

## ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

# Everything is illuminated

See the genius of Heatherwick Studio's intellectual liberation

By MARK LAMSTER  
Architecture Critic  
mlamster@dallasnews.com

The blank page. For the creative professional, its limitless potential may appear either inspiring or debilitating — sometimes both. How do I begin? How do I conjure something from nothing when anything is possible?

Our natural and often unconscious impulse is to fall back on convention. This is why Western artists were stuck in a flat world of two dimensions until Giotto pushed into a third, and this is why, at least in part, so many of the new buildings you see rising around you look like so many of the other new buildings you see rising around you.

Those who can break free of preconceived ideas are a precious commodity and inspiring not just for what they achieve themselves but for the potential they might unlock in the rest of us. It is this special ability that makes 44-year-old British visionary Thomas Heatherwick such an appealing figure, and gives joyful life to the new exhibition of his work at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

Curated by Brooke Hodge of New York's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, and nearly a decade in the making, "Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio" will be on view through Jan. 4.

The show's title, "Provocations," is a reference to Heatherwick's working method; when presented with a new project, he responds with a conceptual challenge. "Can

you make a building using only two components?" "Can you squeeze a chair out of a machine, the way you squeeze toothpaste out of a tube?" "Can a drawbridge open without breaking?" The answers, respectively: Yes. Cool. Holy cow. Heatherwick's often breathtaking solutions betray a craftsman's sense of materiality and tend to look to their means of construction for inspiration.

It is this idea-driven approach that distinguishes Heatherwick's practice from so many others, which begin and end with questions of form — what should an object or building look like. This intellectual liberation allows for works that follow their own creative logic, the resultant diversity only amplified by the scope of Heatherwick's interests and ambition, which are considerable.

In "Provocations," you will find Heatherwick applying his method to the design of buttons, benches, boats, buses, buildings and bridges — and that's just the Bs. To walk through the show, installed in an

See **'PROVOCATIONS'** Page 6E  
inviting jumble of creamy display boxes designed by his studio, is to explore an enormous *wunderkammer*, a collection of strange and unusual objects, each unique but all defined by a single controlling intelligence.

The breadth of Heatherwick's practice is illuminated, if not explained, by his family history. His maternal grandfather was an amateur historian of engineering; his maternal

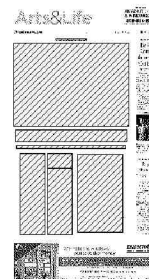
grandmother worked with the noted modern architect Erno Goldfinger before establishing her own textile studio; his mother, a jewelry designer, had a shop on London's Portobello Road; his father, a musician and futurist, has become an occasional collaborator to the studio.

While modernism is often maligned for being slick, sterile and inert — Ian Fleming so detested Goldfinger's architecture that he made him the namesake of a Bond villain — Heatherwick's works, across scales, are animated by a playfulness and tactility that is essentially humane.

Animation is the operative word. Heatherwick's projects have a tendency to movement that gives them almost literal life and encourages physical engagement. This message is delivered at the entrance to the exhibition, where visitors are greeted by a Christmas-tree-size contraption from which they can crank out and tear off a brochure by hand.

Walking farther in, there is a full-scale model of a section of Heatherwick's streamlined London double-decker bus (2010), and on the museum's terrace, a group of his plastic Spun chairs (2007), that rotate like toy tops and have already become something of a viral video sensation among visitors.

Heatherwick credits his ability to regularly conjure a sense of wonder with an empathetic attention to detail. "Hu-



mans crave enrichment," he says. "Find a family of small-scale things that accumulate into something big."

His pavilion for the United Kingdom at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, better known as the Seed Cathedral, typifies this philosophy. Imagine a house-size Chia pet, but instead of grass growing from a ceramic dog, here 60,000 acrylic rods, each 7.5 meters long, protruded from a darkened box. Encased at the inner end of each rod were specimens from the Millennium Seed Bank, some 250,000 in all. The effect was mesmerizing and only more dramatic at night, when the illuminated poles swayed in the wind, like a club kid zoning out to EDM.

If that effectively announced Heatherwick as a force within the international design community, he put himself on a grander stage in 2012 with the design of the caldron for the London Olympic Games. In a daring feat of kinetic engineering, 204 copper stems, each representing one of the competing nations, spiraled up from the prone position to form a single flame. "That seemed to change people's perceptions of the studio," he said.

It also changed the level of his commissions. "Provocations" includes models of an arts center in South Africa, a university complex in Shanghai and a power station in England.

It will be interesting to see

how Heatherwick manages to maintain the intensive attention to the human scale as his studio continues to adjust to ever larger projects. It would be especially nice if that investigation could happen in Dallas.

*Mark Lamster is a professor at the UT-Arlington School of Architecture. Follow him on Twitter at @marklamster.*

## Plan your life

"Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio" continues through Jan. 4 at the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#), 2001 Flora St., Dallas. Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays. \$10, \$7 seniors, \$5 students, free younger than 12. 214-242-5100. [nashersculpturecenter.org](#).



Photos by Kye R. Lee/Staff Photographer

"Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio" at the Nasher Sculpture Center installs a wide range of works in an inviting jumble of creamy display boxes designed by Thomas Heatherwick's studio.



***New Bus for London***, 2010-12, demonstrates that playfulness animates Heatherwick's works.





Kye R. Lee/Staff Photographer

**A Christmas-tree-size** contraption lets visitors crank out and tear off a brochure by hand.