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DANI ROSSELLÓ DIEZ

DELIVERING THE VISION

*It is something of a happy connection that the path of Dani Rosselló Diez, principal and group leader at **Heatherwick Studio**, to the much-feted London-based design practice should have come through his birthplace's most famous building, Gaudi's Sagrada Familia. He spoke to Jonathan Bracey Gibbon.*

Dani Rosselló Diez is a native Catalan. While looking for a new opportunity he made a connection with Heatherwick Studio, by his daughter's godfather no less. The godfather, who was working as project coordinator at Gaudi's masterpiece advising the Heatherwick Studio on geometry moulding, provided Dani with a recommendation.

Born in Barcelona, Dani's father was an architect and engineer who built bridges and other infrastructure works for the Spanish military. Dani attended the Barcelona School of Architecture (ETSAB - Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona), also alma mater of Bjarke Ingels. He pursued a seven-year course of study graduating at 25. Dani's career eventually led him to Miralles Tagliabue EMBT, the practice of the late iconic Catalan architect Enric Miralles.

Famed for the design of the Scottish Parliament Building, among many other projects, it was at EMBT that Dani cut his creative teeth. Over 16 years at EMBT he worked on projects that echo Heatherwick's culture of design-led problem solving. It was after Miralles premature passing in 2000 that Dani moved to Mexico to take up teaching roles. He also associated with that country's biggest firm, Legorreta + Legorreta. Initially under Ricardo Legorreta

and then working with his son, Victor, they also worked with Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners on the competition for Mexico City International Airport. Then fate intervened in the form of a loose connection and perfect timing.

This was one of a number of happy coincidences that tied Dani to Heatherwick; like Thomas Heatherwick's mother, Dani's wife is a successful jewellery designer, and while at EMBT Dani had worked on the Spanish Pavilion for Shanghai World Expo 2010, famously won by Thomas Heatherwick's UK Pavilion, the extraordinary Seed Cathedral. It seemed right that all roads led to King's Cross, London, home to Heatherwick Studio.

When Heatherwick Studio group leader Lisa Finlay took maternity leave in 2016, Dani took the offer to initially come on board as a group leader in her absence. There was also a view to expanding the number of group leaders from four to six to grow the studio.

"They invited me over for a week, a chemistry check," says Dani. "Coming from a different background, Thomas Heatherwick was more interested, in this case, in my background with Enric Miralles. I was also interested in being part of the impressive story of Heatherwick Studio. When Enric Miralles died it was difficult for me to find the next



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“KEEPING THE STUDIO AS A COHESIVE CULTURE, AT THAT LEVEL IT IS ABSOLUTELY PRIMARY IN BUILDING UP OUR TEAMS”

Below: Heatherwick Studio has now expanded into six buildings in central London's King's Cross district.

studio to give me the next design challenge.”

When Dani arrived, Heatherwick's projects that are now well established, like the Google Campus and London HQ, were very much still under wraps. “So when I signed the NDA and the doors of heaven were opened, I went ‘wow, this is something different’.”

“The studio was in amazing shape before I came here. Once I understood the amount and scale of projects I was quite impressed! It was an incredible challenge to which I could not say no.”

Heatherwick Studio's structure now features those six group leaders managing teams working across all Heatherwick projects. Each group leader reports directly to Thomas Heatherwick who retains an overview of all projects across the groups.

Dani's main project currently is the huge 3.23 million square foot (300,000 square metre) 1000 Trees mixed-use development in Shanghai. Located along the banks of the river, the project is already world-renowned for the use of Heatherwick designed tree-planter columns featured in the development.

“Every project is approached differently but every problem is to be solved locally, every project is complex. I was used to this approach because in Barcelona we were going through a similar process of interrogation and depth to get to the right answer.”

“A profound thought process of design

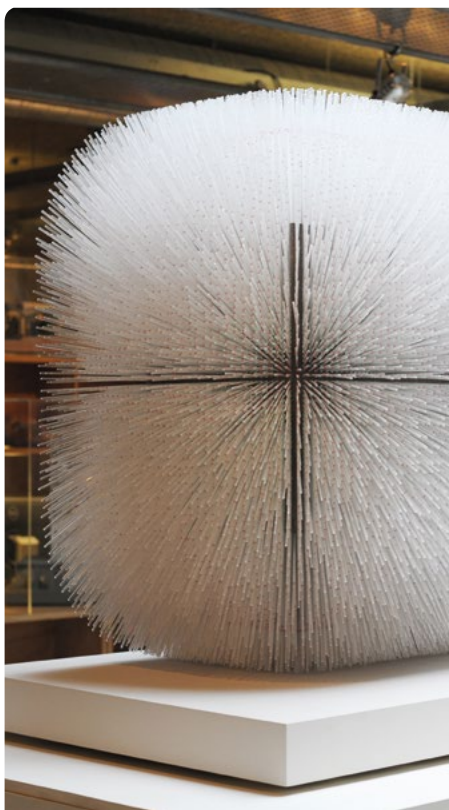
is what is going on here, meeting with all the other group leaders and Thomas of course. There was always a good chemistry. Keeping the studio as a cohesive culture, at that level it is absolutely primary in building up our teams.”

“There is a certain logic when you first hear Thomas explain to you when they hit on an idea. You think ‘oh it's quite simple’, but when you understand the struggle you realise it is something different. Are we going to contribute something to the same dull grey landscape of Shanghai (with 1000 Trees) or are we going to think differently?”

The column planters explain how, what Dani calls “this pixelated landscape”, flows over this vast development. The building is composed of two sections, West Mountain and East Mountain. West Mountain will be completed at the end of this year, with the East Mountain scheduled for completion around 2020.

“We have this two-headed thing whereby the groups look after the business and the design of the projects, and among the six of us, with Thomas, we split the full portfolio of the studio, so at this time I'm working on about eight projects.”

Those projects have included the development of the Bund Finance Centre in Shanghai with Foster + Partners, already famed for it's culture centre, the centre-piece building which is encircled by a



moving array of bronze tubes replicating a traditional Chinese marital veil. Also under Dani's remit has been the Coal Drops Yard for developers Argent. A multi-use development barely a mile from Heatherwick Studio itself, this project has seen a pair of disused Victorian rail coal drop warehouses transformed into a multi-use, retail centre in typical Heatherwick style. It has just soft-opened its doors, although snagging was continuing at time of our meeting in advance of its formal opening.

"It is looking amazing and we are very proud of it," he says.

Other projects are under wraps but include developments in the Middle East. Larger scale projects other groups are working on include the recently won Changi Airport development in Singapore in conjunction with KPF of New York. Indeed, masterplanning Changi is something the studio, and Dani's team, are now consulting on.

"As the studio grows, we are also interested in trying to solve problems that improve people's lives more broadly in cities. In my group, clients are asking us to look at the problem of masterplanning from a different angle as we are doing with buildings."

To this end, an additional project which is at the competition stage for Dani's group is development of the first mixed-used high-rise project in Paris for years. Offered as the Inventer Bruneseau design competition, the challenge was to create a vision for a collection of sites located in the 13th arrondissement right on the Boulevard Périphérique on the Rive Gauche. The design envisioned a large tower on one of the plots.

Dani jumped at the chance to get involved in a project of this scale, effectively on Heatherwick Studio's 'doorstep', given the studio is barely ten minutes' walk from the Eurostar terminal at St. Pancras in central London.

"The way this works at the competition stage, we need the excitement of Thomas and a group lead to work together," explains Dani.

"And if this doesn't happen then it's very difficult for a competition entry to go ahead. When this project came in last year, I raised my hand and said we should be in."

Competition entrants included BIG, MAD Architects, and Adjaye Associates. At time of writing, Heatherwick is through to the penultimate round.

"It's a mix of topology, dealing with demographic, future aspects and the right way

of bringing in the human scale and warmth of the architecture into an area where nothing stops! We have roads, railways, highways, crossings, but nothing stops there!" explains Dani. Success or failure in this particular competition aside, Heatherwick is in the happy position of being able to choose projects to pursue.

"Mostly, we are approached by clients with new projects," explains Dani.

"The opportunities come to us and we have a robust process to evaluate each opportunity. We'll come together at a weekly meeting to discuss business opportunities. We interrogate each through many angles; is that project useful to us? Are we excited enough? Can we solve the problem? Or is there an option to do some beautiful design?"

"Location and studio capacity are also an issue. We are a big studio but we don't want to go along the lines of the corporation and take on projects just to feed the beast. Thomas is the lead designer in the studio and he is absolutely passionate about design and is full-on with the group leader and the team on a project."

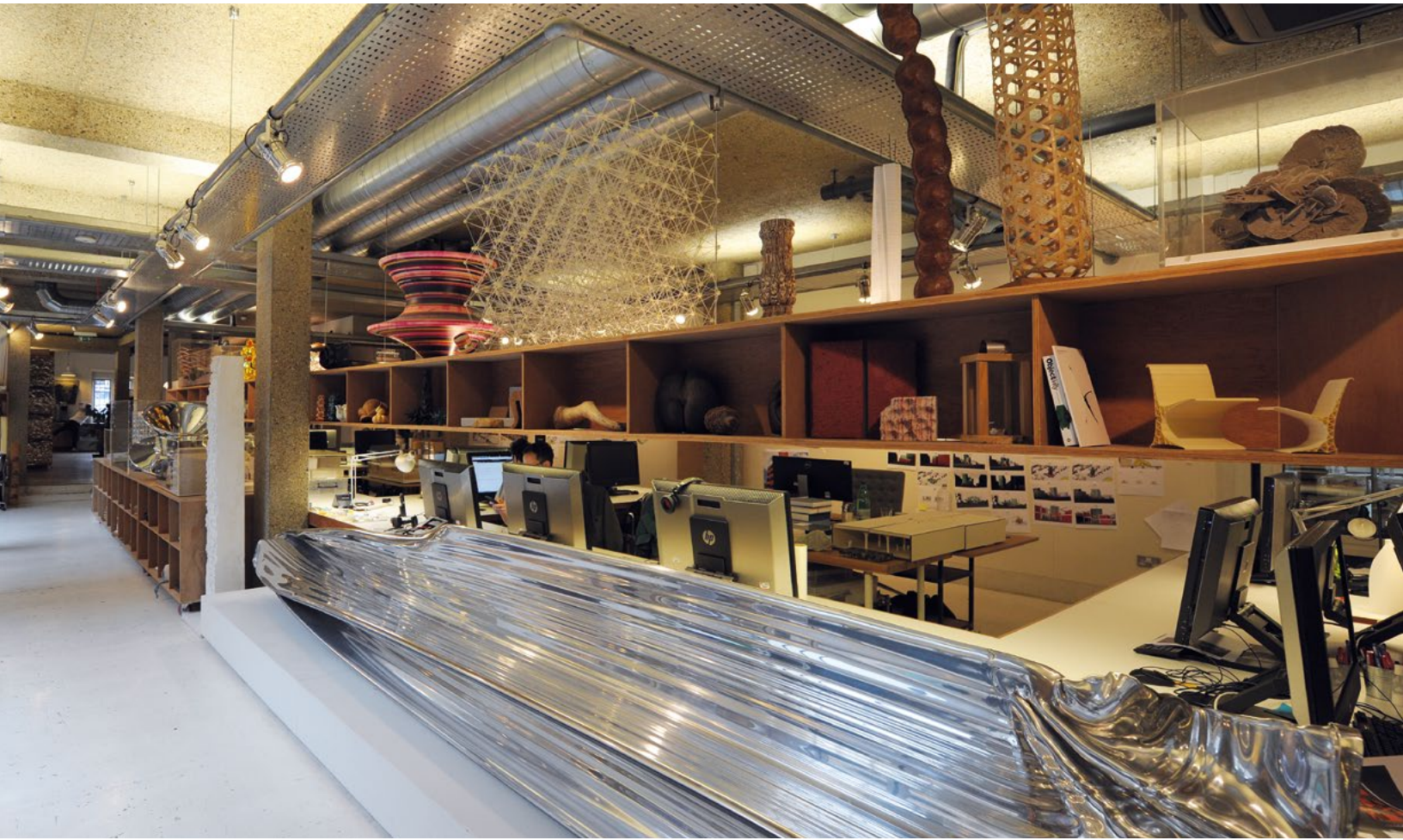
The creative process on new projects is broadly collaborative.

"It's not like old master sitting in a room passing through sketches," says Dani.

"It doesn't work like that, it is more collaborative. We try to leave no stone



Photography: Oscar Lasa



untuned in our process, try to avoid getting mesmerised by the first idea and always be open to something else. If you are always working in known territory things can look the same. It is more like a big design think-tank. We are trying to attract more and more talented people interested in joining us," he says.

With a head count now of 200 staff spread through a number of buildings, managing talent acquisition is an evolving process.

"We have a very robust interview process which grows through several stages. Recently we've had more architects coming in because the projects are more architecture-based so it's a natural thing to happen. We also have people from other types of design backgrounds, which we think is important." Famously, Heatherwick has workshops with the studio and even managed to accommodate half a London bus, in scale, when it was designing the new Routemaster bus. The studio is also decorated with examples from the various, now iconic, projects they have developed, from a row of old Routemaster seats in the small reception area, bronze cylinders from the Bund veil

and an early prototype column planter. Also on display are the famous Spun chairs, and numerous stunning models of projects, built, as in the Seed Cathedral, and, sadly unbuilt, as in the Garden Bridge.

Although banks of video screens vie for space with the myriad extraordinary artefacts, the accent is still very much on the making of physical items.

"It's not like we are just using Rhino, Rhino, Rhino, and just press a button. We are up to date on all the software and CAD developments but the focus will always be on making things."

"We always talk about materials, they are always at the core of our thinking. Sometimes materials are a decision from the beginning."

"We are not close to any specific material in principle. One of the things other firms do is spec a material off the shelf as there is zero risk. But it is also about managing risk in respect to all other project stakeholders, so (if we take a 'risk') it has to be something you can spec with all the guarantees you need."

"We have some materials that are closer

Above: The main studio is something of an Aladdin's cave featuring Heatherwick creations past, present and future.

"IF YOU ARE ALWAYS WORKING IN KNOWN TERRITORY THINGS CAN LOOK THE SAME. IT IS MORE LIKE A BIG DESIGN THINK-TANK"



Left: Model of the Seed Cathedral, winner at the Shanghai Expo 2010.



Photography: Oscar Lasa

to our heart, and we can go back to those, but we are open to any opportunity to get the best out of those materials that haven't been used before."

Interestingly for a studio focussed on design and as a part of creating revolutionary furniture ideas, when it comes to large-scale buildings the studio often does not handle the building's interior design in-house. Dani reveals that in the case of some interiors, like a lobby, often the studio will hand over the project to independent

"WE'VE A POSITIVE AMBITION TO MEET UNEXPECTED DESIGN CHALLENGES"

interior designers while keeping an overview. As to what lies around the corner for such a high-profile firm that is evolving into a fully-fledged architectural practice, it appears to be bigger projects, bigger problems to solve.

"We've a positive ambition to meet unexpected design challenges. The Changi competition is something the studio would never dreamed of winning a few years ago. You keep pushing yourself as a team," enthuses Dani.

"Exploration of materials, exploration of topologies in how people should live in cities and buildings, and how buildings should perform are of great interest to us. We are building more technical teams with technical design leaders helping us push the technical thinking behind our work. Let's see in five years, maybe a city on Mars."

Of the Changi challenge he says, "We wanted to make the scale of the building human so you would not feel like you would be one small human being lost in that structure. Changi has been one of the best airports in the world for a number of years but they



“SPOT WHICH HUMAN MOMENT SHOULD BE MOST IMPORTANT AND THAT’S WHERE YOU CAN GET THE MESSAGE”

understood what we were trying to achieve in the competition.” Of course a high profile, design focussed organisation like Heatherwick Studio is expected to have the upper hand in dealing with clients aspirations. This is not always the case however.

“It’s a struggle and sometimes it’s a process to convince people that a design is right. It is a difficult task because we have a lot of hurdles we need to jump. Whatever it takes we’re very resilient. The final goal is to do an amazing job for somebody. We will try to give you the best we can but sometimes the best is not the easiest the way we design. It is not just about a beautiful building. We have to manage our clients budget and you have to work with that. One of the things we can do is spot which human moment should be most important and that’s where you can get the message.” Dani draws on a heady mix of classical and modernist elements in terms of cultural inspiration. That is a perspective he brings to Heatherwick. He sees Enric Miralles very much as a mentor and inherits this mix of inspirations from the EMBT founder.

“The type of education I had back in Barcelona with Enric Miralles was a complex education. He was always looking at architecture and design as a continuous conversation where he would get inspiration from Borromini, the Italian Baroque, but also the likes of Louis Kahn or from a rural building. So my interest is very broad, Borromini, the exploration of space and form, but of the modern era. I am closer to the likes of Kahn more than Le Corbusier.”

A visit to the studio of Pritzker laureate B. V. Doshi, who worked with both Kahn and Le Corbusier was a formative moment.

“He had this beautiful piece of writing, *The Acrobat and The Yogi*. Le Corbusier was very much the acrobat, Louis Kahn was the yogi.”

“My head is like a mix, and this is how I think. So I guess Miralles, my mentor, is at the peak for me then. Also architects like Coderch who dealt amazingly well with the intellectualisation of architecture, turning it into light and space.”

“So I think that’s some of my point of

interest and vernacular. Architecture without architects. Those type of findings, that’s my kind of thing.”

Also his time in Mexico added Luis Barragán to that list of influences.

“People say Luis Barragán is a master of light but he is also a master of shadow. His house is a masterpiece and some of his other work was quite an inspiration.”

Much of which Heatherwick Studio can draw upon.

