

11 Ways to Make Your Office Complex Less Soul-Suckingly Awful

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BRITISH DESIGNER THOMAS Heatherwick recently unveiled plans for Vessel—a beehive-shaped artwork, comprised of 154 interconnected flights of stairs, at the center of the 17-million square foot Hudson Yards development in New York City. The steel-framed piece, which widens as it rises, will lift visitors 150-feet into the air, offering a unique vantage of the place. Heatherwick says he designed it to differentiate what promises to be a bold, yet familiar, glassy contemporary office complex.

“In recent decades we have had more and more global similarity. An office building in the arctic circle is not likely to be very different from an office in a tropical context. There are some great new buildings here, but they feel similar when you build them similarly and fill them with familiar contents,” Heatherwick says.

Hudson Yards isn’t the only sleek corporate complex confronting the problem of same-ness. Architects, artists, planners, and landscape architects around the world are creating increasingly weird and original focal points to set these environments apart.

These include large-scale public art pieces, parks, and astonishing architectural elements. If corporations are people, shouldn't their lives be a little more interesting?

01: Amazon Biodomes



Amazon's new campus in downtown Seattle consists of three, 36-story glass towers that don't look too different from other corporate buildings. But the complex is focused around something much more unique: three steel-framed and glass-clad "biospheres," filled with plants and trees that are nicknamed "Bezos' Balls," for Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

02: Impatient Optimist, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation



Artist Janet Echelman has been enlivening public spaces for years. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, also in Seattle, is among her more recent gigs. Her piece *Impatient Optimist* (named for Gates himself), is composed of a net of ethereal, lightweight fibers that hang from wires at-

tached to the tops of two of the complex's buildings. The knots throughout the netting allude to the notion that a single foundation can affect millions of lives—a symbol of the foundation's web of influence. The colors projected onto the net are inspired by the hues visible in the Seattle sky over the course of a day.

03: Virtual Depictions, Salesforce, San Francisco



Media artist Refik Anadol has created *Virtual Depictions: San Francisco*, a 40' x 20' digital wall that he describes as a "data sculpture," for its colorful, abstracted responses to varied data in the city (including social networking activity, energy consumption, and environmental conditions) for the lobby of Salesforce.com's new office tower at 350 Mission Street in San Francisco. Because of the lobby's glass façade, designed by Skidmore Owings & Merrill, the installation becomes very much a part of the streetscape in front of it—or, as the design team calls it, an "urban living room." (With a really nice flatscreen TV.)

04: Playa Vista Central Park, Playa Vista, CA



To help enliven one of the LA area's largest new corporate developments (home to an ever-expanding roster of tech companies, including Google, Yahoo, and Facebook), Architect Michael Maltzan and landscape architect James Burnett created Playa Vista Park, an 8-acre collection of exceptionally diverse and graphically inspired topographies and programs centered around a spaceship-shaped, fiberglass-covered bandshell.

05: Metamorphosis, David Cerny, Charlotte



One of the most surprising sculptures to grace a corporate complex is Czech artist David Cerny's *Metamorphosis*, a 30 foot-tall, 14 ton steel bust of Franz Kafka perched inside a reflecting pool in the center of the Whitehall Technology Park in Charlotte, North Carolina. 40 mirrored steel pieces are grouped into 7 segments, which each independently rotate 360-degrees. The mouth spits water into the pool.

06: Giant Interactive, Shanghai, China



Chinese company Giant Interactive Group hired Los Angeles architects Morphosis and landscape architects SWA to design an undulating headquarters that would become a sculpted landscape itself. The building is completely covered in a blend of 15 plants that twists and slopes at extreme angles, and surrounded by lakes and canals.

07: Seagram Building, New York



Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson's bourbon-colored glass and steel Seagram Building on NYC's Park Avenue remains the ideal of a modern corporate office building. Its stone plaza originally held a Henry Moore sculpture. But it has for years been a centerpiece for public art. The most recent installation, Jean Dubuffet's *Welcome Parade*, just came down on September 10. Another classic was Urs Fischer's *Lamp/Bear*, a 23-foot-tall eddy bear with a lamp installed on its head.

08: Rockefeller Center, New York



Another New York corporate campus blessed with continuous public art is nearby Rockefeller Center. (Yes, this is a business development—despite its many stores and thousands of tourists.) Its public art program consistently scores the biggest names in the art world, like Anish Kapoor, Jeff Koons, Chris Burden, and Louise Bourgeois. The most recent was Elmgreen & Dragset's *Van Gogh's Ear*, a 30-foot-tall blue sculpture that took the form of a swimming pool set on-end.

09: Vitra Campus, Weil am Rhein, Germany



Furniture maker Vitra has created a corporate campus in Weil am Rhein that is the envy of the art and corporate worlds. Sculptural structures erected on the grounds have included works by Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Tadao Ando, Alvaro Siza, Herzog & De Meuron, and SANAA. Meanwhile the campus is full of public art. Its most recent effort was Tobias Rehberger's 24 Stops, a selection of 24 unique pieces scattered throughout the surrounding countryside.

10: La Defense, Paris



Paris's largest business district, La Defense, on its western edge, has long used public art to warm its cold reputation. The most obvious example is Otto von Spreckelsen's Grande Arche, a modern, and gargantuan, interpretation of the Arc de Triomphe; and the most recent effort is French sculptor Cesar Baldaccini's 40-foot-tall model of his own thumb. But the area has an entire art route running through it, which includes more than 50 giant sculptures and art pieces by Calder, Miro, Raymond Moretti, and more.

11: Vessel, New York City



Heatherwick's Vessel is one of the strangest, most memorable public sculptures ever proposed. The 150-foot-tall piece is composed of 2,500 interconnected copper-colored steel steps, culminating in 80 landings, propped atop a painted steel frame resting in the center of the heavily planted Hudson Yards Public Square and Gardens. "It's something you interact with instead of just looking at," explains Heatherwick Studio Group Leader Stuart Wood. "We felt this shouldn't be an artwork, but something that celebrates the users of the square, and augments their physical experience," Heatherwick adds. Its sheer audacity, he notes, is what lends it distinctiveness, making it a fantastically weird counterpoint to the development in which it sits. "How many people walk up 16 stories ever?" he says.