



Annie Cattrell's flock of birds was inspired by the extraordinary biology underlying commonplace creatures.

The art of laboratory design

Can visual arts stimulate creativity in the science laboratory? A new biochemistry building for the University of Oxford might provide the answer, finds **Georgina Ferry**.

"The lab is a major building type, yet we have come to expect little of it," lamented art historian Martin Kemp in this journal more than a decade ago (see *Nature* 395, 849; 1998). The new biochemistry laboratory that opened at the University of Oxford, UK, in December 2008 refutes Kemp's charge that such buildings are graceless and functional.

The innovative design, by London-based architects Hawkins\Brown, ensures that the 300 researchers working there communicate as much as possible. The traditional layout is reversed: here, labs are on the outside, divided by clear glass walls from the write-up areas, which are open to a vast, five-storey atrium. Everyone is visible. Open staircases clad in warm wood fly across the atrium at odd angles, and each floor hosts a cluster of inviting squashy leather chairs and coffee tables, giving the impression of an upmarket hotel.

What sets this laboratory apart from other 'statement' science buildings is the degree to which visual artists were involved in the project from its inception. Seven large-scale works were commissioned from four contemporary artists: of the total £49-million (US\$71-million) budget, around £750,000 was spent on art. To those that grumble that this sum might have been better

spent on science, Jonathan Hodgkin, professor of genetics and one of two departmental coordinators of the art project, points out that the money has come from designated arts grants from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the UK Wellcome Trust's public engagement fund and the Arts Council of England. "Part of our aim is to humanize the image of science for the public," Hodgkin explains.

All four of the artists developed their work after spending time with researchers in their labs. The entire L-shaped facade around the entrance displays Nicky Hirst's *Glass Menagerie*. Her multiple life-like forms based on the Rorschach inkblot test, screen-printed onto the glass panes, raise questions about how we organize and view the world around us.

Fine-art photographer Peter Fraser followed the demolition of the department's old buildings and the construction of the new. "He is documenting a process of physical change and 'capturing the intermediates', which is what we do as scientists," says Hodgkin. Meanwhile, digital artist Tim Head found common ground in Mark Sansom's Structural Bioinformatics and Computational Biochemistry group. "The point of the residency was not to illustrate the science," says Sansom. "But if you have

a greater degree of visual literacy, you reflect more on both the way you represent things, and also the way that may limit the way you think about them."

In the atrium, artist Annie Cattrell has suspended a flock of more than 150 bird forms cast in resin. Commenting on the success of the art-science collaboration, she noted each side's respect for the professionalism of the other, and the "lovely sense of trust" she felt in working with Sansom and Hodgkin. Her piece was inspired by learning about Hodgkin's work on nematode genetics, and understanding that "you can find something extraordinary in something so prosaic".

The prime purpose of the art project is to create a stunning physical environment for research. "The senior people [in the university] grasped that if you are trying to recruit the best people in the world, walking them through a building that is dark and dingy is not the best way to get them," says Sansom. Time will tell if money spent on art gives a significant return in scientific discovery.

Georgina Ferry is a writer based in Oxford, UK.

For a 360° view of the building and artwork, see <http://tinyurl.com/95ctgy>.

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