

Out of the blue

Newcastle's citizens have swapped a grimy road junction for a carpet of blue glass — and it's magic, says HUGH PEARMAN

Well," says Tom Heatherwick, slightly defensively, "I think it's blue enough." This is possibly the oddest defence of a work of art since Turner had to explain why all his paintings were so yellow. But when the work in question has been six years in the making, takes the form of a new public square in Newcastle and has always been described as a "blue car-

pet", well, people expect blue. They expect Yves Klein blue, or its close relation, Will Alsop blue. What they get with Heatherwick's square is grey with a sparkly hint of blue. Some Tynesiders have been muttering that it's not blue enough. Hence Heatherwick's defence.

Such are the pitfalls of public art. The whole point of the new place is the beguiling, if fundamentally absurd, idea that this hard masonry object is a carpet — curling up a

little at one corner, with benches mysteriously peeled in strips out of this pretend-fabric, with bollards pushing through rents in it. Beneath the carpet is, not floorboards, but a mysterious world of hectically coloured neon light, glimpsed through glass. So it is a magic carpet, then. Moreover, someone has been sweeping something under it. It is not flat, but a very shallow dome. Your knees sense this as you walk across it. It is mildly disconcerting, as is the deliberately overscaled laminated-timber spiral staircase that descends into the space from an upper level.

It is also — let's get this over with — indeed not very blue at a casual glance. Heatherwick mixed scrap blue glass — from designer sherry

bottles — with resin to get his paving slabs. The trouble is that you can't put too much glass into such material, otherwise it goes crumbly. So a balance has to be struck. Blue enough, as the man said. Blue enough, he hopes, to last 100 years without fading.

In itself, the Blue Carpet is nothing much. It's relatively small, it cost a mere £1.4m, it makes a nicer place out of what was a grim nexus of roads in front of the Laing art gallery, part of the city where Georgian elegance meets 1970s tat and, generally, loses. Heatherwick himself tends to point out that the biggest single contribution to his square (actually, it is a very irregular polyhedron in shape) consists of the

mature trees — the largest ever imported into the UK — strategically placed to screen the roaring buses of the nearby streets.

The citizens of Newcastle, one gathers, were expecting something spectacular and concept-artish and globally significant — and instead got something subtle, right down to the inlaid brass strips dividing and edging the blue-paved areas. It's an intelligent, quirky, upmarket little regional pedestrianisation scheme, that's all. Hence the sense of slightly baffled deflation on Tyneside that greeted its launch. When something has been in the making for so long — getting well overhyped in the process — the final unveiling was bound to teeter on the edge of



Walk and wonder: Tom Heatherwick's blue glass-and-resin square, main picture; fluorescent tubes in the void beside a bench, above; and a bollard pushes up through a 'rent' in the 'fabric'

designed a church in Hereford and a temple in Japan. His forte is thinking things through from scratch, rather than merely putting a slick gloss on what already exists.

This attitude can prove difficult to the point of exhaustion. For a Glasgow design exhibition in 1999, Heatherwick made the entire display out of 60 miles of industrial cling-film. The amount of hands-on effort involved was almost painful to behold. Similarly, the public spiral staircase in the Newcastle scheme was most effortfully made by a firm of Jarrow boat builders to produce a conker-like smooth glossy finish to its laminated timber structure. The downside to this is the cheap tinniness of the metal stairs themselves, which are already showing signs of distress. One wonders just how many of the 100,000 people who hit the city-centre bars and clubs every weekend are going to notice either way — the good or the bad. If you've ever experienced Newcastle on a Saturday night, you'll know that public-realm design niceties are not high on anyone's agenda then. But cities are about more than Saturday night.

This is the Heatherwick difference. Other urban designers might have a mad inspired idea, dismiss it on grounds of practicality or unprofitability, and then do something conventional. They would use off-the-peg materials and aim for a general slight lift in quality, rather than concentrating all the effort on getting a high concept to work. They might be defeated by the thought of the physical punishment their work would receive, and act accordingly. But Heatherwick sticks with the mad idea all the way and is perfectly happy to juxtapose the sublime with the prosaic, the expensive with the dirt-cheap. Indeed, he insists on it. He specified cheap paving round the edges of the good stuff and, above all, no "designer" lampposts — the habitual calling card of jobsworth cityscape improvers.

Thus, through unrelenting toil and large doses of charm, he makes it work his way. The Blue Carpet has turned out looking remarkably like Heatherwick's competition-winning sketches from 1996. And when you think what "public art" usually means in the municipal mind (Newcastle has more than its fair share of bad contemporary sculpture plonked around the place), that is some achievement.

There is a civic agenda here, too. Newcastle and its riparian neighbour, Gateshead, jointly want to be European City of Culture in 2008. Much kudos and tourist money can flow from this designation, as Glasgow famously proved years back. The Blue Carpet is thrown into the bid along with the Angel of the North, the clever new opening-eye Tyne bridge, the soon-to-open Baltic contemporary-arts centre, the bulbous Norman Foster concert hall now under construction, the housing designed by Wayne and Gerardine Hemingway on the site of a long-forgotten garden festival, and so on.

Southern critics tend to be button-holed by the northeastern media on arrival in Tyneside. They want to know: is the area making headway? Is it appearing on the contemporary-culture radar screen, or do we think of it still only in terms of soccer and brown ale? In other words, does the bid stand a chance?

It ought to. Of the great British metropolises, only Manchester/Salford is harder at work restoring its cultural image, and they had the sudden shock of a devastating city-centre bomb to concentrate their minds. But if Newcastle/Gateshead really wants to do a Barcelona with its public space, the Blue Carpet should be seen not as a one-off, but a prototype. Dozens of corners of the city could benefit from such design competitions. The cumulative effect could be remarkable. The problem is that exercises such as the Blue Carpet are still seen as special. They should just be normal. □

'THIS EXTRAORDINARY PLAY... UNRESERVEDLY SUPERB'

EVENING STANDARD

THE ROYAL NATIONAL THEATRE / MARKET THEATRE JOHANNESBURG PRODUCTION

THE ISLAND



BY **ATHOL FUGARD JOHN KANI WINSTON NTSHONA**
LAST CHANCE - STRICTLY LIMITED SEASON

'Great and graceful actors... IF YOU MISSED THEM BEFORE, DON'T MISS THEM NOW'

DAILY MAIL

'Celebrated performers... international treasures'

THE TIMES

'MAGNIFICENT. Nobody should miss this play'

SUNDAY TIMES

'This astonishing play... one of the great images of modern theatre'

THE GUARDIAN

NT

THE OLD VIC
WATERLOO ROAD, LONDON SE1

BOX OFFICE & CREDIT CARDS:
020 7369 1722
CREDIT CARDS:
020 7344 4444

bathos. The sudden blizzard that turned the blue square white at the moment of opening was an appropriately surreal commentary on the whole business.

But it is interesting for other reasons. One is that it is the largest single thing so far designed by Heatherwick, one of our best and least categorisable young designers, first spotted at the Royal College of Art by Sir Terence Conran. Heatherwick, now in his early thirties, is equally at home designing furniture, sculpture, exhibitions and buildings — anything three-dimensional. He has designed an all-glass arched bridge just for the hell of it — it may find a home in London's Paddington Basin development — and has

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK SPINDER