

UK Starchitect for landmark V&A CT development

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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Easily the most mythical of all Design Indaba presenters - part alchemist, part shaman, with the sensibilities and integrity akin to the Dalai Lama himself, Thomas Heatherwick was back on the Indaba stage after an absence of nine years. Then we saw bridges that rolled open to form a wheel and bristle brush light rod installations.

The years have honed Heatherwick's skills to full power. Yesterday he talked us through the conceptualisation and fruition of the 2012 Olympic flame - a project so secret they had to keep models in locked cases and shred sketches daily.



Thomas Heatherwick

Ignore the brief

Briefed that the one mandatory for an Olympic flame was to not have any moving parts - the final solution of 200 copper (gold, silver and bronze were busy) petals, that rose to form one, representing the coming together of 204 countries, the design turned out to have more moving parts than any Olympic torch in history and probably the most memorable and emotive too. Lesson for designers here to reach the optimum solution, you may have to ignore the brief.

Like most designers that make it to the Indaba stage, Heatherwick demonstrates a deep reverence for his projects, where every decision is considered, has meaning and is employed for a the greater good of whoever will experience the design. A case in point is the redesign of the London bus, which had lost all the charm of the old iconic, hop on hop off buses that hadn't had a redesign in 40 years.

He states that the sign of the successful city is when rich people take public transport. The buses have been designed to dignify the experience, with love in the stair details, light walls that follow the passage of the person through the bus and a rounded form that echoes the romance of the original despite being 30% longer.

He is only interested in the interface where the public meets his work - stating that he is not interested in designing private homes or luxury resorts.

The brief to be in the top 5 of the 250 pavilions at the Shanghai World EXPO, is more about the space than about the structure.

He explains the design process as having to second guess what every other country would do and then not do that. The outcome is a mélange of textures to make a building that looks like a dandelion set in an undulating textured space. The interior is formed by 67,000, 7,5m optic rods at the end of which each seeds set in amber, donated by the Royal Botanical garden at Kew, symbolise growth and future.



Debut of a new project

The big reveal of the day at the Indaba is the debut of a legacy project, publicly unveiled yesterday for the first time. The project, under wraps for a while has been brought to fruition by a collaboration with property developers, the V&A management and Design Indaba founder Ravi Naidoo.



The nine-storey building, described by Heatherwick as "the elephant in the room", which for 90 years has loomed over the V&A Waterfront's Clock tower almost invisibly despite the fact that it was once the tallest building in Cape Town, is to be repurposed with the same organic integrity, sensitivity and mastery as the aforementioned Heatherwick projects.

It is a great honour and a perfect serendipity that silos will be repurposed to be the largest collection of curated African art on the continent. The personal collection belonging to ex-CEO of Puma, Jochen Zeitz, one of the world's foremost African art collectors, will be curated by Mark Coetzee under the name Zeitz MOCAA.

Demonstrating all the signature Heatherwick sensibilities, the new glassed areas designed to let light in will be organic textured, "pillowed" glass, not the flat glass that renders most modern buildings sterile.

The inside of the silo tubes are to be hollowed out in to reveal their majestic curves in a shape inspired by a corn kernel to honour the original purpose of the building. The remaining "organ pipe" shafts will house lifts, spiral stairwells and organically glazed lightwells. The entire structure will have the yellow paint blasted off to reveal the original bluish concrete aggregate beneath.



A solution so lyrical, elegant and timely for World design Capital 2014 - that caused the first day of Design Indaba 2014 to end with a standing ovation.

Images courtesy Thomas Heatherwick studio

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