

# The philanthropic principle

The Kavli Foundation will award its first prizes in 2008, as two new Kavli Institutes set about making their mark in China.

To meet Fred Kavli is to meet a true philanthropist; modest but generous, honourable but approachable, an idealist with a clear vision of what he wants. And he's not one to waste time. Fred Kavli was the founder and sole shareholder of Kavlico — one of the largest suppliers of sensors for aeronautics, automotive and industrial applications — a business that he sold for several hundred million US dollars in 2000, just before the economic downturn caused by the burst of the 'dot-com bubble'. In December that year, he established the Kavli Foundation, to take up the cause of "supporting science for the benefit of humanity". More specifically, the Kavli Foundation supports the three branches of science in which Kavli himself thinks that the most exciting and wide-reaching discoveries will be made in the twenty-first century: astrophysics, nanoscience and neuroscience. These are areas in need of long-term investment, not only short-term funds, and that is what Kavli wants to offer.

Kavli has endowed individual professorships in the past, but with the Foundation he has begun to build up a network of institutes. He started with the Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics at UC Santa Barbara, followed by institutes throughout the USA, as well as in Delft in the Netherlands and in Cambridge in the UK. But, if science is to be supported for the benefit of humanity, he reasons, the most populous country on Earth cannot be left out: the Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics China, at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing, was launched in a ceremony in the Great Hall of the People in May 2007, the day after the ceremonial groundbreaking for the Kavli Institute for Astronomy and Astrophysics at Peking University.



The lights are green for Kavli's Chinese adventure, and now, beyond the openings and the ceremonies, it needs to be seen that a long-lasting difference can be made. At the opening events last May — and especially during the two-day 'International Conference on the Frontiers of Science' at KITP China — the tremendous momentum that there is in China's physics community was tangible. But to succeed in a global network, strong local support is needed as much as integration, and the younger generations of Chinese physicists, in particular, must rise to the challenge. Cultural differences will always exist, and must be recognized with sensitivity on both sides, but such differences can be seen in the context of opportunity, rather than as a barrier.

For Fred Kavli, opportunities and chances are the centre of his attention. His genuine confidence in human beings is impressive. The Kavli Institutes are intended to be a platform for the development of "peer pressure though networking", as David Auston, president of the Kavli Foundation, puts it. The Kavli Institutes currently number 15, the latest addition being the Kavli Institute for Systems Neuroscience at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim (the institution where Kavli received his physics degree in 1955 before emigrating via Canada to the USA). Eventually, the network should comprise some 20 members.

And now the Foundation is focusing on a new endeavour: the Kavli Prizes. A twenty-first-century Nobel Prize, if you will. Three Kavli Prizes — in those favoured areas of astrophysics, nanoscience and neuroscience — will be awarded every two years, in cooperation with the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters and the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. Each prize comes with a scroll, a medal and US\$1 million. Unlike the Nobel, younger scientists are deliberately the focus; the Kavli Prize is intended to target those whose careers are still unfolding. The call for nominations ended in December 2007 and the winners will be announced on 4 June 2008, with the award ceremony to take place in September, in Oslo.

According to Fred Kavli, his undertaking to support science and scientists is still very much in its developing stages. However, what has been achieved in only a few years is remarkable, and, with the support and cooperation of the world's physicists, 2008 promises more.