The world of architectural criticism is roughly divisible into those who see architecture as a medium for aesthetic experimentation, and those who see it as an instrument for social justice. They are, more often than not, at odds with each other: hackles rise, tempers flare. Writing in the New York Review of Books earlier this year, critic Martin Filler used a truncated quotation from Zaha Hadid that made her seem unconcerned about worker deaths on construction sites in Qatar, followed by an incorrect assertion that a thousand people had perished while constructing one of her current projects (which had in fact not even broken ground at the time). Hadid threatened to sue and Filler made a formal retraction, but the damage was done. Others still quote the original falsehood as if it were damning evidence of the callous attitudes of all too many famous architects. Supposedly they seek out the rich and powerful as patrons, willfully ignoring the role of their architecture in perpetuating injustice and despotism. Their fame is assumed to be at the expense of all those unfairly ignored architects who are quietly producing worthy, unflamboyant buildings sincerely intended to make the world a better place for everyone. While it’s easy enough to find any number of counterexamples to this caricature, it’s not without some truth. How does one balance support for architects that are committed to improving our collective environment against the pleasure we take in beautiful architecture that is indifferent to its social or environmental consequences? We all vocally endorse the former while being uncomfortably aware that most of the buildings we venerate are examples of the latter.

At least since his first post-earthquake cardboard church (built in Kobe in 1995), Shigeru Ban has seemed to represent the hope of a synthesis between these two extremes: an architect who is
socially and ecologically responsible, yet innovative and appealing in his methods. He is most fa-
mous for inventing new uses for mundane materials in providing disaster relief shelters, and his
work for the rich is purportedly only a way for him to subsidise pro bono work for those unable
to afford his fees. Ban’s 2014 Pritzker Architecture Prize caused elation among those who felt that
far too much attention is given to seemingly irresponsible architecture, while those who advocate
architectural creativity for its own sake were left perplexed. Few had the courage to point out aes-
thetic shortcomings in Ban’s designs, and fewer still the temerity to suggest that there might be a
degree of hypocrisy in his ambitions, but none were able to deny that Ban’s Pritzker nomination
was at least in part motivated by a desire for a politically correct counterbalance to most of the
winners who preceded him. Indeed, for some years it had been clear that the fix was in. In 2011 a
relatively harsh critique of Ban by Australian architect David Neustein, titled “A paper-thin hu-
manitarian ethos”, received a furious response from Martha Thorne, Executive Director of the
Pritzker Architecture Prize. Her opening sentence: “Shame on you David Neustein!”

Shame indeed. Critics dealing with Ban find themselves in risky territory, but it would of course
be churlish and pointless to try and find fault with Andrew Barrie’s book or the project it repre-
sents. The Cardboard Cathedral is an optimistic symbol for Christchurch’s traumatised citizens
and an international statement of the city’s ongoing vitality. As such, it deserves only applause.
The book, designed by Alt Group, is a beautiful production, comprising a glossy dust jacket over a
raw cardboard cover and a sequence of distinct paper stocks that become increasingly refined as
the narrative moves from conception toward completion. It’s both a memento mori and symbol of
Christchurch’s rebirth, and not least an epitaph for Cathedral Dean Lynda Patterson, author of the
foreword and a key player in getting the project underway; she died at age 40, just before the book
was released.

The content is aimed at professional and lay audiences, which partly explains the extraordinary
number of pages being devoted to a single project. Most of the process photos were taken by Bridg-
it Anderson, a documentary specialist, with architectural photographer Stephen Goodenough
brought in for shots of the completed building. Together with reproductions of architectural detail
drawings, contracts, and building consents, Andrew Barrie provides a long essay that incorporates
a number of his earlier published pieces into a jargon-free overview of Ban’s career and a play-by-
play of the Christchurch project. There is not much critical analysis of the architecture, aside from
some preemptive special pleading for Ban’s decorative use of his signature paper tubes to con-
ceal the timber A-frame: “Just because Ban typically uses tubes in ways that are structural or at
least self-supporting, demanding that he must always do so risks slipping into pedantry.” Maybe
so, but then why use them at all? Barrie argues that they “retain the architectural roles of defin-
ing the space, adding material warmth and shaping the way natural light flows into the space”. There
are plenty of other ways to achieve equivalent effects, and it seems more likely that the paper
tubes were chosen, as with most Ban projects, for stylistic consistency and easy recognition. You
commission Ban because you want the tubes. Structural honesty and integrity may have seemed
important to earlier generations of architects, but these days it’s merely a matter of alternative
genres, each with their own validity.

Ban’s brilliance with makeshift solutions surely has an extra appeal to the New Zealand self-image
of do-it-yourself, low-tech ingenuity, as does his use of a single material solution for every problem,
irrespective of appropriateness – much like the Kiwi farmer who will insist there’s nothing that a
bit of number 8 wire can’t fix. The book and the building alike may raise questions about flimsiness
and substantiality, about which parts are essential and which are redundant, but the motivations
for all of it are beyond reproach.