

The rise of **Thomas Heatherwick** has been both rapid and remarkable. From Royal College of Art design graduate to lead artist on the regeneration of Milton Keynes in 8 short years is exceptional progress, so it was no surprise to see a full attendance for his lecture to Art & Architecture in December 2002. What was revealed was a practice rooted in research and experimentation, fascinated by materials and with a collaborative approach to problem solving. Whatever the scale of the project, from the smallest product to large building, the same attention is given to detail and developing ideas in the workshop. Siting his studio's work in the middle ground between design and art, Heatherwick demonstrated a commitment to modelling, to the hands-on manipulation of material, which distinguishes his from standard architectural practice.

Heatherwick began by established the platform from which he operates. This was to be a talk about the Thomas Heatherwick Studio which, at present, consists of 2 architects and designers, a textile designer and a product designer. Outside this core, they regularly work with associates on projects such as landscape architects, project managers and engineers. So fruitful had the relationship with the latter become that they had sent one of their structural engineers in to work-full time with the Studio.

The first project Heatherwick discussed was his first public project, which took over 6 years to complete. He described it as "an exercise in patience". The brief for the competition to upgrade the public square in front of the Laing Gallery in Newcastle had called for an artist and an artwork. Heatherwick's winning entry purposely suggested a different route. Because of the "strange, hotch-potch mess" of the surrounding buildings, "you couldn't make a serene public space, it needed something calming to link the routes in and across the square, to make it work better". The Studio's solution was a subtle intervention, there was no room for the grand object, so they looked at what could be done with the flooring, with the details. With no big construction budget, everything had to be useful.

In a move characteristic of the Studio, not content with existing paving products, they collaborated with Sheffield Hallam University scientists to develop a new material. After exhaustive testing, lasting 3 years, they arrived at a cheap and resistant material, which met all the Health and Safety requirements. Made out of recycled glass with a distinctive blue colour, the product has now become a standard in product brochures. To differentiate the work from the surrounding paving, the zone follows a geometry marked by trees and is edged with brass rods. The surface is subtly articulated, given an impression of walking on and off a carpet, which furls up at the edge where it meets the gallery wall. Flooring is pulled up to make seating, leaving a sealed void below. Despite all the vicissitudes and delays (being a lottery-funded project, the Arts Council's press machine was hyping the project) the scheme won a Worshipful Company of Pavers award, which pleased the Studio. What they learnt from the project was the importance of "keeping it quiet", the subtlety of experience preferable to the grand gesture.

In contrast, and demonstrating the flexible approach of the Studio, a competition win to design a monument for the Manchester Commonwealth Games has produced a design for the tallest sculpture in England (almost three times the height of the Angel of the North). In response to the site, to make its presence felt, they decided the sculpture had to be as high as the adjacent stadium. The Studio investigated how they could achieve this with the limited budget available, and produced a model of 180 tapering steel columns which burst out from "a central vanishing point" 30m above the ground. An engineering tour de force, the gateway sculpture is planned to be installed by the end of 2003.

Heatherwick revealed the range of the Studio by describing a variety of recent projects: a pair of roundabouts on the A13 (where they again went against the notion of an artwork and the roundabout as plinth, wanting to create "the feel of the roadbuilders making it themselves" as the tarmac continues to spiral upwards); at the Eden Project where they have been invited to find a solution to the agglomeration of support buildings and have



proposed carving space out of the cliff face; at Paternoster Square where they were commissioned to unlock an infrastructure deadlock by designing 11m high flues for the cooling services; or collaborating with the engineers Anthony Hunt on a bridge made totally out of glass, with no steel elements; another pedestrian bridge across a canal which rolls out when required, but sits "as its own object on the bank" when not in use.

But perhaps the most surprising commission for the Studio was the invitation to design a Buddhist temple in South Japan. Sited on a mountainside with views across to a volcano, Heatherwick is not only faced with a challenging site and a myriad of unfamiliar uses to extract out of the space, he has also been given the freedom by the client Priest to develop a new form of temple, one which does not copy the traditional temple plans of Kyoto. His initial response has been to investigate potential forms through modelling material. Working with the Royal Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital, he has used their scanner to cut out test foam blocks. The Studio is exploring computer-controlled cutting to get the maximum use from timber and plywood, creating a structure of strata and layers. An unintended but welcome outcome of the resulting form is its resemblance to folds of fabric, like "the fabric that the Buddha sits on".

The ethos of the Studio, as expounded by Thomas Heatherwick, was the desire to keep testing and experimenting with different genres, not to sit back and repeat past successes. For the future, Heatherwick indicated, "they were interested in different building types, such as inexpensive housing and the construction of power stations, areas not saturated with design". By not siting themselves firmly in the art camp or the design or architecture profession, they have created a multi-disciplinary practice area which may be a model for future development. Their appointment to work with EDAW on masterplanning the regeneration of Milton Keynes is indicative. The Bilbao model of regeneration, Thomas argued, was fine once but looses it affect when applied everywhere. The original consistency of Milton Keynes made the city "a kind of artwork in its own right" and it was important for them to retain this uniqueness. "Artists", he claimed "should keep the specialness of cities". Whilst the other professions looked at individual elements of the city, artists could look at the whole. "Artists have magic powers. They apply creative thinking which can expand on the ideas of others".

**Lecture review by Nigel Frank from [www.artandarchitecture.co.uk](http://www.artandarchitecture.co.uk)**

