

[ico Design](#)

[Home](#) | [News](#) | Design Week: Into the body

- [Previous](#)
 - [Next](#)
- 28.06.2007

- [Previous](#)
- [Next](#)

Design Week: Into the body

The vast, nine-storey home of the Wellcome Collection, the Wellcome Trust's new £30m public-facing venue, is littered with objects of art, culture, science and history. In a suite of exhibitions designed by Gitta Gschwendtner and Coombe Architecture, with graphics by Kerr Noble and Nick Bell Design, these subjects overlap and intertwine one another, serving up a polymath's view of medicine, the body and health.

Situated on London's Euston Road, the building is cultural repository, medical library, debate forum and social space, with its café, bookshop and a clubroom designed by Ilse Crawford. It's founded, so the blurb goes, on the attributes of the trust's originator Henry Wellcome, who was a pharmacist, entrepreneur, philanthropist and collector. Entry to the building is free, which represents something of a civic front for the independent medical charity.

The open ground floor foyer, carved by Hopkins Architects from Septimus Warwick's original 1930s design, holds sculptures of the human body by Antony Gormley and Marc Quinn. It is an immediate demonstration that the trust - by far the largest organisation of its kind in the UK - is a purveyor of cultural spheres above and beyond its £450m-a-year scientific and pharmaceutical funding. In fact, a subject no narrower than the history of the human condition seems to be the conceptual gel for this venue, with its sweep from medical history to religious art, via technology and psychology.

In design terms, this presents something of a challenge. Gschwendtner, who gave shape to the venue's two permanent exhibitions, Medicine Man and Medicine Now, says the distinction between artworks and scientific objects - and the degree to which it is made explicit - are important in discussions between designers and curators. In Medicine Now, an exhibition of contemporary medical issues, Gschwendtner's design sets out a clear demarcation by placing all artworks inside red cube 'sub-rooms' in the 350m² space, to avoid misinterpretation.

The exhibition focuses on the period after Wellcome's death in 1936. Gschwendtner's bright, contemporary space includes a number of simple white 'sound seats' which play a directional beam of audio revealing more about the exhibition's issues, including the body, malaria and obesity, as well as genomes. An interactive exhibit by Ico Design Consultancy explores biometric data collection, creating a unique 'Bio-ID' symbol for each user, where graphic elements are adjusted for eye colour, fingerprints, height, pulse and age. A second Ico Design exhibit maps users' facial features to a range of personal and lifestyle factors, throwing up average faces for different demographic groups. Here, interactive installation becomes almost live scientific research and experiment, continuously generating a database of the facial characteristics of the venue's visitors.

Medicine Now is held together visually by Kerr Noble's graphic system - the 'human quality' of white Houschka letterforms set against white back-lighting, explains consultancy director Frith Kerr. As part of the project, Kerr also had a hand in a spot of history-making/ the consultancy typeset the entire human genome sequence for the very first time. Its 3.4 billion units of DNA code translate into 118 volumes, each 1000 pages long and set in tiny, 4.6 point type.

Gschwendtner's design for Medicine Man, the second permanent exhibition, is a very different experience. A darker, walnut-panelled room, dotted with drawers and cupboards, aims to reveal Wellcome's prodigious collections in a Victorian library atmosphere. Visitors are greeted by a 'Wunderkammer', or wonder cabinet, of Wellcome's huge glassware collection, while elsewhere objects are grouped in a more contemporary, thematic manner. Kerr Noble's labelling system here is layered - more detailed information is revealed by rifling through drawers and opening doors.

Alongside these permanent spaces, the Wellcome Collection's head of public programmes Ken Arnold has set aside the largest, 650m² space on the ground floor for a more dynamic, changing exhibition schedule. The Heart, the first of these shows, slides more fluidly between art, science and historical objects than Medicine Now, tracing the changing cultural and medical relationships with the body's most symbolic organ. 'It's not a parading of how art and science can be brought together, but a contemporary exhibition approach which doesn't stop at boundaries between disciplines to explore the subject,' says Arnold.

Designed by Coombe Architecture, the spare, white environment and VBK Lighting Consultants' low lighting lend The Heart an almost brooding atmosphere, suffused with the sound of a gently pounding heartbeat somewhere in the background. Hopkins Architects' exposed piping, painted black in the open ceiling, complements this slightly unsettling feeling, although the industrial canopy may not prove so effective for every theme.

Although the permanent exhibitions will remain largely as they are for the next five years, Arnold intends to install a new temporary show roughly four times a year. This changing space, along with the very well-rendered permanent exhibitions, a programme of debates and workshops and the medical library, combine to offer London another impressive scientific and cultural venue, very consciously presented through design.

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- [Back to the news home page](#)

