BOOKS & ARTS

Trinity says: Let's talk

Dublin's new Science Gallery hopes to dissolve barriers between science and city through conversation. Director Michael John Gorman explains how the gentle art will bring new voices to research.

Science often erects barriers around itself. Consider the inscription over the entrance to Plato's Academy in ancient Athens: "Let no man ignorant of geometry enter here." Barriers to entry serve useful functions. They ring-fence institutions, centres of excellence and research projects. They allow groups of scientists to work on shared problems without having to continually question fundamental assumptions or waste time explaining their work to the uninitiated.

Yet rigid barriers can constrict those living on both sides. Interesting science is often created where boundaries are crossed, in border territories where connections are suddenly perceived between problems in seemingly unrelated areas. Critically for science's future, the widespread image of science as a narrowly focused, socially isolated vocation for the initiated can put off the brightest young talent from entering for one day, let alone decades. How can we make the world of science a little more inviting to those who may consider a whirlwind romance more thrilling than a life-long vocation?

Notoriously fickle, cynical and impossible to engage, young adults are considered a difficult audience by interactive science centres and museums. For this reason, many places focus their energies and marketing budgets on children and families. Some ambitious spaces such as the Dana Centre in London have tried to engage adult audiences with science by offering various series of events centred on controversial and newsworthy topics. The Wellcome Collection in London uses art to draw adults into thinking about biomedicine through its exhibition programme. The creative process itself is dissected by Le Laboratoire in Paris (see *Nature* **449**, 789; 2007) which nurtures 'artsience' collaborations in a space more like an artist's atelier than a science centre.

Conversation is the goal of the new Science Gallery, which opens on 2 February at Trinity College Dublin in the Republic of Ireland. This centre aims to capitalize on the university's scientific talent and location to design a new kind

of interface between the university and the city. It is a territory where the business, cultural and policy communities can enter into direct creative and critical dialogue with researchers and young adult students.

Illuminating: the Science Gallery's opening exhibition tackles the science of light — here an exhibit explores vision in bees.

Rather than a repository for art works or science exhibits in cabinets, the Science Gallery is a place to talk. What happens when a nanotechnologist meets a fashion designer? When a biotechnologist meets a film-maker? When a 17-year-old meets a technology chief executive? Like the coffee houses of the seventeenth century, where one might have discussed the dissection of a dolphin with members of the Royal Society or encountered merchants and shipping agents swapping news, the Science Gallery hopes to be an informal, inclusive place for the exchange of ideas around emerging science and

technology. Napkins have been designed for the café, on which visitors may sketch or jot down an idea. The generation of questions, open calls for ideas, public experiments and challenges is a key goal. Broad themes will be highlighted, ranging from fear to fashion to food. The Science Gallery opening features a series of installations and performances exploring the science of light, including lighting design and glowing textiles.

With numbers of graduates in science, engineering and technology declining in Ireland and elsewhere, the Science Gallery has a serious agenda to attract new pools of creative talent. Support has been forthcoming from the Irish government and companies such as Google, ICON, Dell and Wyeth.

So where might we go to spot promising scientists and engineers? In the Science Gallery, a range of activities will allow university researchers and members of the business and creative communities to mix with budding innovators. One is 'seed-dating', a variant on speed-dating designed to stimulate creative connections through rapid-fire two-minute conversations punctuated by a gong.

In common with other cultural centres, the ultimate challenge for the Science Gallery will be to keep its activities fresh and relevant, especially for a young audience for whom change is second nature. With the sole remit of killing off stale or unsuccessful programmes, the Science

Gallery will appoint a 'jury of death', so resources can be redeployed. If the next generation of science centres is going to keep up with its audience, it will be critical to continue developing new and imaginative mechanisms to harness creativity, expertise and the desire for social interaction between communities. ■ Michael John Gorman is director of the Science Gallery, Trinity College Dublin, and author of *Buckminster Fuller: Designing for Mobility*.

The Science Gallery launches with Lightwave (2–9 February). Visit www.sciencegallery.com.