

Thomas Heatherwick Article/Modern Weekly

The British design maverick talks exclusively with Modern Weekly about his retrospective exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, his design projects within China and how he managed to keep his 2012 Olympic Games cauldron one of the worlds best kept secrets.

From the discrete entrance in London's King's Cross, an area that until recently has been sorely neglected, it would be hard to tell you are about to enter the powerhouse of British design. Heatherwick Studio is a vast workshop where the design team are hard at work, surrounded by architectural models and cabinets displaying material samples, overlooked by a taxidermy squirrel in a glass case. Building plans are pinned to the wall under spotlights and small teams gather around them, deep in discussion. At the centre of this creativity is the energetic mastermind Thomas Heatherwick, a man who Terence Conran once described as 'the Leonardo da Vinci of our times'. It would be hard to compress Thomas Heatherwick in a simple category. In the 18 years since he started Heatherwick Studio, the practice has spanned the disciplines of architecture, sculpture, furniture, engineering and urban planning, with a continuously questioning approach to redesigning the environment around us. He is often described as an eccentric inventor, even the mad professor of the design world. However, the man who invites us into his studio is focussed, eloquent and clearly a strategic thinker.

He is pleased to tell us that he has just found out that his first solo exhibition at the prestigious Victoria & Albert Museum has been the most visited paying show that the museum has ever hosted. Accolade indeed for the designer who is passionate about his designs being in the public sphere. So how did it feel to see the fruits of your career condensed into one large room? 'It felt like my whole life was flashing before me' laughs Heatherwick. 'We had an opening party and invited all the people who have helped the studio be what it is, from lecturers who taught me 25 years ago, to metal polishers and engineers that we've worked with. It was one of the most moving moments of my life to bring everyone together who had helped the studio achieve what it has.'

The exhibition provides a fascinating walk through the mind of the designer who is driven by a strong sense of curiosity and experimentation. Heatherwick credits his upbringing with having a profound effect on his work. 'In a way what I do as a designer and in our architectural work now, is a direct extension of what I was doing when I was five years old'. He was brought up in a large, rambling house in London's Wood Green, which offered plenty of space for the young designer to convert into a studio. 'I met someone when I was younger who made hammocks, so at one point I was making fisherman nets which I hung from the walls. I have always made things and been interested in the ideas behind objects.' Heatherwick comes from creative stock; his mother was a jeweller who had a workshop at home, while his grandmother had set up the textile design studio for the high-street chain Marks and Spencer. Heatherwick describes his grandmother as 'a very focussed, determined lady. The strength of her commitment to pursuing

creative ideas rippled through the family. She was a very powerful influence and was also very interested in beauty and felt it was something that was not really discussed anymore. I have found that to be true and with my designs now I try to balance the theoretical and social basis for the built environment, with grappling with what has meaning and beauty to us’.

Heatherwick went on to study three-dimensional design at Manchester Polytechnic, where he was the first student on the course to roll up his sleeves and make a building with his own hands for his final project. This was an important milestone in his career. It confirmed to Heatherwick that an understanding of materials was essential for a designer and not just an area of concern for the contractors. It appears that no task is too large or too small for Heatherwick, as displayed alongside his design for a toilet door hinge, is a model of B of the Bang, Britain’s largest public sculpture that sadly had to be dismantled due to structural problems. Also included in the show is the handbag that he designed for the French luxury brand Longchamp, made entirely from one long zip. His concept for the East Beach Café took a former ice-cream kiosk and used curved steel boxes to create a futuristic structure that resembled shingle on a beach. The café soon became a local landmark for the coastal town of Littlehampton and has been credited with reviving tourism within the area. In 2004 Heatherwick Studio was commissioned to produce a design for a pedestrian bridge for a canal in London. They came up with the Rolling Bridge, a bridge that can curl itself into a ball to allow boats to pass through the water, and then uncoil itself to become a footpath again. This design brilliantly captured the public imagination and often receives applause from the bystanders who come to watch this feat of engineering in action. More recently he took on the challenge of redesigning the red London bus making it larger, sleeker and more comfortable. It has been fifty years since this icon of London has been rethought, and soon six hundred of his new buses will be cruising the streets of London.

It was however his design for the cauldron of the 2012 Olympic Games ceremony that seemed to be attracting the crowds to the exhibition. The cauldron was made of 204 polished copper petals, each representing a competing national team. During the opening ceremony the cauldron created a giant kinetic sculpture in the centre of the stadium, which aimed to visually symbolise hope and peace. It was produced in his workshop under strict confidentiality conditions. ‘No one was allowed to tell their mothers or friends and everyone in the studio had to sign an extra confidentiality agreement, not to make it a contract but to remind them again not to tell anyone’ he says in a loud whisper. ‘Confidentiality is an important thing though and in a way it is the ultimate act of flirtation, withholding a secret gets everyone’s interest. You can see peoples eyes flash with excitement when they hear about secrets being withheld. I now need to find some new secrets’ he laughs. Rehearsals took place under stringent conditions, sometimes at 3 in the morning so no aeroplanes could fly over the stadium. ‘There were 10,000 volunteers and performers practicing in the stadium, so we had to wait until they had all gone home to test and refine it. When we were able to do this there were about 10 people in the stadium, which was lovely. It was like being in a museum on your own at night, which I’ve had the privilege to do a few times. The feeling

of being in a place designed for 80,000 people and there are just ten of you; that silence is magical. Choosing to place the cauldron under the stadium stage, rather than on the skyline was a key point for keeping the design a secret. 'Everyone assumed it would be on the roof. Even when we did the dress rehearsal, we had children carrying buckets instead of the petals and no one seemed to question why as they were all looking towards the roof!' An estimated one billion people watched the opening ceremony on television and Heatherwick admits that even for a designer used to working in the public sphere, it was a little daunting. 'I was slightly in denial about the scale of the Olympic cauldron design. I had to be, in order to work on it and not be intimidated by the project' he reflects.

Heatherwick's first high profile project in Asia was to redesign Pacific Place in Hong Kong. The shopping and entertainment mall had originally been built in the 1980s in the area next to Hong Kong Island's Admiralty MTR interchange station. Heatherwick installed flat skylights to maintain the natural daylight, used white swirling steel to create a cloud-like ceiling in the restaurant, and used bent wood and curved stone throughout the complex. The overall effect was clean, organic and easy for the visitor to navigate. Amazingly they somehow managed to complete this major renovation task while the mall stayed open for business.

A couple of years into the Pacific Place project, Heatherwick beat off stiff competition to win the chance to design the UK pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. The international fair attracted seventy million visitors who came to see the pavilions from over 200 countries, showcasing their national culture, technology and achievements. The British government provided Heatherwick Studio with half the budget of the other main western nations, along with the strict brief that it must be voted in the top 5 of all the pavilions. Heatherwick rose to the challenge by creating the Seed Cathedral, a modest building in size that had 60,000 clear acrylic rods protruding from it, each encompassing a seed at the tip. These rods danced in the wind rather like grass, giving it an organic feel and the nickname of the 'hairy building'. Heatherwick was determined that the vision of Britain that he presented must progress beyond bowler hats, Beefeaters and Buckingham Palace. 'We felt a responsibility to create a pavilion that didn't endlessly promote Britain as a place of conservation of the past. That is a stereotype that is widely believed around the world and in a way that is great because we have a lot of incredible things to conserve, but there is a balancing factor as we also have a new cultural heritage to talk about. We tried to manifest the parts of Britain that people were not expecting to see. Although our budget was tight, we were voted number one pavilion at the Expo. I think that was because we used design to stand out, grab peoples imagination and pull them in.' The Shanghai Expo marked a turning point for Heatherwick's profile in Asia and lead to connections with influential city mayors and property developers. He found within these meetings 'a greater level of cultural sophistication than the UK. There was a deep work ethic, but also a hunger to find meaning within the context of a civilisation of China and a genuine receptiveness to ideas. I think it is an interesting time within China as there has been sustained

economic growth and development over a period of time. The first wave of building development felt as if it was so excited to make change and was very influenced by the rest of the world, using similar languages and approaches. I think now the people we are working with in China are looking with sophisticated eyes at those buildings and thinking, 'that's good' but let's do something specific to China rather than imported from elsewhere in the world. That is the question mark that excites me; trying to stitch meaning into projects that make them specific to a place and not generic buildings that feel as if they've landed with a parachute from Europe or America.' Heatherwick is wary of a uniformed style of contemporary architecture being adopted throughout the world, leading to homogeneous cities that lose their national identity. "When I was younger I was told that travel broadens the mind, but I keep visiting places and finding they were probably more interesting 20 years earlier. That is a great danger of the time we are in now, with global dissemination of information, techniques, processes, that best practice is adopted all over the world and made similar. My role in our architecture projects is to use my passion for inventing unique solutions to invent for that specific place and not do a version of what I have done elsewhere. I don't want to have a similar style that I just role out'. So what does he feel have been successful in the recent architecture in China? 'In Shanghai I have seen some interesting re-use of existing buildings. For example, taking industrial factory buildings and not flattening them, but on the other hand not over respecting them. They are daring to be modern but also to intervene with the existing building by casting new concrete staircases, building new roofs but keeping certain original features. This provides a way of keeping the soulfulness of the building that only time can give. No matter how amazing your design is, something brand new struggles to have a soulful spirit. In China I've seen examples of redesigns that I know in Britain there would not have been the courage to do. We can sometimes over respect old buildings and feel the only way to handle them is to add a glass box to it, as anything else is disrespectful'.

Heatherwick Studio has had a team based in Hong Kong for the past seven years and more recently has installed a project office in Shanghai, working in a former flourmill building. They are working on 'two large mixed-use developments in Shanghai that are both a number of millions of square foot of space, which unfortunately I am not able to give details about at the moment.' Thomas Heatherwick is a regular visitor to Asia and at the last count had been to Hong Kong over eighty times. 'I feel I am understanding the planet better from that other perspective. For me working from both London and China, it helps me to look back at the planet through different eyes and have a greater understanding of it'.

As Thomas Heatherwick discusses his design career it seems to suggest a constant stream of innovative ideas. The designer did in fact find that when he was working on his own at the beginning of his career, he could occasionally become susceptible to a block in his inspiration. It is now through working with his team of 85 people that the creative process has really been brought to life. Heatherwick explains that, 'I sketch with my hands when working with clay, with a pen when drawing, but actually the process of talking for me is

sketching as well. It's one of the most powerful methods of all as when you are speaking you can move very quickly through ideas. I can verbally wrestle with design ideas with my team and it is almost like thought experiments. You can do research and experimentation in your mind and verbally, as well as in a workshop with clay, wood, fabric and foam.' Now that Heatherwick is in charge of one of the busiest design practices in the UK, creative block is not a luxury he can afford. Currently Heatherwick Studio is simultaneously working on such diverse projects such as a public boat for the River Loire in France, a gin distillery for Bombay Sapphire, and a technical university in Singapore. Heatherwick leads each project and his approach can be compared to a detective attempting to solve a crime. 'You're researching and eliminating from your enquiry the different design suspects and you narrow it down until you have what you believe is the culprit, which is the design scheme. We do not rely on the notion of singular inspiration and the wonder moment, where you jump from your bath and run down the street shouting "Eureka"! We work on accumulating evidence, research and development, until you evolve the idea. Our process is lengthy but it gives us certainty that what we have come up with is the right direction.' Alternating between drawings, three-dimensional models and tests, he will take a brief for a vast public space and work right down to the miniscule details such as door handles and windowpanes.

Heatherwick says that his practice is striving to find 'sustainable forms of sustainability. I have spoken a number of times at architectural symposia, where in order to get work, each speaker is trying to empathise how incredibly sustainable they are. They are almost filling the audience with terror to feel that unless they are very sustainably aware, the world will fall apart. But then when you actually look, there are things that in some criteria are very low energy and on paper might sound good, but if you step back and look they are often phenomenally ugly. We try to weigh up all the factors; social, political, ethical, the craftsmanship of materials, there are so many different aspects to architecture. There has been a trend with theorists over the years to focus on one aspect and the rest suffers. My interest is true sustainability. We try to make the environment something that is considered from the beginning, rather than an add-on at the end, that is labelled 'Sustainability'.

For Heatherwick, his life outside of the studio and his work within it are heavily intertwined. 'I don't feel there is one thing called work and a separate thing called pleasure. I sit in this studio with a phenomenal amount of pleasure. Myself and many of my team are doing what we most want to do, which in a sense is very relaxing. There are things I do outside the studio, new interests or new things I've read, which feed into my work here. So I see everything as very connected. Now that doesn't mean I work every weekend but it does mean there is a continuum. My private life and professional life are stitched together'.

As our interview draws to a close Heatherwick mentions the book that accompanied his Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition. The heavy tome offers a complete guide to Heatherwick Studio and took two years to compile. It tackles questions such as how can you get someone to eat your business card, generate the form of a building in less than a minute and create a piece

of architecture that represents a nation. Due to the required knowledge of his projects and the specific language needed, Heatherwick ended up writing most of the 75,000-word text himself. He had to hide himself away from the design projects he most wanted to be working on to write, which he found very challenging. 'Actually forget what I said about there being no such thing as work for me, writing that book was really hard work!' the designer laughingly confesses.