



Dallas' Nasher Sculpture Center makes way for Thomas Heatherwick



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Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio

- Through Jan. 4
- Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas
- \$5-\$10
- 214-242-5100, www.nashersculpturecenter.org.

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dfw.com

Posted 7:38am on Wednesday, Sep. 24, 2014

If you worry about the future, despair at the state of the world and dread the headlines, you are certainly not alone, but all is not hopeless.

Recently an exhibit opened at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas of work by Thomas Heatherwick, a British designer and architect who shines a brilliant beacon of hope that things can be better — much, much better. He is imaginative, sensitive, clever beyond all reason, and a very nice person. What he and his studio partners are creating often defies belief and certainly exceeds expectations.

While “Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio” does not offer an end to world hunger or bring about world peace, it does address the world’s built environment with wonderfully ingenious solutions that seem inspirational.

In 2010 he was asked by the British government to create the U.K. Pavilion for the Shanghai World Expo. Each participating country — there were 240 of them — was given a soccer-pitch-size plot of land. Heatherwick says his budget was half that of other designers and he was expected to produce one of the top five pavilions.

In response to the big demands and tiny budget, Heatherwick said he was not going to do a teabag-Union Jack-QEII-David Beckham-Sherlock Holmes-themed pavilion. They could forget that, as that would be a waste of money. (Typically government sponsored pavilions tend to boast a litany of national superlatives that have little to do with reality or audience engagement.)

Heatherwick says he tried to imagine what visiting 240 pavilions would be like for the expected 70 million visitors, and shudders.

“Our challenge” he says, “was to do one powerful thing that had clarity.”

He chose to make a small “hairy” building, using 1/5 of his allotted site, and to surround it with a plaza, making the U.K.’s location a respite visually and physically.

Hairy buildings are something Heatherwick has been advocating. These usually consist of delicate extrusions on the facade that give an extreme texture to a building’s surface — and if the extrusions are pliable, they can offer texture and movement, too.

He made a 15-by-10-meter shell and punctured it with 60,000 acrylic rods. The long clear rods made the box larger and fragile looking, like a dandelion ready to explode with the slightest breeze. Inside the end of every acrylic rod was a seed.

The seeds came from the Millennium Seed Bank, a project of Kew Gardens to collect and preserve the seeds of 25 percent of the world’s wild plant species. Heatherwick felt the seeds spoke to the theme of the expo, “Better City, Better Life,” by addressing the global imperative of preservation and recognizing Britain’s long history of botanical research and gardening, as well as its emphasis on urban green spaces.

Named *Seed Cathedral*, Heatherwick’s pavilion was Britain’s most visited tourist destination in 2010 even though it was 6,000 miles away from the motherland. Two weeks before the end of the expo’s six-month-long run, it was awarded the event’s top prize for pavilion design.

The British government often hires Heatherwick, and then, he says, attempts to tell him what to do. Fortunately he interprets those demands.

He was commissioned to design the cauldron for the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. His directive was: No moving parts and put it high in the stadium. Heatherwick heard, “We don’t want anything to go wrong.” There had been a mechanical glitch with Sydney’s cauldron, and the London organizers wanted to avoid any potential embarrassments.

Heatherwick's cauldron rested on the ground, and it had, he adds, a thousand moving parts. It was made of 204 copper petals on stalks that looked like calla lilies and were spread out on the ground. As it was lit, it rose to form a large blossom of fire.

"We wanted it ground level with the athletes and visitors," he says. As for all the moving parts, he shrugs and explains, "We worked with that risk."

Heatherwick Studio has created spinning chairs, tables the stretch from circular to oblong, draw bridges that curl up rather than break apart, cabinets and cooling towers shaped like origami, and a new double-decker bus for London.

In the early days of the studio, there were a number of projects, brilliantly imagined, that were never realized.

"It takes a lot of determination not to let the process of realization take the spirit out of something," Heatherwick says. "Me and my team are keen to let the process of development makes things better, not make a bitter person."

Patience has paid off and waiting out the days of un-built projects finally has brought them to a time of international projects that are being built. Some, still on the drawing table are in the U.S. but not completely assured. He can't talk about them just yet.

"In three years," he says. "Talk to me in three years."

There are two highly anticipated gardens underway. One, in London, has been approved and is waiting for its final funding. It is a pedestrian bridge that stretches across the Thames. With its lush landscape, including mature trees, it is a city park suspended across the historical waterway called Garden Bridge.

The other one is nearing completion in Abu Dhabi. Old Airport Road Park had been in existence but suffered from harsh desert conditions and had to be irrigated using de-salinated water. There was inadequate shade for visitors and plants and, as a result, was underused. Heatherwick was asked to make it a vital gathering spot.

Heatherwick formed a canopy of protection over the garden, broken just enough to give the trees adequate sunlight. He modeled the canopy on what happens to the earth's crust when it is exposed to too much heat. This is something we see often in Texas when the earth breaks and scales of dirt become cracked with fissures. Heatherwick recreated the cracked scales as canopy pieces and the fissures became the light channels for the secret garden under the manufactured crust. The garden now needs 50 percent less water, and there are play areas, pools, public baths and cafes.

"It is a celebration of both absence and abundance," writes Heatherwick in his enormous catalog of works, *Thomas Heatherwick, Making* (Monacelli Press , \$75).

Many of the objects in the Nasher Sculpture Center attempt to explain Heatherwick's marvelous creations with prototypes, drawings, large-scale models, photographs and videos, but they are merely pale postcards of the built pieces.

Heatherwick's massive catalog is helpful in visualizing the works; a world tour would be even more illuminating.

Few of Heatherwick's structures are rectangular or box-like. The silhouettes often undulate in a provocative way. "I try to start from scratch with each project, trying not to bring a baggage of style from somewhere else," he says.

In the Nasher's lower level room are several of Heatherwick's one-offs — projects and products he made that should be in production and aren't, and pieces that are quite edifying as to his way of thinking. Should you go, and you should, don't forget to visit that area as well.

The exhibit was organized for the Nasher by independent curator Brooke Hodge. It will travel to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and then the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York.

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