

PRESTIGE

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FEBRUARY 2021

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**PASSION
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COURAGE**

SOCIETY
PERSONALITIES
LET LOVE LEAD
THE WAY

WOMEN WHO
DON'T QUIT

JEWELS OF
ROMANCE



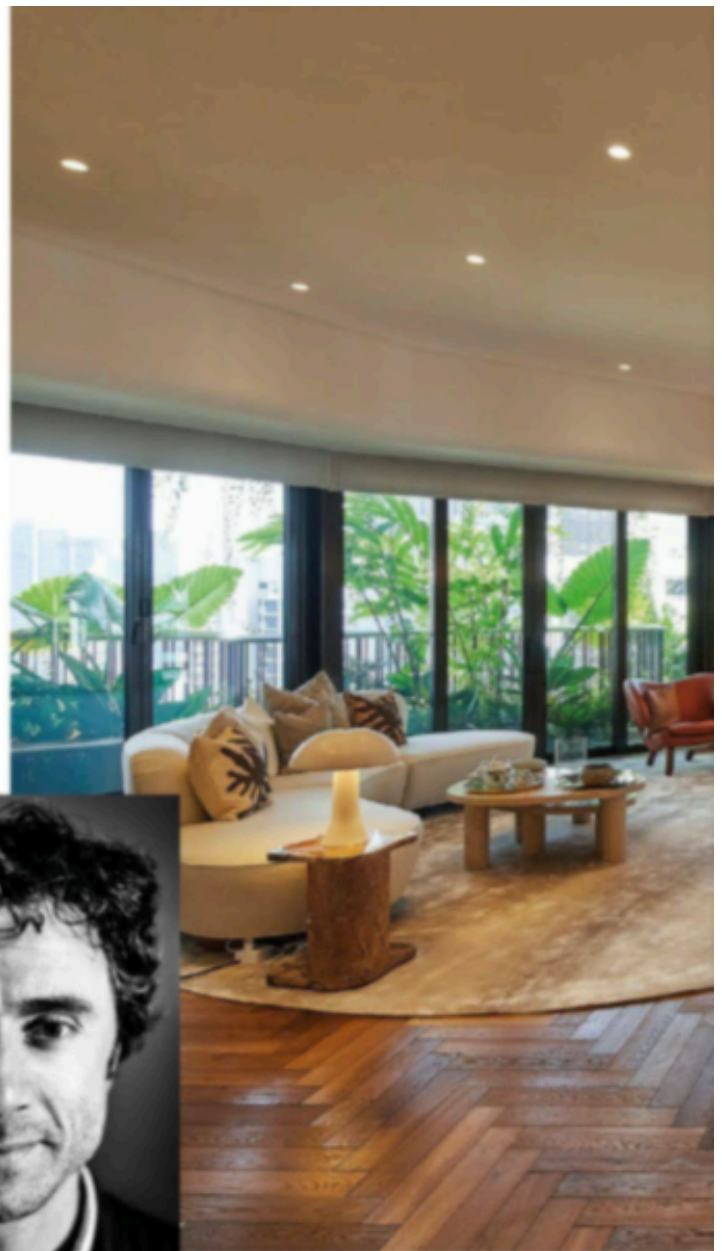
SHAMIN ABAS
COMMUNICATIONS FOR ULTRA-LUXURY BRANDS

PARADISE IN THE SKY

Rising high above Draycott Park is new ultra-luxury condominium Eden, the brainchild of internationally renowned architect THOMAS HEATHERWICK, who speaks to Yanni Tan about how the development is his vision of biophilia and the humanity the urban environment needs now.

Driving into the basement carpark of Eden on an afternoon is like entering a cave – quite unlike the typical Singaporean experience of using the functional grey carparks ubiquitous in our urban jungle. Surprisingly, the air is not stuffy and the brown walls are clad with an undulating texture revealed by slivers of daylight from above.

When I mention this experience during my videocall interview with Thomas Heatherwick, he seems pleased. A carpark would appear an inconsequential amenity to many, but here we are talking to an eminent British architect who dreamt up the magnificent honeycombed Vessel in New York, two massive Google buildings in Mountain View, California, the Olympic Cauldron and a variety of cutting-edge projects in his native London. Also tasked with designing Changi Airport Terminal 5, the man is meanwhile set to unveil the 1000 Trees multi-use complex in Shanghai and the Little Island pier by the Hudson River in New York this year.



Preferring to call himself a designer, Heatherwick is known as a cross-disciplinary maverick who straddles the worlds of art, architecture and engineering. Nature and sculptural, organic forms are signature features of his works – and they are the defining traits of the Eden project that took a team of around 200 experts some five years to realise.

EMBRACING THE OUTDOORS

Eden is Heatherwick's first residential project in Singapore, having completed the environmental award-winning "The Hive" Learning Hub at Nanyang Technological University in 2015 after his eponymous



The lush balconies flow into the living spaces seamlessly, and vice versa, at Eden



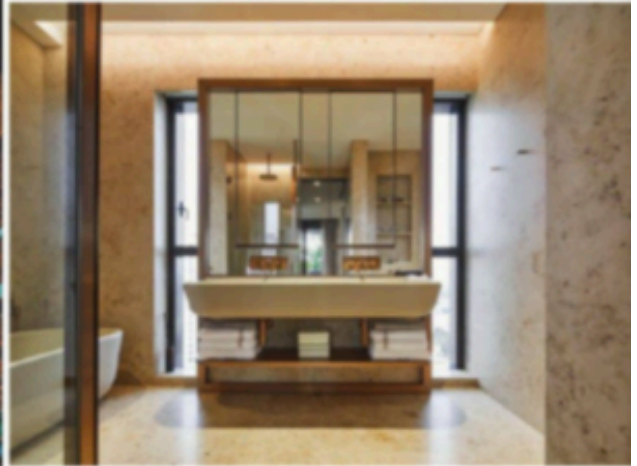
firm Heatherwick Studio snagged a design competition. The freehold condominium is a masterpiece in the concept of biophilia, which posits that humans possess an innate affinity with nature and the environment. And it is obviously his passion, palpable from how thoughtfully he spoke at length about his creative and research process, and the enlightening nuggets he shared during our conversation.

"Whether it is people living in New York or Europe, they retreat from the climates rather than embrace it. In Singapore, it's like people got scared of the heat and humidity so they just hermetically seal themselves indoors. I'd visited lots of apartments in my research and I was a bit shocked by that," says Heatherwick, who then had his eureka

moment on the 10th floor of an apartment in the vicinity. "It had windows open on more than one side, and suddenly the cross-ventilation was magical. I felt so alive rather than dead in the other air-conditioned prisons. A closer connection to nature isn't a vain or sentimental thing; it can actually become a lifeblood for you."

When it came to conceiving a biophilic design for the 20-storey Eden, Heatherwick had no lack of inspiration and even knowledge of our city, being a frequent business traveller who has chalked up over 50 trips here so far. He cites our founding father Lee Kuan Yew's vision of a "City in a Garden" as a powerful influence and how Singapore is already a pioneer in integrating nature into architecture.





Clockwise from left: The cantilevered clamshell balconies; the master bathroom clad in Jura limestone; the single-tower Eden rests on blades

All that isn't mere lip service. He talked about how our heritage black-and-white houses or houses with gardens are the most desirable homes; he considered how natural ventilation can best replace air conditioning in our tropical climate; and he wondered how to let the garden grow upwards into the light than keeping it many floors below.

BLADES OF BRILLIANCE

The cave-like carpark I observed was just a clever continuity of Eden's ingenious design extending from above. The 104.5m-tall building structure is supposed to resemble blades, explains Heatherwick, with a little bit of daylight running down the blades into the basement and highlighting the textured carpark walls that bear the natural topography of Singapore – a unique feature cast from a laboriously hand-chiselled mould that also adorns a portion of the building's facade in the ground-level manicured gardens next to the infinity pool.

"It isn't just about blending the indoors and outdoors better but

what works well for an apartment project. Should buildings sit big and heavy on the ground, or could a building touch the ground lightly? I also wondered whether an air-conditioned lobby was necessary and if you could just walk into a garden and take an elevator right up to your unit," he adds, explaining that his blade concept allows the single-tower Eden to rest on the ground very lightly while lifting the first apartment to 27 metres up in the sky.

The 20 south-facing apartments, each 3,035 sq ft and taking up a whole floor, also pose a different set of challenges and opportunities.

PHOTOS: EARL WAN (THOMAS HEATHERWICK), SWIRE PROPERTIES (EDEN)



“And so we set ourselves the goal of making a very flexible living space. It is very large and generous, with the kitchen and main living room blended together in a flowing way because we don’t live in an old-fashioned way where you’d go into separate kitchens and living rooms.”

Bringing nature into the home involved designing a series of cantilevered clamshell balconies teeming with greenery – Eden’s distinctive feature, which looms over the Ardmore skyline like a sight for sore eyes. Scaled across all the floors in varying arrangements, they are not just aesthetically pleasing but maximise solar shading for each unit. “Instead of having one little dry balcony, we brought the garden into each living space so that it flows out on every side,” says Heatherwick, who used the balconies to open up the walls on three sides of each apartment to optimise light, views and natural cross ventilation. The main south-facing balcony offers an unblocked 270-degree panorama that stretches from Goodwood Hill to ION Orchard, while each of the four en-suite bathrooms boast their own slice of jungle and city vista.

“When you look out, the garden becomes your stained glass. It’s kinetic as the plants move when there’s a breeze,” he adds, as he informs

“I feel that it’s important to integrate nature, landscape and all the factors rather than just lead from a very cerebral, city-planning dimension.”

me that the 100 species of exquisite tropical plants and trees featured throughout the estate were sourced from garden centres from Malaysia and Thailand. “They are really special specimens. There’s an amazing plant collector whom we had to persuade to give us some of his private collection. This could really feel like a museum of extraordinary plants.”

Maintaining the flow between the interior and exterior are elements that blend harmoniously. Take, for instance, the balconies’ textured slate floors that mirror the herringbone pattern of the stunning, UK-imported oak wood flooring indoors. “We proposed using a very natural wooden floor, which has details that aren’t defects to me. There are knots and natural features where the branches would have come off. That’s the beauty of it. But it took a lot of persuading to show that this actually is more special and precious than what people are used to.”

Other bespoke highlights include the large solid walnut front doors, into which were carved with the same 3D topography of Singapore; the 180-million-year-old cross-cut Jura limestone featuring fossilised imprints from Germany that line the bathroom floors and walls; and the huge slab of rare Italian Carrara marble used as the dry kitchen countertop. “There was craftsmanship in as many details as possible. I’ve learnt that so often in architecture, people think very big but they forget to give the love at the small scale.”

HEART AND HUMANITY

Indeed, even when Heatherwick has managed to conjure up a real sense of beauty and awe for Eden with his evocative descriptions, the proof is in the pudding. The air-conditioned Singaporean in me does not notice that the ground-floor lift lobby is not enclosed, and after I step out of the lift on the 20th floor and into the living space, I find myself in a wonderful light-filled, breezy atrium.

Despite not boasting a conventional rectangular shape, the floorplan is judiciously designed. The bedrooms are nestled along two ends; the kitchen is spacious and stylish; the yard is functional and bright; there are no cramped or oddly shaped spots. Elevating the space is masterful detailing and, of course, Heatherwick’s “landscape bouquet”. Pointing out the organically curved balustrades of the balconies, he says, “They are not ships where you’re holding onto the edge for dear life. They’re something that you can lean on to look at the world and relax. In a home, it’s so important that you can linger, contemplate and, hopefully, do good things with your life.”

Heatherwick’s approach boils down to humanity and connection, which bring us back to the topic of biophilia. “For decades, the public have felt very disconnected from architecture. There’s been a sort of division between how the public experiences architecture and how the building designers perceive their creations. In the past decades, there have been some of the worst buildings ever built. It’s astonishing.”

It relates to his desire to be called a designer instead of an architect: “We are mainly working on buildings and pieces of a city but I feel that it’s important to integrate nature, landscape and all the factors rather than just lead from a very cerebral, city-planning dimension. Going down to the smallest detail, including furniture and product design, I see all of that coming together as one spectrum rather than separate professions. I’m wary of the slicing up of the built environment into these funny, different specialisms.”

Thankfully, Eden’s property developer is as visionary as Heatherwick. “I was very lucky to be working with Swire Properties with whom I’ve collaborated before in Hong Kong. I knew they were ambitious, willing to invest in developing something that didn’t exist already in Singapore, and wanted to focus on lives.”

Together, they developed this stunning counterpoint to the visual language and sometimes monotonous experience of our modern high-rise city. “Does the building care about you? Could we be the least shiny apartment, unlike the bright white residences that look like spaceships? We were trying to build on a heritage and philosophy that already exist here. I hope that this project will inspire Singapore to carry on being a leader in the world in making more human-centred places.” ■

