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U.K.-Based Designer on Why Biophilic Living Is Here to Stay

“If people don’t feel emotionally engaged by a place, it’s not sustainable,” says Thomas Heatherwick

BY LUCY COHEN BLATTER | ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON NOVEMBER 30, 2020 | [MANSION GLOBAL](#)



Mr. Heatherwick with exterior and interior views of his latest design project—Eden, an ultra-luxury residential development in Singapore. COMPOSITE: HUFTON + CROW; COURTESY OF THOMAS HEATHERWICK

With the Eden development in Singapore, designer Thomas Heatherwick helped create a manifestation of biophilic living.

As Covid-19 lockdowns around the world show the importance of living with access to green space, Eden feels perfectly of its time, a luxury building that offers owners to live with nature all around them.

It was built around the principle that there’s a correlation between physiological and psychological wellbeing when nature is present in urban life.

The ultra-luxury building features 20 apartments, each occupying a full floor, with spacious, light-filled central living areas that bring in the verdant greenery on its balconies. The window design in the apartments allows for cross ventilation, too. The 22-story building, dotted in greenery with plants on each level’s balconies, is instantly recognizable as a stark juxtaposition to the glass and steel buildings around it.



SHAMIN ABAS
COMMUNICATIONS FOR ULTRA-LUXURY BRANDS

It's the first completed residential project in the city-state for both its developer, Swire Properties, and Mr. Heatherwick, founder of design and architecture firm Heatherwick Studio.

We caught up with the U.K.-based Mr. Heatherwick to discuss the importance of living among nature even in a crowded city, why surroundings matter as much as what's inside a home, and more.

Mansion Global: Can you tell us a little about biophilic living? What does it mean and why do you think it's particularly important at this current moment?

Thomas Heatherwick: It sounded like a fake science word when I heard about it nine years ago. It sounded like an overly complicated way of saying plants are quite good. As we experimented more, we noticed the issue wasn't just about plants. It was rooted in mental health and the neuroscience of place. We have our conscious mind and our unconscious experience of the world around us and they both affect us.

I was born in London, which is one of the greenest cities in the world in terms of parks and heaths and garden squares. There was a culture baked into the city which meant you had proximity to nature. It was only when I traveled and spent time in cities with no greenery that I realized how different I felt. There was nothing to mediate or soften the hardness that the human-made city brought.

Buildings have become quite detail-less since World War II. Homes have become machines that you live in, and the office has become a machine you work in. That felt appropriate after World War II for a time of austerity. But our humanity was forgotten. My studio was created as a counterpoint to that.

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Biophilia is not just about plants and leaves, it's about engagement with your senses and the natural world. If you're in a double-glazed office building that's hermetically sealed with A/C, you can't hear the rain or feel the breeze, and in many cases can't see the sun.

Because of the Covid crisis when there's been a retreat to our homes, it means we're not living on work's terms. It's about seeing what our terms are. People are going to be making their homes better.



MG: The Eden project is very unique. Can you tell us about it?

TH: When we were planning, we went all around the world to see how we could do this in a tall building. There are gardens everywhere. And we figured out a way that we could open up the windows three ways, so that we don't need air conditioning and you can feel like you're living in the real world, you can hear birds and feel the world going by. We're as proud of the cross-ventilation as we are of the plants.

Eden would have been a more perfect place to lock down.

MG: Why do you think sustainable living is here to stay?

TH: Years ago I was visiting the offices of Amazon in South Africa. Someone told me they were paying their workers more to *not* come into the office. The idea was there are all these empty homes all day long, and empty offices all night long. It's crazy to not use space well. There's the potential to use space better, and not pointlessly move around, and only commute when you need to. I'm excited about people making their homes more appropriate for living. Our homes had been places where we didn't spend much of our time. That's changing.

MG: Will architecture change as a result of the pandemic?

TH: Hopefully we'll use space better and we'll see better designs. People won't be able to get away with lazy design as people realize they don't *have* to go to universities or offices.

There's excitement within this tragedy, and maybe I'm an optimist, but it's open season for intelligent conversation about the components of our lives.

MG: How has business been for you since Covid-19 started? What are some of the challenges and maybe even opportunities you've faced?

TH: Like with everybody, there was a shock phase at the beginning, where we were trying to take in this situation that no one wanted to happen, and then finding that the technology that was around us was more capable than we expected.

I felt very lucky to have such a strong team. We all know each other very, very well. We had real resources to draw from.



MG: How do you define luxury?

TH: My mentor was a man called Terence Conran, the founder of [famed British furnishings brand] Habitat, who passed away a few weeks ago. He profoundly changed Britain from terrible food [he was also a restaurateur], furniture, et cetera. He modernized us. He said that the greatest luxury is space. For example, with the Eden project, the apartments aren't gigantic, but it's about how we've used the space. The living space is connected to the garden on three sides. For me, luxury is the confidence to make a simple place engaging. More broadly, luxury is ideas, not glossy materials. It's things that facilitate you in your life.

Everyone needs to feel that they're special. There's this attitude that wealthy people design specialness for themselves, and everyone else should be happy with the basics. But the basics must include humanity. We need to build places that support the idiosyncrasies of everyone.

MG: How would you describe your dream property?

TH: I wish I could afford one of the Eden apartments. The idea of living in Singapore would be wonderful, now that we're being locked down twice.

I'm interested in places that are not homogenous, and feel diverse. I'm less interested in my personal home, and more about the other homes around it—the feeling of living in a place with diverse people, living within a broad and varied society. Home as a bubble of gorgeousness that's disconnected from other people is not ideal to me. I miss going on public transport, just seeing people and feeling we're in the city together.

