



**This page:**  
Designed by Heatherwick Studio, Eden is a luxury residential tower in Singapore that comprises 20 apartments, each with its own hanging garden

**Opposite page:**  
London-based designer Thomas Heatherwick

| Iconoclast |

# Joy of Making

Thomas Heatherwick's imaginative legacy reflects his desire to create meaningful pieces and places—ranging from a scalable sculpture in New York to a residential tower with hanging gardens in Singapore

By Luo Jingmei



If potential clients ask Thomas Heatherwick for a napkin sketch upon their first meeting, he'd decline politely, for his creations are born in his workshop through comprehensive experimentation and back-and-forth discourse. Like master builders of yore, Heatherwick is a tinkerer who is unencumbered by categorisation.

As such, the British designer's works are fascinatingly tactile, detailed and original. For the Pacific Place project in Hong Kong, the toilet-stall hinge design was as agonised over as the mall's undulating stone exterior. The 2010 UK Pavilion for the World Expo in Shanghai had 60,000 acrylic rods protruding like porcupine needles and his London 2012 Olympic Cauldron deconstructed into 204 copper petals as souvenirs for participating countries after the event. Currently under construction in Shanghai is the 1,000 Trees multiplex, whose columns peak into planters that appear as rolling hills.

## EARLY START

Heatherwick's creative family shaped this progressive, exacting sensibility. His grandmother founded Marks & Spencer's textile design studio and his painter-jeweller mother took him to model engineering shows and craft fairs where he observed processes of iron forging, glassblowing and metal machining. "It was exciting to go to a steel factory and see the workers rolling giant sections of steel or hammering ball bearings. This contrasted with the many buildings I saw that had been built in the 1980s and 1990s which seemed so sterile and did not (demonstrate) the way materials are made," he says.

Main image: Eden / Hutton+Crow. Portrait: photography Earl Wain

After studying three-dimensional design at the Royal College of Art in London, Heatherwick established his namesake studio in 1994 to continue his rigorous research into interesting ways of using materials. The few showcased on his website are a fraction of over 100 studies that are detailed in his monograph, aptly titled *Making*.

Like basket weavers, he has woven metal mesh strips for the willowy entrance of Guy's Hospital in London and made straight-faced adults chuckle in his swivelling Spun chair for Magis. In a Longchamp store in New York, rolled steel and glass ebb and flow in a staircase that garners as much, if not more, attention than the exquisite leather goods.



**Left to right:** Designed for the London 2012 Olympic Games, the Olympic Cauldron featured 204 copper petals that each represented the competing nations; at Coal Drops Yard in London, the roofs of a pair of restored Victorian warehouses connect to form a viewing gallery and retail space



### MAGNANIMOUS DESIGN

Heatherwick's ingenuity has earned him countless honours. This includes being the youngest practitioner to be appointed a Royal Designer for Industry by the British Royal Society of Arts in 2004; he was then 34 years old. But all the affable designer wants to do is create meaningful and soulful work. "I think it's important to make designs that connect with people's humanity and there are many different ways to do that. There's an ugliness to repeating a formula everywhere in the world," he says. "Copy-pasting designs does not respect context and a project's users. We find beauty in things that are generous to us," he says.

In the Eden condominium in Singapore, this means giving occupants the best of tropical living with large, shaded balconies and three-way cross ventilation. "The beauty there, I hope, is the integration of the gardens (into the architecture)," says Heatherwick of the design that embraces biophilic principles and extends Singapore's lush greenery upwards. Unlike the surrounding glass-and-metal towers, scalloped balconies hang between three structural blades finished in earth-toned concrete that Heatherwick accords texture and narrative to, by using abstract mouldings of the Singapore map. Glass apartments are barely soulful, he says. "Glass reflects light and is very harsh and clinical. It's not good for your soul if you were hermetically sealed in a glass box. You need nature—the breeze, sound of rain—and Singapore has all of that."



Photography: Hufton + Crow (Coal Drops Yard), Jasper White (Olympic Cauldron)

"We've learnt how important our homes are, so the places that aren't our homes will have to be really meaningful or we won't go there"



Image: Zhu Qingyan (1,000 Trees)

## Think Different

*The most recent projects that exemplify Heatherwick Studio's unique approach*

### ZEITZ MOCAA

*Cape Town, South Africa (2017)*  
For the continent's first museum dedicated to contemporary African art, Heatherwick retained the character of an old grain silo while updating it for its new cultural functions. The firm carved into the tightly packed concrete structures, creating a large central space with cathedral-quality light from gem-like windows fritted with a pattern by West African artist El Loko that is repeated on the adjoining grading tower.

### COAL DROPS YARD

*London, UK (2018)*  
Critics have commented on King's Cross Central's gentrification with this project, but there is no doubt its dramatic form has livened up the district. Formerly used to receive coal from South Yorkshire before it was transported into London, two Victorian warehouses were restored and connected with a "kissing roof". The gesture also adds 20,000sqft of glazed retail space within.

### MAGGIE'S CENTRE

*Leeds, UK (2020)*  
This project is a case study in biophilic architecture. Heatherwick employs natural, tactile materials to create a haven for cancer patients who visit for practical and emotional support. Tracing the site's sloped contours, the building is constructed with a prefabricated and sustainably sourced timber system. Inside, the glulam timber fins rise like tree trunks to support roof gardens that give back to the St James's University Hospital its last grassy spot.

### LITTLE ISLAND

*New York, US (2021)*  
Little Island is a new 0.97-hectare public park and outdoor performance space on Manhattan's Pier 55. After facing setbacks in its initial phases that ballooned project costs to US\$250 million (S\$342 million), the venture is now underway. Inspired by the old timber piles protruding from the Hudson River, 132 new concrete piles extend out to support an elevated platform with bulbous bases that also serve as planters.

## HERITAGE & INNOVATION

In Singapore, Heatherwick designed Changi Airport Terminal 5 in partnership with American architecture firm Kohn Pedersen Fox (KPF), which will “consider the humanity of the traveller”. This mega airport project, however, is currently on hold due to changes to air travel demand caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Heatherwick Studio also worked on the Learning Hub at Nanyang Technological University, which features British artist Sara Fanelli’s artwork etched into concrete walls like cave drawings alongside construction bubbles and marks. Informally dubbed the “dim sum basket building” for its assemblage of rotund rooms, it has a rustic look that the designer likens to archaic spaces.

“I feel excited about using concrete with the spirit of a potter—mixing colour into the clay, the pouring process, the qualities that emerge. The modern movement in architecture was trying to suppress imperfections, but perfection



**Previous spread:** Little Island, an ongoing park project in New York

**Clockwise from opposite:** The Zeitz MOCAA museum in Cape Town is the world’s largest facility dedicated to contemporary African art; a collection of handmade concrete towers surrounds the atrium of the Learning Hub at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore; the Vessel at New York’s Hudson Yards is a climbable sculpture that references India’s ancient stepwells

often creates boring things. We make those imperfections something we can cherish in the same way we cherish handmade ceramics,” says Heatherwick, referencing the Japanese *wabi-sabi* aesthetic concept that acknowledges beauty in impermanence and incompleteness.

These qualities are what make older architecture timeless. “It’s hard to find examples where the structure gets better the older it gets, and yet some places on the planet that we love are full of imperfections,” says Heatherwick. History has provided him with many precedents; in his controversial Vessel, a spiral staircase in New York’s Hudson Yards, the 2,500 steps mimic India’s ancient stepwells to foster spontaneous social interactions among visitors.

In these unsettling times of the pandemic and thereafter, emotionally engaging spaces are increasingly vital. “We’ve learnt how important our homes are, so the places that aren’t our homes will have to be really meaningful or we won’t go there,” reflects Heatherwick. “It makes the physical places that we will share more important than ever.”



Photograph: Fulton & Crow (Zeitz MOCAA, Learning Hub); Michael Morgan (Vessel)