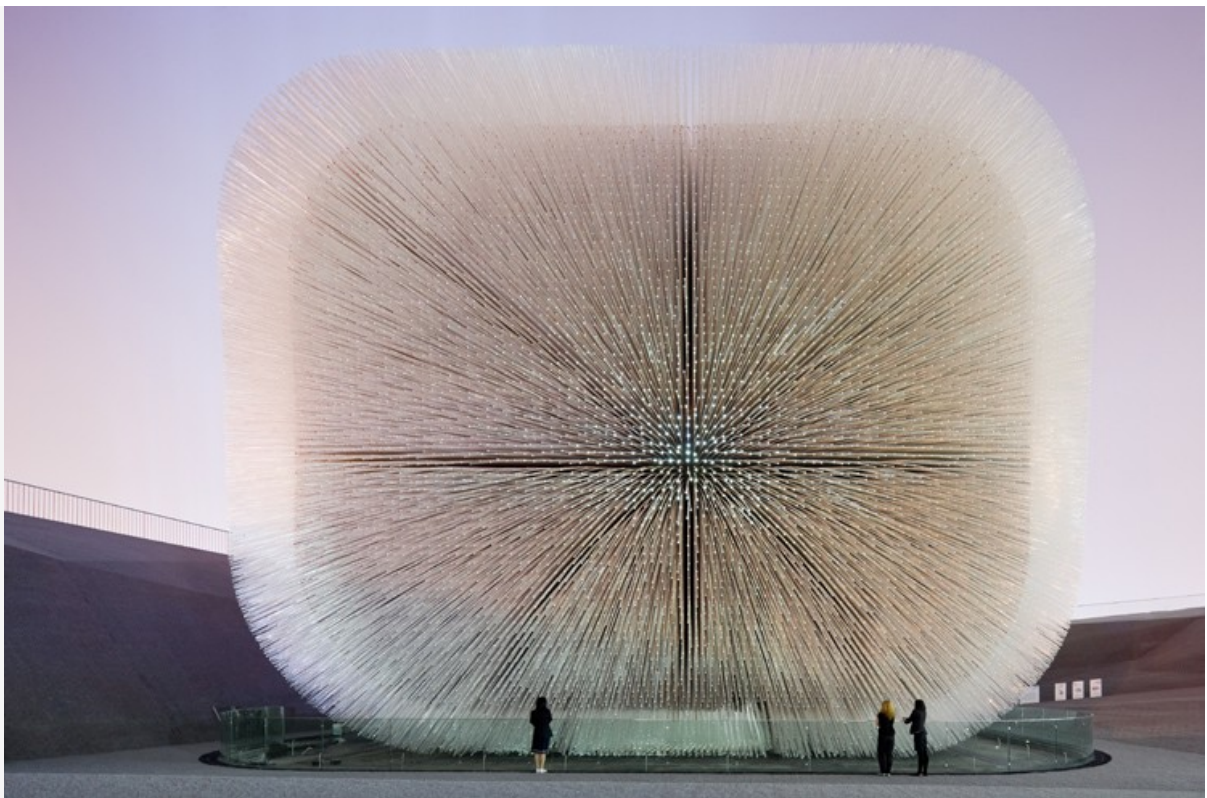




FRONT ROW **BLOG**
DALLAS ARTS FROM THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE



Thomas Heatherwick's Seed Cathedral (Image courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center)

Interview: Thomas Heatherwick on Inventing, Madness, and Alfred Hitchcock

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The Thomas Heatherwick exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center is the first show at the museum dedicated to the work of an architect. Heatherwick, the man behind the London Olympic torch and the spiny “Seed Cathedral” at the Shanghai World Expo (pictured), has been called a modern day Leonardo Da Vinci for his novel approach to design and architecture and his willingness to blend disciplines. His works can feel more like inventions than structures, like a pedestrian drawbridge in London that “rolls up” up into a snail shell-like curl. We sat down with the architect to talk about his attitudes towards making, his thoughts on invention and fantasy, and the cinematic underpinnings of his approach to architecture.

So much of your work orchestrates an almost theatrical experience of space. Here you are coming into an exhibition of your work that is in a museum setting. How do you think about how you want visitors to experience this space and these representations of your work?

I’ve only had an exhibition of our work once before, and there was no natural light in the space. You had control with spotlights of what you show and what you

don't show. That could make what felt like a pile of junk from my studio look like a really good exhibition. We're normally doing projects but the project is the thing, not an exhibition of our working process. It is different than being that sort of theatrical control. Maybe I'm a control freak, so I'm used to an environment where you can control the cinematic experience – or maybe cinography is the word. I was worried [at the Nasher] that daylight reveals all. We were wondering if we had all this daylight splashing down on our things, whether it would look maudlin somehow. But the quality of light is beautiful and the exhibition design was designed trying to make the best of that. It is a very particular building to have light in the entire ceiling like that is quite different.

You mentioned cinema, and I wanted to ask you if movies were an important early inspiration for your work, since much of it can feel like stage craft or set design, and your working approach feels a bit eccentric, like character from Willy Wonka or *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

My grandfather was very interested in the engineers of the industrial revolution, and Georgian and Victorian times in the United Kingdom, which was a time of particular growth and development. Then when I was older, Hitchcock was interesting to me because he invented — he thought about the experience of the cinema goer and then invented whatever he needed to invent in order to create the feelings that he wanted to have in people. I feel that architecture and design has gotten obsessed with itself and with ideas of geometry. And so I've been trying to find ways to think from that human experience side. And I guess a film director is thinking about the experience of the viewer all of the time. I don't feel that I am like an artist who is expressing myself. I'm interested in the response of what something does. Each of the projects is thinking of its context

This consideration of the experience of a thing seems explicit in the Seed Cathedral. How did this idea of context drive the design of that project?

I didn't set out to make something that was as extreme an object as it is. It was more that in the context of 250 national pavilions, all screaming at you, and each one having a three hour queue, some even more – that's hell when you think

about it, in very hot temperatures in shanghai. The British government had given us the brief that we had to be in the top five. So we were just analyzing that. How do you actually be in the top 5? So you imagine what everyone else is going to do, and then not do that.

What did you think everyone else going to do?

We guessed that the pressure on designers with national agendas to show that Belarus or Portugal or South Korea has got food, is a nice place to go on holiday, has great economy, etc. – is similar. People try to say too much. We decided to do one thing. Could the UK have the confidence to not trot out the same old heritage story about tea bags and castles and Sherlock Holmes? That analysis brought us to thinking about how the whole expo was about the future of cities. And the UK pioneered the integration of nature into cities in a particular way. We had the world's first botanical institution at Kew Gardens; we have the greenest cities of their size in the world because of the Georgians and Victorians thinking that it was good for the health of their city to have parks and public squares, and they forced that to happen. This analysis led us to using only a 6th of the site, because we had half the budget of the other western nations. I'm trying to evoke for you that the lines of largest that end up in the world's biggest, hairy building, once the ludicrous object, but in a way it was the most serious object. It had a quarter of million seeds inside and nothing else. Nothing asking your opinion. No famous actor's voices. No LEDs no televisions. And designing the other 5/6th of the site be forgettable. Very deliberately.

It seems like what a lot of your work does is identify where conventional thinking translates into creating the same solutions to the same problems over and over, and then trying to tackle it again in a new way.

It is knowing when convention is wonderful and totally appropriate. Through that kind of questioning you come to think, 'oh that's very good, that's why they did that.' But sometimes that questioning does find an angle that is missing or a possibility that could be there. I just think that humans are responsive to ideas. We're interested in what the future is, and that's made of ideas. I think we've got obsessed with style, rather than what's the idea. In my studio with my own team,

a lot of our discussions, we can easily find yourself doing something that is actual idealist. I don't trust that. I suppose I'm interested in people who, whether in science or business or writing, are whole-hearted. And I hope that our studio's work attempts to be really whole-hearted. I feel that city planners and people like that, they want to do things that are authentic and that their granddaughter can say, 'my granddad helped that to happen.' It is trying to see if we can together evolve ideas that will be would capture people's precious bit of their life. Life goes so quickly, so why waste your time doing things that are versions of things that are rehashed if something could be pushed or tested?

This holistic attitude speaks to the multi-disciplinary approach you're studio is known for. How did that approach evolve?

There wasn't a great singular moment. I was brought up unaware that there was so many divisions, actually, and then became surprised to find that there was such separate fashions of thought. There were people with no making sensibility and yet they were making some of the biggest objects in the world with no passion for making. No real experience – have never even touched a brick. And it is sort of pushing geometry around. And so no wonder things were so clinical. I studied wood, metal ceramics, and glass, plastics. That's what we do now. And in a way, ideas don't have boundaries. I don't think of what we do as multi-disciplinary. I see it as a single discipline. It is problem solving and looking at the public world around us.

When you put together your studio, did you know you wanted to foster this kind of approach?

When I was doing my master degree at the Royal College of Art in London I had an interesting experience. It is quite a big deal to get in there and so, on day one, you can see the look in everybody's eyes, the 'I'm pretty good look.' So they think, I must be brilliant, and they sit there by themselves at each of their desks trying to brilliant. And so you fall into this trap. There is the promotion of the idea of the individual genius. That doesn't really work for me. And I realized I had this disability: I didn't sit by myself and generate the ideas of the future, and suddenly it all came alive. It was through dialogue. That felt like a disability, at the time, but working on big building projects you need many of you together. We push

each other in the studio, there are concurrent projects all at different stages. I love that. I feel very privileged to have got to the point where there is this gang of us and there are these changes to carry through. But very much the people who commission us are our partners as well, and you learn a lot from the people you work with.

What kinds of commissions appeal to you?

There are quite a lot of good designers in the world, and there are more than really good clients. You can't help yourself but say yes to all the ones where there is a fantastic client collaborator. We never turn down when you really feel like you're the right person to do it, or when you think, I wonder what the answer would be and there would be this adventure to try to get to the point where there is an outcome that's interesting? For example, someone we know has just approached us about building a school, a really large school, and that's really interested. I went to quite a few different schools in my raggedy hodge-podge education, and I know there are not many really, really good school environments. And with the different forms of learning, with digital technologies that exist now, that's going to be really interesting. How is there a way to say no to that? So I like projects where you feel like you can make a difference or where there's something that can be done that hasn't been necessarily done to death.

You have spoken in the past about wanting to be an inventor. Are you drawn to projects that allow you to dream up something new?

When I was little I liked inventing. But then I found out that you couldn't study invention. Everything that was interesting was about inventing something – in food, sculpture, in writing, in science. Someone could be an inventive sort. But the word invention was always mad it was connected. In a way I'm anti-Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and the promotion of 'Whoa, it's so wacky.' To me I'm a pretty serious person. And that motivates me. The function of the projects, and to me the how something looks and feels is part of its function – it's just part of the many, many things that go into it.

Disclaimer: As I've mentioned before, my significant other is now communications manager at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

