

# Sunday Times

## Thomas Heatherwick to fire up Olympia

*The 2012 cauldron designer is to transform the 'unalive' exhibition site*

Tony Allen-Mills September 24 2017, 12:01am, The Sunday Times



*Olympia, in west London, has played host to rock concerts, the Miss World pageant and, seen here, the Hyper Japan show*

The renowned designer may have suffered a disappointing setback with the rejection of the Garden Bridge he had hoped to build across the Thames, but Thomas Heatherwick has not given up on transforming London's landscape. He is now planning a 21st-century "revitalisation" of one of the capital's best-known addresses – the 14-acre Olympia exhibition site in West Kensington.

The vast Victorian-era halls, which have hosted exhibitions, rock concerts and sporting events for more than 130 years, will become the centrepiece of an ambitious £1bn refurbishment project that will "make London better", Heatherwick said last week.

What the 47-year-old designer described as an "eerily unalive" corner of the capital may soon be transformed into a series of public spaces incorporating restaurants, a theatre, a museum, a new hotel and pedestrian walkways beside the filigreed iron arches of the 100ft tall Grand Hall. There are no plans for residential construction.



*Heatherwick's plan for a Garden Bridge has not come to fruition REUTERS*

Speaking from South Africa, where he last week attended the official opening of the new museum of contemporary African art he built inside an old Cape Town grain silo, Heatherwick said he wanted Olympia to attract “not only people with tickets to an exhibition. We intend to give the public access in a way that hasn’t existed before.”

Google recently unveiled plans by the designer for its new campus in California’s Silicon Valley and for its London “landscaper” at King’s Cross.

The Olympia site is best known as the venue for the London International Horse Show and the Ideal Home Show. It has also played host to a startling variety of other events, from a Jimi Hendrix rock concert in 1967 to the 1999 Miss World pageant – as well as a notorious 1934 fascist rally, held by Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union party, which ended with violent clashes between Mosley’s Blackshirts and communist protesters.

The site was sold earlier this year by Capco, the London property company that is redeveloping the former Earl’s Court exhibition site nearby. Olympia’s new owners are led by John Hitchcox of Yoo, the London-based company he founded with the French designer Philippe Starck in 1999.



*The UK pavilion at the Shanghai Expo PHILIPPE LOPEZ*

Hitchcox emphasised last week that unlike the controversial Earl's Court development – which involved demolition of its exhibition halls – there will be no change to Olympia's role as a venue for exhibitions and events.

“We are not knocking Olympia down to build luxury flats. The challenge is to reposition and enhance this grand old dame while maintaining its business as usual,” he said.

Still on the calendar of 105 shows scheduled for this year are the Luxury Wedding Fair, the Bar & Pub Show, Vegfest UK, India Fashion Week, the London Drum Show and the European Pizza & Pasta Show.



*Heatherwick's reinvention of the Routemaster bus ALAMY*



The main problem, Hitchcox suggested, is that Olympia has “slightly locked itself out of its local community”. It sprawls alongside a railway line only a short distance from Kensington High Street, “next door to some of the most affluent people on the planet”, he said.

Yet the site often appears like a “fortress”, closed off to the public for much of the week. Tube trains stop at Kensington (Olympia) station only at weekends and on holidays, and the site’s only restaurant is a Pizza Express.

“It’s somewhere you go to in spite of itself, rather than feeling it’s a cherished part of the infrastructure of London,” said Heatherwick. His portfolio of acclaimed but frequently controversial projects include Manchester’s ill-fated B of the Bang sculpture, dismantled in 2009; the UK pavilion at the 2009 Shanghai Expo; a Longchamp boutique and a pier development in New York.



*The cauldron created by Thomas Heatherwick for the 2012 Games*GETTY

Hitchcox said he had chosen Heatherwick to lead the Olympia project in part because the architecture of the Grand Hall reminded him of the spectacular 204-piece cauldron the designer created for the opening of the 2012 London Olympics.

Both Hitchcox and Heatherwick were wary of being specific about their plans, pending discussions with local residents and officials. But planning permission has already been granted for the main addition to the site, a 275-room hotel on a vacant plot of land on Hammersmith Road.

“Working on Olympia is completely different and separate [from the Garden Bridge],” Heatherwick said. “But what it has in common is a deep driving passion to make London better. It’s a thrilling thing to work on.”