



Science Communication and Public Engagement

Re-developing the Royal Institution

Narrator:

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the Royal Institution underwent a major programme of refurbishment. The work was partly to conserve important elements of the old building. But it was also a reinvention of the RI itself. Why was that reinvention needed?

Baroness Susan Greenfield:

When I first came as Director in 1998, I remember the sun shining on the dust motes and the silence almost sort of suffocating you. And although in those days we had the Discourses on Friday nights, these black tie lectures, we had very little else going on in terms of public outreach. We had the labs of course doing stellar work but we didn't have much in the terms of public engagement. And the kind of people that came to the RI were middle class, white middle age men. And what we're trying to do now is to have much more diversity.

Baroness Susan Greenfield:

Faraday was unusual for his time in having a very identifiable public persona, and one could argue that certain scientists like me, are in that tradition nowadays and is there a place for that. And I think there is. I think it's vital for girls, school girls and women in science, to know that there's other women in science out there and it's not all white middle aged men wearing the white coats. You know, I think that's a really important signal to send out. I think it's also important to have a human face to science for the general public.

Narrator:

In some ways the magnificent façade is part of the challenge facing the Royal Institution.

Dr Isobel Falconer:

The elitism that is embedded within that classical façade is actually a barrier to a vast number of the potential audience that the Royal Institution would actually like to get in.

Sir Terry Farrell:

In the eighteenth and nineteenth and early twentieth century institutions were fairly introverted and cellular, and that's the way the whole culture of the place was.

Narrator: This £24 million refit is the latest in a long line of revisions and additions – and it represents a desire for greater informal access to the Institution.

Sir Terry Farrell:

What we're now trying to do is open it up, make it accessible, bring a lot more people in, it's a democratisation of this institution (large) in the building. So we want to bring them in. Particularly to bring them through to the new bits at the back and where the new bits at the back will be completely open.

Baroness Susan Greenfield:

We're having this glass atrium spanning five floors. There'll not only be the bar that I so wanted but a bistro where kids can go, and sort of soup and salads, a high tech environment that's fun to be in and eat in. That will enliven the place. And if you think that we also have laboratories with real scientists doing real experiments. We have heritage spaces, we have a media centre, we'll have ongoing events, it will be science in all its aspects.

Sir Terry Farrell:

I think that one of the most interesting aspects of the ... re ... renaissance that's going on here at the Royal Institution was one of the first, if not the very first stage for us, was the Media Centre. And I think the communication of science, the explanation of our world today,

every day in the news there's something about DNA, whether it's some murder being solved, or it's about space travel, or it's about global warming now in the news, in the media all the time. So the role of the Institution is, can be a very very significant critical one in helping to explain science within this building. And that is, that is always for me the absolute touchstone of this building.

Dr Isobel Falconer

The way they're constructing and redeveloping the RI now seems deliberately designed to ... to pull the public into a common space where the ... the public can interact with the scientists. So we've got the same method, if you like, of using the Royal Institution buildings and the architecture to actually create an image of what science is all about and what the scientific process is like.

Narrator: But for all the change and reinvention, the Lecture Theatre that was Faraday's public stage is staying in a form that he would recognise. Change is happening elsewhere.