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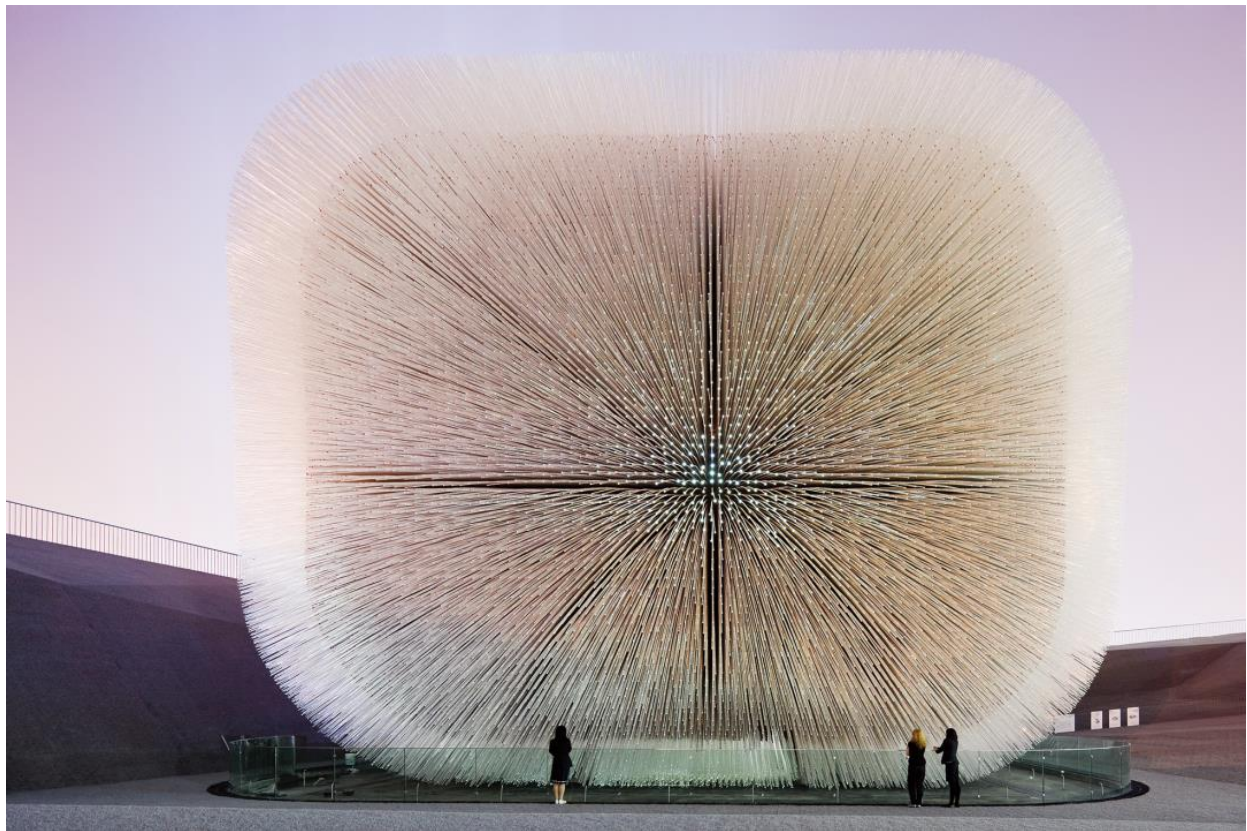


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Architect and designer Thomas Heatherwick takes on the Nasher Sculpture Center

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With buildings to handbags, a British firm blazes trails (and gets a Nasher show)

by LUCIA SIMEK



Thomas Heatherwick

The buildings are like the harebrained schemes of imaginative children: exteriors that seem covered in toothpicks and drawbridges that coil into the shapes of snails. The furniture and design objects are like the confections of a candy- or toymaker: metal benches that recall saltwater taffy and chairs that can spin like outsized tops. Such are the makings of Heatherwick Studio, the London-based architecture and design firm and the creative empire of architect Thomas Heatherwick. Founded in 1994, the firm has established itself as one of the most innovative and daring in the field, winning awards while challenging the limits of materials, technology and invention.

Always savvy enough to honor the exceptional, the Nasher Sculpture Center will present “Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio,” opening September 13 and highlighting the firm’s 20 trendsetting years. The show is part of the Nasher’s continuing series of architecture- and design-related work by the likes of Nasher architect Renzo Piano and Foster + Partners, responsible for the Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House. It is curated by Brooke Hodges, the deputy director of the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum in New York, and will feature prototypes, large-scale models, objects and photographs, plus film and video of some of the firm’s projects, all contained in a Heatherwick Studio–designed space inside the Nasher.



The Spun (Coriolis) chair

Much of Heatherwick's work conflates forms into unlikely combinations, looking to the particular challenges of a project and always determining the most imaginative way to solve them. Take the versatile Zip bag, for example. For a commission from the renowned Parisian leather-goods manufacturer Longchamp, Heatherwick Studio employed one length of zipper to make what appears to be a regular leather shoulder bag, short and compact. However, when the zipper is unzipped, it expands the bag into a roomier weekend tote and reveals bands of vibrantly colored fabric beneath the resulting leather strips, adding a flash of rogue pop to an originally conservative form. With its own Spun (Coriolis) chair, the studio created a "completely symmetrical rotational form" — the aforementioned top — by taking up the jewelry-making principle of metal-spinning, creating a piece of furniture that dazzles and delights. (It is also utterly comfortable.) Heatherwick's architecture projects harness this contrariness and more, making for buildings that defy conformity while showing great concern for the environment and each community. One of the projects to be featured in "Provocations" is a university learning hub in Singapore. The porous, tiered building, free of corridors and isolated spaces, echoes the increasing disconnection brought on by the Internet between students and their learning environments. Another project, a gin distillery for Bombay Sapphire in Hampshire, England, revamps the traditional British greenhouse by incorporating two rebelliously amorphous glass structures — rather like giant glass bubbles — into a campus of restored old brick buildings. As with all of Heatherwick's work, the project piggybacks on history while blazing a dynamic, futuristic trail.

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