. In 1995 he established his own charity, the Volunteer Architects' Network (VAN), which is still active in international relief efforts. Between 1995 and 1999 he was also Consultant of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Ban's best-known works include the Paper Church, Kobe, 1995, the Japan Pavilion at the Hanover Expo 2000 and the Paper Arch Installation at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2000.

As the guest curator of the exhibition, Ban has selected 15 projects to chart the development of Aalto's career, which spans six decades. Highly diverse and prolific, Aalto's work ranges from private houses, low-cost housing, cultural, civic and religious buildings, industrial estates and urban planning, to furniture, light-fittings and glass design—the Aalto Archive holds over 20,000 drawings associated with his architectural projects and product design. In this exhibition, Ban explores the thought processes behind each of the 15 projects and contemplates the relevance of Aalto's work to twenty-first century architecture.

This chapter consists of two sections. In the first, Ban speaks in interview about Aalto, his self-confessed hero and spiritual mentor, as well as about his own design philosophy; the second section features the contextual notes on the architectural projects and design works selected by Shigeru Ban for the exhibition.

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Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea, Noormarkku, 1938–1939.

previous page bottom
Shigeru Ban's Paper House, Lake Yamanaka, Yamanashi, Japan, 1995.

ENCOUNTERS WITH AALTO

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHIGERU BAN

Questions and compilation by Tomoko Sato with Jun Matsumoto

ENCOUNTERS WITH AALTO

TOMOKO SATO: How did you become involved in the Aalto exhibition at the Axis Gallery, Tokyo?

SHIGERU BAN: In 1983–1984, while I was a final year student at The Cooper Union, New York, I began to work with the Axis Gallery in Tokyo as a consulting curator. I proposed to the gallery three exhibitions of the artists I was interested in at the time: Emilio Ambasz, Judith Turner and Alvar Aalto.[1] Around that time, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, was touring the exhibition, *Alvar Aalto: Furniture and Glass*; I negotiated to bring the show over to Japan. The exhibition was realised at the Axis Gallery in 1986, and I curated and designed the show.

That show happened ten years after his death, in 1986. What was his standing internationally at that point? How was his work evaluated?

The Aalto show at the Axis Gallery was one of a series of exhibitions organised by the Museum of Modern Art, focusing on the key architect/designers of the twentieth century, including Charles and Ray Eames, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer. Within this context we can see that Aalto was by that time already positioned as one of the masters of twentieth century architecture. In the past, he had somehow been regarded as an 'outsider' of the mainstream of Modernism dominated by the so-called International Style.[2] However, with the increasing awareness of the problems of 'modernisation', it became necessary to look at alternative directions: it was time to re-evaluate Aalto's approach to design, which emphasised the use of natural and local materials, as well as organic forms.

In one of your previous interviews you said "it was such a shock to discover Alvar Aalto's architecture". What was that 'discovery' and how did the encounter with Aalto impact upon your career?

As a student, to be honest, I was not very much interested in Aalto's work. At The Cooper Union, under the tutelage of John Hejduk, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier were the two giant pillars of architecture.[3] None of my colleagues talked about Aalto. I studied these two masters extensively and used their vocabulary for my work. I was, of course, aware of Aalto's work through architectural books at the time but I was not particularly impressed by the reproduced images of his buildings.

However, this all changed when I actually saw Aalto's architecture in person for the first time in 1984. After graduating from The Cooper Union, I was in Finland, working as an assistant to Yukio Futagawa, photographer and editor of *GA* magazine.[4] In Aalto's architecture I found a space created to complement its context. It was the kind of space that one wouldn't be able to comprehend through photographs and text in a book; one would need to experience it on the spot in order to understand the quality of it.

1 Emilio Ambasz is a New York-based architect and designer renowned for the harmonious integration of buildings in nature.

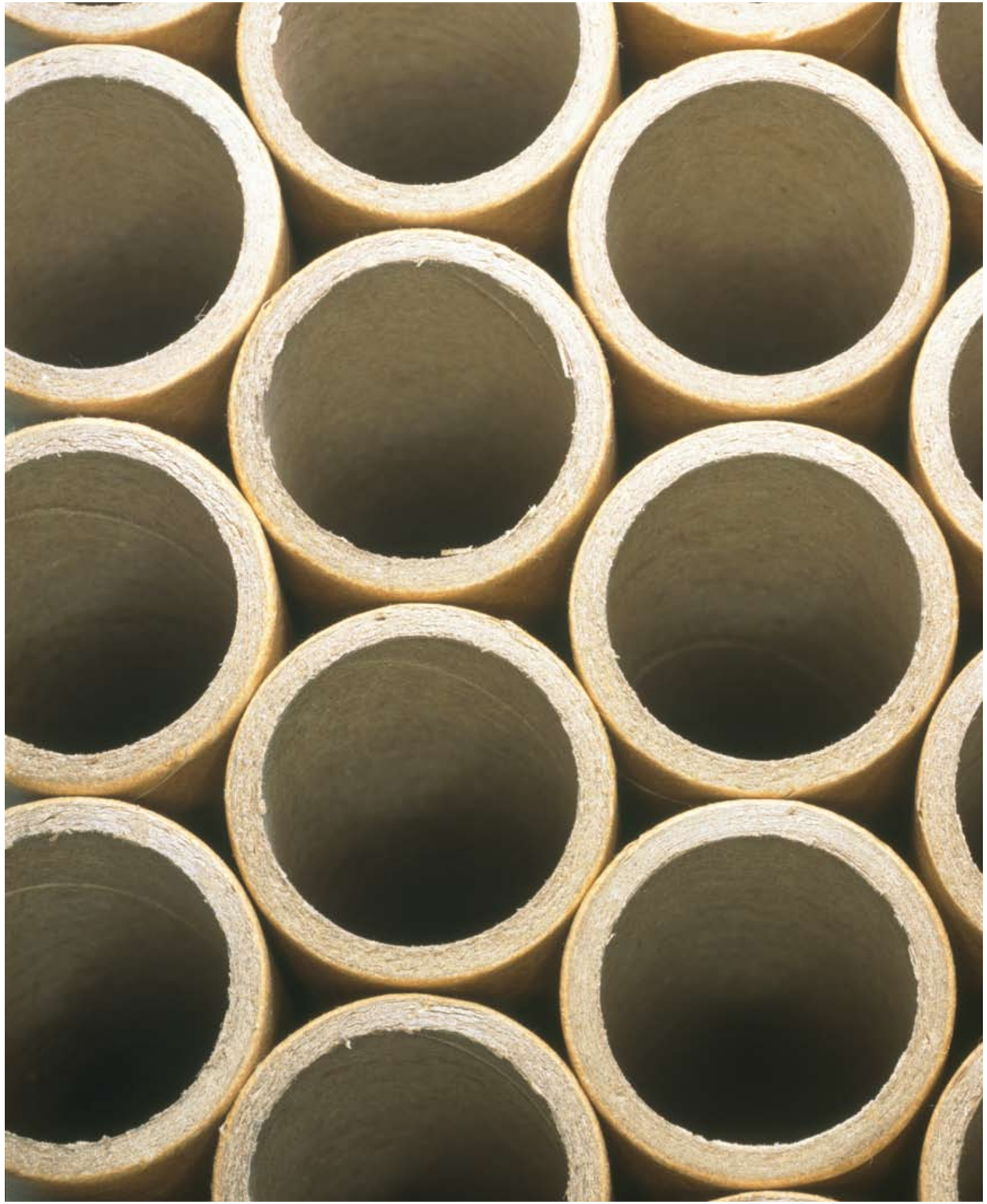
2 Coined by Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock, the term was first used in 1932 at an exhibition organised by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Curated by Johnson and Hitchcock, the exhibition charted architecture from 1922 to 1932; the term is often used as a synonym with the Functionalist architecture developed in Europe during the 1920s and 30s.

3 Influential architect, artist and educator, John Hejduk (1929–2000) spent most of his life in New York. Heavily influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe, Hejduk was widely regarded as a 'hard-line' Modernist but his later work shows elements of a freer style. He was Dean of The Cooper Union of Art and Architecture, New York, during the years 1975–2000.

4 Founded by the architectural photographer and writer, Yukio Futagawa, *GA* (*Global Architecture*) is an influential magazine in Japan and abroad specialising in architecture and design.

previous page
Library of a Poet, Zushi, Kanagawa, Japan, 1991. This was Shigeru Ban's first permanent building made of paper tubes.

opposite
Paper tubes–the material which Ban developed to be used in a structural capacity.



With Mies' or Le Corbusier's buildings I did not perceive a huge discrepancy between what I had understood previously from books and what I actually saw—there was less of a sense of 'discovery' than with Aalto's work. For Mies and Le Corbusier, in their pursuit of Modernism, it was not a great priority to consider the contexts the building was located within—such as the cultural background, the local community or the environment. Given that I was trained under these influences, Aalto's approach provided me with a refreshing change. Aalto was the first architect I encountered whose work was inseparable from its surroundings aesthetically and functionally. Until I actually looked at his buildings in Finland, I was not able to understand how he had made his architecture *from* the context and used new methods of design with neutral, gentle materials from nature, such as wood and brick. This encounter with Aalto was a great shock to me.

Discovering Aalto had a great impact on my career. Understanding Aalto's own experience—his movement away from the International Style to establish his own architecture—helped me grow out of the influence of the International Style, providing me with a clue to help discover my own style. Furthermore, through the process of designing the installation of the Aalto exhibition of 1986, I developed the idea of paper architecture.

So, you used paper tubes as a key design element for the first time in conjunction with the Aalto exhibition. How did you develop this idea?

Initially I just wanted to create an Aalto-like space for the exhibition. The simplest solution was to use a natural material such as wood like Aalto had, but the budget restrictions did not allow for this. I also thought it would be a waste to use such a precious material as wood for a temporary exhibition: after a short period of time, all display materials would be thrown away. I started looking around for an alternative material and I found cardboard tubes scattered all over my studio. They were leftovers from finished rolls of tracing paper or fax paper. I didn't like the idea of throwing them away, so somehow I kept them in the studio for some possible future use. These tubes were surprisingly strong and their neutral colour and gentle texture reminded me of Aalto: that's what triggered the idea.

I then went to a paper tube factory to discuss the practicality of my concept. The material had a great potential—it is inexpensive and flexible to produce (coming in a variety of sizes) and it's recyclable. After various tests, cardboard tubes were proved to be strong enough to work as a structural material and could be fire-proof and water-proof too. I became convinced that they would be a new building material for the future.

20 years have passed since your first encounter with Aalto. Is there any change to your view of him now?

No, my view remains the same. Aalto is one of the most innovative architects I know. I think without encountering Aalto's architecture, I wouldn't have been able to discover my own style.

I recently visited La Maison Carré, 1956–1959, which Aalto built at the peak of his career. It was interesting to see how Aalto applied his architectural vocabulary, which he had been developing and refining since his famous Villa Mairea, 1938–1939, to this more manneristic work. Aalto seems to have perfected the range of his capabilities with this building. Everything looks under control; there is a balance between the composition with its highly matured stylistic devices and the efficient, flexible application of standardised materials. As an architect, I am always driven by an urge to do something completely new. It is a struggle. I wonder whether I will reach the same maturity as Aalto one day....

The installation of the Alvar Aalto exhibition at the Axis Gallery, Tokyo, 1986, designed by Ban. Aalto's characteristic undulating ceiling and walls are mirrored in the cardboard tube structures.

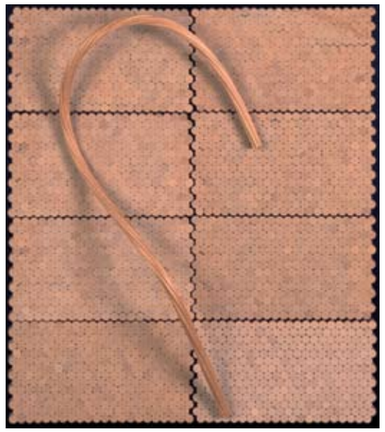
The interior of the Odawara Pavilion. This paper structure was produced as a temporary exhibition space for the Odawara Festival, 1990.

Villa K, Chino, Nagano, Japan, 1987. This is one of Ban's early buildings, in which the influence of John Hejduk's geometric style is clearly apparent.

opposite
Dressing table with three revolving drawers, as part of the bedroom suite shown at the Turku Industrial Exposition, 1929.

left
Chair, 1932, with the seat, back and arms made of a single piece of bent plywood, which was produced in a special mould.

right
Chair, 1930, with a tubular metal base and padding.



top
Experiment with bent wood, early 1930s.

bottom
'Z-leg' chair with backrest, 1947.

top
Cantilevered 'Tank' armchair, first shown at the Milan Triennale, 1936.

bottom
'Paimio Chair', also known as 'Closed-Framed' chair, 1932.

opposite
Savoy Restaurant, Helsinki, 1936–1937. Interior with a row of 'Golden Bell' pendant lamps.

top
Light-fitting 'A 330' or 'Golden Bell' pendant lamp, designed for the Savoy Restaurant, Helsinki, 1937. The earliest model was made from a single piece of metal.

bottom
Sketch for 'Golden Bell' lamp, 1937.