

Ishinomaki Laboratory

Born in the rubble of the 2011 earthquake, a Japanese city's furniture-making project has grown into a unique brand of DIY craftsmanship

By Danielle Demetriou



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ABOVE AA hanger by Torafu Architect: the project's 50-plus products are all simple to replicate

"When the tsunami hit, there was a lot of damage and the ideal situation was for people to be able to fix their own buildings"

OPPOSITE Stacking coffee table by Taiji Fujimori – one of the most popular designs

Five years ago, Takahiro Chiba was a sushi chef, chopping raw fish round the clock in his family's generations-old restaurant in Ishinomaki, north-east Japan. Today, however, although he lives in the same city, he is devoted to making something different – furniture. Chiba is a founding member of Ishinomaki Laboratory, a DIY furniture-making project launched in the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake, first featured in Icon in 2014. Ishinomaki, in Miyagi Prefecture, was one of the worst-hit areas in the resulting tsunami: vast swaths of the city were washed away, along with businesses, homes and more than 3,000 lives.

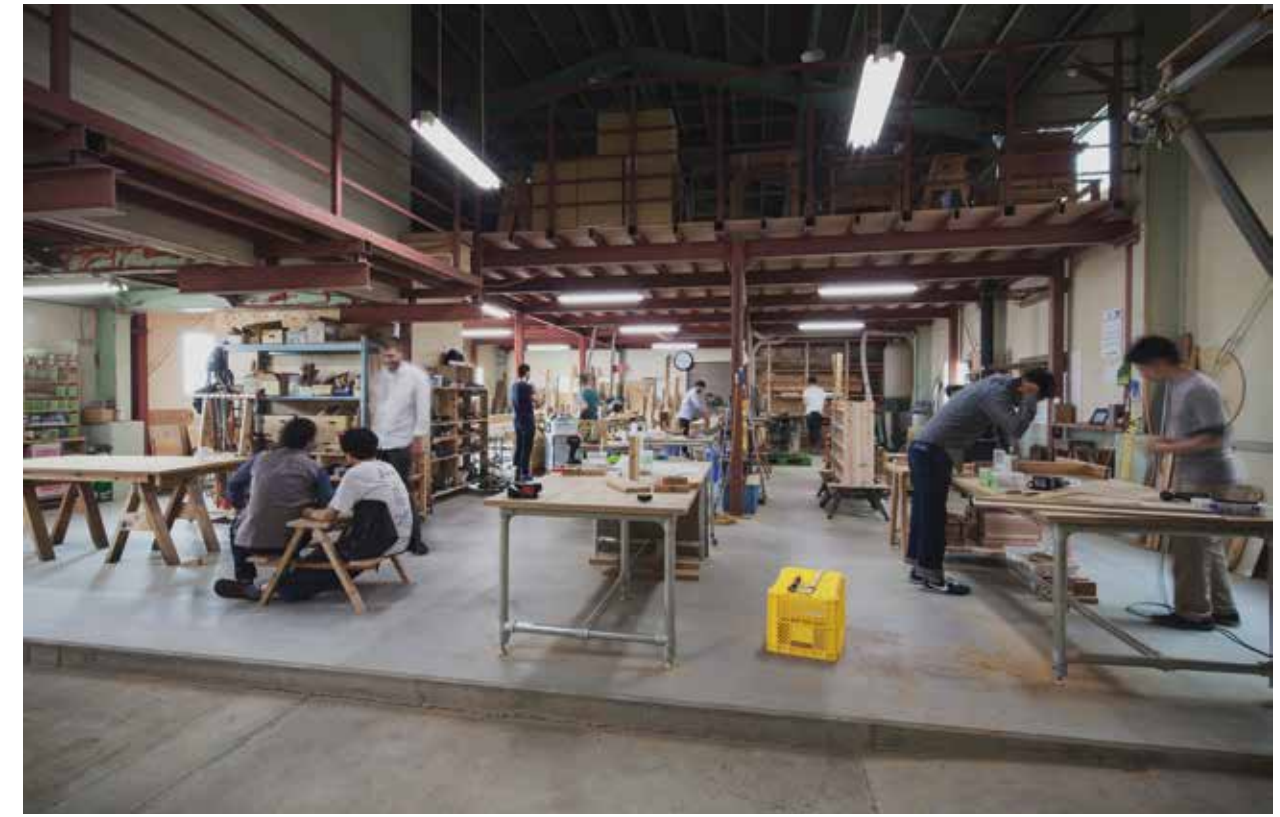
Today, Chiba is at the helm of the Laboratory's programme, housed since 2013 in a former seaweed-processing factory. Here, at worktops surrounded by stacks of aromatic red cedar wood and carpentry tools, staff busy themselves measuring, cutting and sanding wood, or planning workshops. After cheerfully pointing out the level several metres above the ground to which the tsunami water rose in 2011, Chiba explains: 'When the tsunami hit, there was a lot of damage and the ideal situation was for people to be able to fix their own buildings. But they had no tools, no materials, no know-how. That's how the idea came about – from the spirit of self-reliance.'

The project was the brainchild of Tokyo-based architect Keiji Ashizawa, and its concept is as simple as its products are easy to construct. The Laboratory was set up as a community workshop to empower locals to make their own furniture, so they could rebuild their homes, businesses and lives. Ashizawa and other designer friends created a series of minimal furniture templates, which even the inexperienced could easily make from standard planks of red cedar. 'The government was focusing on serious things such as infrastructure, but it was really hard for people to repair their own homes and small businesses,' Ashizawa explains. 'We wanted to teach people how to make things themselves – so they could rebuild their lives.'

Their first products were simple stools and benches, not just for ease of construction, but also to give locals a place to sit, connect and re-establish a sense of community. And this simplicity remains a key design feature, both structurally and aesthetically. The only adornment is the project's distinctive logo, a small square formation of kanji characters, branded into each piece using hot metal. 'The starting point is standard dimensional lumber,' says Chiba. 'It is easy to build, strong and inexpensive. We wanted to build ►

RIGHT The Laboratory is housed in a former seaweed-processing factory

BELOW RIGHT
Happiness table by
Fabien Cappello



CHANG KIM

something with basic tools, using the least amount of materials. It's uncomplicated and unpretentious – for example, we don't hide the screws.'

Fast-forward almost six years and the project has grown exponentially. In addition to operating the six-staff workshop in Ishinomaki, a showroom opened in an old printing factory in Tokyo in 2015, while a nearby gallery and workshop called Design Koishikawa was launched last summer. They have collaborated with over 20 designers to create 50-plus products, which can either be made in workshops or sold, already built, in design stores around the world. All are clean-lined and thoughtfully designed – highlights include the Stacking coffee table by Taiji Fujimori; the Happiness table and bench by Fabien Cappello; and the Carry stool by Tomoko Azumi, a seat that cleverly doubles as a tray.

One of Ishinomaki Laboratory's earliest creations – the iconic Ishinomaki stool – was added to the Victoria & Albert Museum's permanent collection in 2015, and their furniture also features in a growing number of business premises, including Yahoo! Japan's head office. But the project stays close to its humanitarian roots, with founders travelling to the hurricane-hit island of Bohol in the

Philippines in 2016 to run furniture-making workshops.

Like many locals, Chiba's cheery demeanour masks personal trauma: he quietly describes how one of his three daughters survived only because her satchel kept her afloat after tsunami water flooded the garage at home. His mother, who was with her at the time, was not so fortunate, passing away the following day. Today, he has embraced a major life change – he smiles as he attempts to pinpoint the parallels between his two careers, saying: 'The perspective is the same – whether you are making sushi or furniture, you have a lot of repetitive tasks. For example, we always use the power sander in the workshop, it's a constant. With sushi, you are always preparing. In both, preparation is extremely important.'

Ishinomaki Laboratory remains keen to extend its global reach: a raft of new projects includes the launch of the Domino Series – a furniture collection by Singapore-based designer Gabriel Tan – and products for the new Herman Miller flagship in New York, as well as a collaboration with Japanese office furniture supplier Itoki. 'We know we are not Ikea,' says Chiba. 'But we don't want to stay completely local. Our ultimate goal is to transmit this idea of craftsmanship and DIY spirit around the world.' ♦



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