

Softening the blow

Healthcare Design is poised on the verge of a transformation. A panoply of initiatives are remaking the rules for how our health buildings are realised, with design and sustainability close to this movement's centre. In Scotland the fast moving Maggie's Centres cancer care movement is recasting architecture's place in the health debate, while across the NHS both buildings and new research are beginning to drive the Service closer to such human-centred approaches.

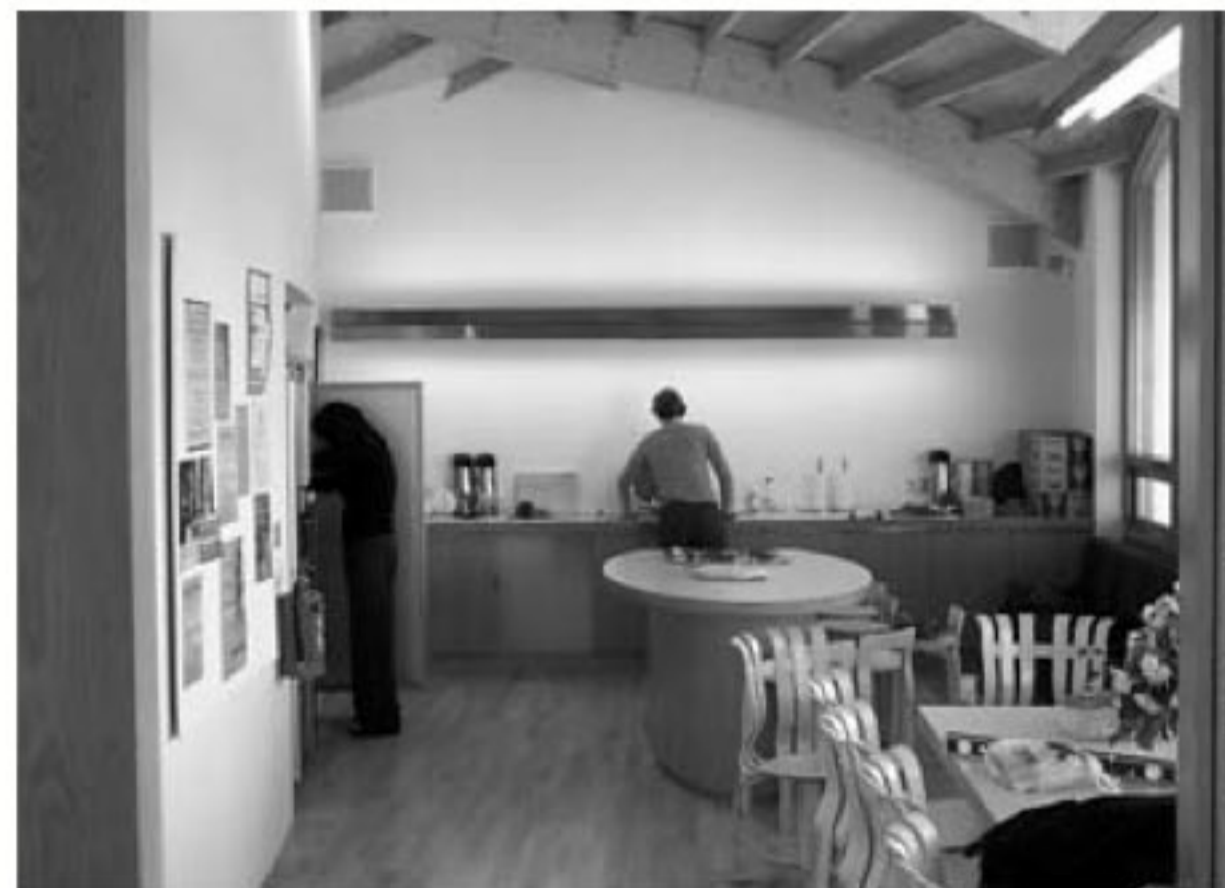
Looking south from Frank Gehry's new Maggie's cancer centre building in Dundee there is a panoramic and beautiful view across Scotland's mid-country Firth of Tay. This is the view patients, as they begin to come to terms with the stark reality of a cancer diagnosis, will be able to look out on. These views, along with other symbols of the human touch, are the keystone to the Maggie's Centres movement's philosophy. Much architectural significance is being given to the fact that this is Gehry's first British building, set in Scotland's foothills; and the arrival of his imprimatur, a light-swathed Bilbao in miniature with its concertinaed roof and lighthouse tower centrepiece. But just as significant is how the 'patient-centred' environment that this building and the Maggie's Centres' network aim to embody, turns on its head architectural thinking about health environments. It states loud and clear that built environments and design are central to health and well-being. Form can equal function in importance, a value low on the priority sheet of a target-obsessed NHS.

Turn from Gehry's curving lines one hundred degrees and the ruling functional paradigm presents itself in the guise of Ninewells Hospital: unremitting concrete, and a reminder that hospital design is not so distant from that of factories, conveyor belt throughputs of accidents and ailments into recovery and health. One of Scotland's biggest hospital projects from the late 1970s, Ninewells is a typically brutal example of the standard NHS building approach. While it is difficult to reconcile the needs of a health environment – all those shiny clean surfaces, all that invasive equipment – with the kind of welcoming atmosphere you might walk into

at a friend's house, the Maggie's Centre movement begs the question, could things be different? In the public's mind this is echoed in countrywide anecdotal nightmare conversations of patients left waiting on trolleys in long interior hospital corridors, shuffled between wards and moved with neither warning nor explanation, or ignored for hours on end, as part and parcel of the resignedly accepted story of the NHS today. By contrast, what the Maggie's Centres emphasise in terms of interior design, as much as architectural individuality, along with views, is something of the intimacy of home: welcoming furniture, an open kitchen, private places to cry and public spaces for coffee and sharing one's story. There is also a well stocked information area and library. It is an apparently simple shift in emphasis, though one which can be generalised to the NHS built environment as a whole. If one thinks of who exactly wants to look out on a windowless wall, or for that matter, a prison-like courtyard, Maggie's Centres are both a breath of fresh air and an explicit challenge to the current aesthetics of clinical institutions.

The Dundee building is a recent fruit of this fast growing Scottish based network of centres, the third in the country. They are testament to the vision of Maggie's Keswick Jencks, the landscape architect and writer, who out of a prolonged exposure to cancer, experienced first-hand the life negating qualities of cancer clinics specifically, and medical institutions in general. From this Keswick decided, along with her husband, the influential architectural theorist Charles Jencks (see p34), to create a centre which recalibrated the emphasis towards being a patient-friendly, supportive and secure environment. In the words of one of the founders and Maggie's Centre chief executive, Laura Lee, 'the environments hold' the patient. Keswick herself wrote in her moving account of her cancer, *A View from the Front*, of how hospital environments generally say "How you feel is unimportant. You are not of value. Fit in with us, not us with you," and how quite easily this could change to "Welcome! And don't worry. We are here to reassure you, and your treatment will be good and helpful to you."

Keswick died in 1995, but by this time the seed was sown and from this came the first Maggie's Centre, designed by the leading Scottish architect Richard Murphy. This opened on the grounds of the Edinburgh Infirmary six years ago, under the directorship of Lee, originally Keswick's personal nurse. Lee transparently and engagingly admits that coming originally from a NHS nursing background, she was steeped in the traditional view where internal hospital spaces, 'without



Maggie's Dundee inside out

windows, but with pvc chairs and pink walls, weren't important. I've been transformed,' she says, adding that such environments 'fill me with energy, rather than depleting it. What helps is the quality of the human relationship. People come into Maggie's Centres saying, 'thank God I'm not looking at a concrete wall'. How unhelpful is that? It's better to talk in a kitchen. Environments dictate our cultural values. Why is it a kitchen can't be accessed in a hospital? Why do corridors act as boundaries to areas which are secrets?' In other words, design with care. Lee's specific example here is the preconceived and culturally acceptable ways of designing and then once built, entering a ward. But

implicitly the Maggie's Centres challenge the accepted status quo of health environments as a whole. Different sets of priorities could mean the building team thinking through how people will actually experience the building, and taking time to allow these not so easily hurried solutions – in contrast to that of rushing to build new hospitals whatever – to emerge. 'What,' Lee asks, 'would a hospital designed by Frank Gehry be like?'

With the Dundee building opening, the Maggie Centres, along with Ninewells Hospital Trust and the University of Dundee, have obtained funding to research and explore whether, in the sceptics' eyes,