

Visual Culture

New York's \$150 Million Staircase Misses the Point of Public Art

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A rendering of Thomas Heatherwick's *Vessel*. Image courtesy of Forbes Massie

Last Wednesday, hundreds of onlookers including city officials, developers, and even Anderson Cooper gathered for the announcement of *Vessel*, a towering public sculpture by British designer Thomas Heatherwick. The sculpture, a series of interlocking staircases that stretches some 15 stories into the sky, will be built amid the West Side's Hudson Yards development at a cost of \$150 million. Private real estate firm Related Companies is footing the entire bill for what is already being hailed as a landmark, drawing comparisons to the nearby and popular High Line and the further-off but arguably more iconic by an order of magnitude Eiffel Tower.

The price tag might raise eyebrows. Though overly simplistic, if you break down the cost of *Vessel* by its 2,500 stairs, each step will set back Related \$60,000. Given that the piece is entirely privately funded, it isn't directly a public concern that the project has already doubled in cost from its original

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estimate. NOR DO I THINK spending money on public art is necessarily bad or wasteful—just the opposite, actually. The problem with Heatherwick’s creation is more straightforward, inherent, and really about its relative artistic merits: It is a \$150 million staircase. That’s it. It looks like M.C. Escher designed a gym or someone messed up an experiment to clone a StairMaster or (as a friend put it a bit more colorfully) like a beehive “had a baby with” a panopticon.

Many have rushed to spin the sculpture’s glaring emptiness into its greatest virtue. “It has no commercial job to do, it’s not based on electronics, it’s not based on advertising,” Heatherwick said in a [video](#) flogging the piece’s virtues. That *Vessel* serves no commercial purpose may be the strangest claim made about the sculpture. It is patently untrue—high-profile public art paid for by private companies always has a commercial role. Among its other benefits, *Vessel* will help lure tenants to Hudson Yards and attest to the financial prowess of the person who commissioned the piece, the company of billionaire developer Stephen M. Ross. Clearly, the work owes its existence to, and performs a function of, commerce, even if that function doesn’t necessarily mean it can’t be enjoyed as art.

But Heatherwick’s statement remains bizarre however you slice it. Robbing stairs of their practical function—to take us someplace useful—has been cast by PR and press alike as a valuable artistic exercise. Coverage around *Vessel* has implied that ascending 14 stories of stairs to look at office space (you can take an elevator up too, if needed) is supposed to tell us something meaningful about our own bodies. “There’s something timeless about humans and our physicality,” Heatherwick said in the same video. I don’t know what this means. But I do know one doesn’t need to climb 2,500 stairs to realize that we’re feeble flesh and bone—a bad hangover or, better yet, a trip to an actual gym will do the trick.

Still, the mayor of our fine city, Bill de Blasio, agrees with Heatherwick, declaring, “I like what I see.” Others suggest the work will provide a space for meditating on the city. But meditating on what, one wonders. The glistening glass buildings that will surround Heatherwick’s structure hardly prompt the kind of introspection inspired by, say, the unfettered view of Paris one gets from the peak of the Eiffel tower. Make no mistake, the Hudson Yards real estate project is actually worth pondering. The development features glitzy residential properties (\$1.95 million is the starting cost for a one-bedroom at 15 Hudson Yards) and high-end office space. The vast majority of the people who will climb *Vessel*’s steps will gaze out at a reality that is, and likely will always be, financially inaccessible to them.

But creating a space where people normally isolated by our urban environment can interact is perhaps the most important function of public art. People will probably interact because of *Vessel*; perhaps Heatherwick’s sculpture will draw them to the square surrounding the sculpture. But in and of itself, climbing stairs is limited as a communal activity. Compare this piece to the High Line, which is both a constantly shifting and evolving work of public art itself *and* a space for the creation of more public art. Thought provoking artists like Barbara Kruger, Nari Ward, and Kathryn Andrews have all contributed works to the park, which runs along an out-of-use rail line. Moreover, it is practical, allowing you to skip over crosswalks and the din of downtown traffic and providing spaces to sit, eat, and relax.

Then there are works of public sculpture that use height to provoke political confrontations with normally inaccessible places. Take Tatzu Nishi’s

CONTRADICTIONS WITH NORMALLY INACCESSIBLE PLACES. TAKE TATZU NISHII'S

Discovering Columbus (2012), put on by the Public Art Fund, for example. Normally, the statue of the explorer, towering powerfully 75 feet above 59th Street's Columbus Circle, is inaccessible. But Nishi built a room around the figure, accessible by climbing six flights of stairs. (Let the record show that I'm not against stairs.) The piece served to alter the power dynamics created by the monument, asked us to think about who has the means to collect art, and perhaps caused some New Yorkers to confront the legacy of Columbus and the problematic way he is idealized in the United States.

One of the unending struggles when wading through all the contemporary art that exists today is to differentiate between works with meaning that is ambiguous or multiplicitous and works that are simply empty. To be confronted with the latter wrapped with language that implies the former, as is all too often the case, can be incredibly alienating. *Vessel* is no exception, except, perhaps, in terms of scale and visibility. "The project is a big invitation," Heatherwick has said. "It's just there to hopefully mean things to different people, to not tell you what you're supposed to think. It's like a platform for life." No—it's just a giant staircase. And that's too bad.

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