

THE PHOENIX OF WELIGAMA

SHIGERU BAN'S LATEST RESIDENTIAL PROJECT IS A TIMELY TESTIMONY OF HOW BEAUTY AND INSPIRATION CAN ARISE FROM UNFORTUNATE CIRCUMSTANCES.

Text by Michele Koh Photography by Hiroyuki Hirai

In 2004, the Sumatra tsunami ravaged the little fishing village of **Weligama** in Sri Lanka.

The destruction was devastating, the loss, heartbreaking. As with any disaster-stricken area, initial recovery was slow and tedious. In recent years, however, new buildings have begun to spring up as part of the village's reconstruction process. The most striking of these is **Villa Vista**, designed by renowned Japanese architect **Shigeru Ban**.



↑ CROWNING GLORY:
The building sits atop
a cliff in Weligama

← PICTURE PERFECT:
Villa Vista is a picturesque
composition of planes



Considering the history of the site, Ban was perhaps the best man for the project. Most famous for his innovative use of paper and cardboard tubing as construction material for buildings, Ban was the first architect to design and build a house entirely out of paper. The idea for Ban's famous paper houses came about because he was looking at creating quick and effective housing for disaster victims. "Even in disaster areas, I want to create beautiful buildings. This is what it means to build a monument for common people. And this is what I would like to continue doing as an architect," says Ban.

A Tokyo native, he is no stranger to natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. Ban has worked to help victims of natural disasters since 1995, when he used beer-crate foundations and paper-tube walls to construct emergency housing for survivors of the earthquake in Kobe. In 1999, he helped design prototype tents with paper poles for refugees in post-genocide Rwanda. In the aftermath of the 2008 earthquake that ravaged Sichuan Province, Ban built a paper-frame schoolhouse in Chengdu, which combines his talent for fine aesthetics and utility. At present, he is raising funds and preparing materials to build privacy partitions for evacuation shelters for victims of the recent 11 March earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

But more than just a humanitarian and the father of "paper architecture", Ban is paradoxically, a rationalist, a modernist and a Japanese experimentalist

SKILFUL MIX:
A revealing consistency in colour and texture shows Ban's mastery with materials

WIDE OPEN:
An expansive view of the ocean is framed by a massive roof



PICTURE FAME:
The master bedroom captures the view of the sun setting over the cliffs

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NATURALLY COOLED:
Villa Vista affords generous shade beneath Sri Lanka's cloudless skies

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GREEN WELCOME:
A simple sculpture of a frangipani tree greets visitors at the entrance



whose works have almost always made a powerful and bold architectural statement. Ban's works are more than mere buildings; they have been likened to painting, sculpture and explorations of geometrical form.

Like many of Ban's past projects, *Villa Vista* is at once painting, sculpture and formal test bed. The residence was commissioned by *Koenraad Pringiers*, a Belgian owner of a tyre business with a factory in Weligama. Pringiers who was awestruck by the magnificence of the site, which sits on a hill facing the sea, requested a home that would allow him to take full advantage of the breathtaking views.

To achieve this, Ban composed a series of planes, some monolithic and some porous, to include and frame the house's surroundings. As one enters and proceeds through the house, the spaces are revealed, sometimes tentatively and at others in grand gestures.

Ban came up with a double-height design and added volume by segmenting the house into zones with a 1.5m height difference between each zone. This gave the interior a towering effect, which allows for better and more expansive views. Ban found three excellent viewpoints within the property boundary and cut the house to frame three different views from three different angles – the view of the ocean as seen from a jungle valley perspective is framed perpendicularly by an external corridor; a horizontal view of the ocean from a hilltop perspective is framed by the massive roof, supported by 22m span poles; a cliff scene that reveals spectacular red sunsets is seen through the perspective of a solid wood square frame in the master bedroom.

It took Ban two years to design the blueprint for *Villa Vista* and another three years to construct it. With a sprawling land area of 351,420sqft and a total built area of 8,880sqft, the villa has three tiered landings and a master bedroom in a "boxed" wing on the northern side of the building. It includes a corridor, entrance court, a salon, lounge, dining area, living area, master bedroom with study and an ensuite



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 – PERHAPS AN
 APPROPRIATE ECHO
 OF WELIGAMA'S OWN
FORTITUDE.

↑ **NATURAL FLOW:**
*Voluminous spaces
 spill into one another
 in the monumental
 scale of Villa Vista*

↓ **PUNCTUATION MARKS:**
*Layers of perforations,
 weaves and textures
 combine into a complex
 material experience*

bathroom, two guest rooms, a gym, pool, storage room, servant's room, kitchen and stage. The villa follows the natural sloping ground contours, and similar to Ban's 1990 *Villa Torii* residence in Nagano Japan, it has no walls on the east and west sides, which leaves the elevations entirely exposed to the landscape.

On the ground level is a corridor that runs through the house. The first right turn from this corridor takes one to the entrance courtyard where a single frangipani tree stands as a sculpture in the centre. From the wall of the courtyard are steps that lead to a lounge area that is 1.5m above the ground level of the entrance courtyard. From the wall of this lounge are steps that go up towards



the dining area and from there more steps lead to the top most portion of the house where the living area and master bedroom are located. The gym, kitchen, storage room and servant's room are neatly tucked away under the upper level tiers and hidden from view by wooden doors.

Ban also thoroughly explores the idea of scale here. The building is monumental in both form and size, with sweeping voluminous spaces freely flowing into one another. Constructed of large robust planes that intersect at carefully considered junctures, the house resonates with a quiet strength – perhaps an appropriate echo of Weligama's own fortitude. But it's not all about strength and monumentality.

Ban's treatment of surfaces also takes into consideration how people will encounter the space. In this case, he used perforations, weaving and textures that follow the human scale. Driven by the concept of the "invisible structure", where structural elements are worked into the form rather than overtly expressed, Ban

“ARCHITECTURE IS NOT
ABOUT DESIGNING SOMETHING
FROM A FREE, FANCIFUL IDEA.
IT IS ABOUT DISCOVERING
AND ESTABLISHING
ONE'S OWN PRINCIPLE...”

FLOWING PLANE:
The gym beneath the terrace is defined by a wavy paper ceiling

often selects materials not based on novelty or technology but rather on how the strength, substance and texture of the chosen material expresses the essence of the building. For Villa Vista, he used concrete blocks with triangular perforations for the entrance courtyard and local teak louvre screen windows, hand-polished cut cement for the exterior walls and a “box” of solid timber teak for the bedroom.

Much thought was put into the creation of the large roof and ceiling. The roof was covered with a light cement board for waterproofing, then layered with woven coconut leaves that keep the house from overheating. For the ceiling, Ban used teak strips woven into a large wickerwork pattern, which, together with the aforementioned woven coconut leaves, also references local vernacular architecture.

Ban also designed all the furniture, which was produced by Pringiers' brother who owns a furniture factory in Sri Lanka. Some interesting pieces include a poolside bed with adjustable head rests, a long bench placed on the edge of the floor in the living area that also functions as a fence between the living and dining areas, and a vierendeel-truss-structure dining table with paper tube legs.

As with many of Ban's other projects, Villa Vista employs spatial continuity to create a seamless flow between indoor and outdoor spaces. In the vein of Ban's *Hanegi Forest* project, where he incorporated trees from the site into hollowed-out circles within the structure, Villa Vista was built to complement and enhance the natural topography of the site. Ban once said, “Architecture is not about designing something from a free, fanciful idea. It is about discovering and establishing one's own principle, some kind of regularity – finding an individual formula to apply to one's buildings.” With Villa Vista, the specific formula is one that is intrinsically linked to both the local vernacular and geographical landscape. But perhaps what is most compelling about the house has nothing to do with formulaic approaches and all to do with the poetry with which Ban has captured the resilience and quiet strength of this once-devastated fishing village in a single edifice. ♦ shigerubanarchitects.com

