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Today

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Noah's Ark Hospice

Michael Badu explores Squire & Partners' handling of a challenging commission

Photos
Gareth Gardner

Noah's Ark Children's Hospice in Barnet, north London, is where terminally ill children go to die. That is the stark essence of the brief taken on by its architect, Squire & Partners. A 38-page booklet produced by the architect expands on this somewhat: the hospice client sought "an inspiring space for palliative care, relaxation and adventure within a 'home from home' environment". However, the provision of a 'cold blanket room' — designed to ease the trauma of losing a child by allowing their family to stay with them for up to five days post-mortem — leaves one under no illusions as to the nature and challenges of such a project.

It would be a tall order in any circumstances, but Squire & Partners heroically took on this commission on an at-cost basis, and a host of other consultants, suppliers and contractors either did the same or worked pro-bono. Perhaps the first question that one expects to come to mind might be 'Can good architecture be had without a generous budget?', but as I walked around the just-completed building, the question I kept asking myself was 'Does architecture matter at all?' Squire & Partners associate and project architect Jason Brown was adamant that it does.



Above, below
The hospice provides 'clinical, practical and emotional support for families of children with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions'. Four 'wings' embrace gardens and play areas.



ANY SPACE,
THE ANSWER IS



Above
The central 'nave' and entrance portico.

He explained how the design concept evolved from an uninspiring, inward-looking courtyard scheme that had received planning permission, to a plan that was outward looking to maximise views of the 7.5-acre nature reserve in which the hospice is sited. The building is arranged as legible components incorporating its residential, private and administrative functions with a large public entrance atrium at its centre.

Thoughtful design is indeed in evidence everywhere, from en-suite rooms designed to facilitate step-up/step-down care (basically care for children who are no longer eligible for a hospital bed, but are still too ill to go home) and respite care, allowing families to stay in an environment where they can be supported for a while, and also meet others going through the same thing.

Extra-wide doors allow direct access for treatment beds to the gardens and terraces outside, and fitted furniture is adjustable and specifically designed for children with mobility issues. Inevitably, there is some evidence that this is a medical facility. Bedrooms are equipped with a hoist and ceiling-track system that allows a child to be transferred directly from their bed to a bath, and more subtly, all surfaces are specified to be anti-bacterial and/or easily cleanable to minimise the chances of infection.

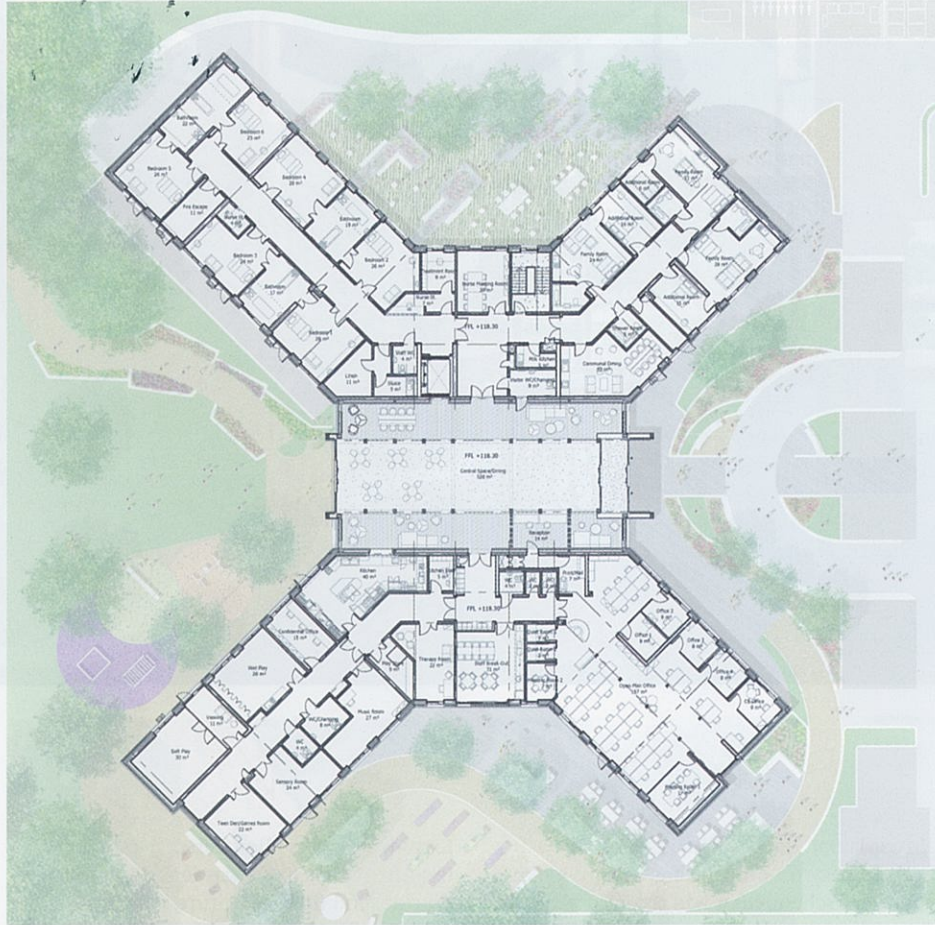
Great store is set by the use of natural materials, chiefly timber. Most notable is the use of green oak framing in what I can only describe as the building's 'nave'. This long, double-height, pitched-roof space forms the spine of the butterfly plan of the complex, serendipitously depicting the symbol of the hospice movement, a brief but beautiful life.

Below

The 'butterfly-shaped' plan provides a central double-height communal hall with four wings containing residential accommodation, plus shared and service spaces.

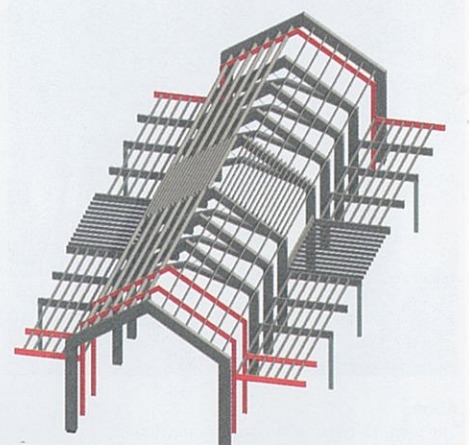
Right

Roof plan: timber portal frames structure the central space.



It provides the building's principal connections with the public and with the natural landscape. Along with the outstretched arms of the adjacent brick 'wings' — an image surviving from the earliest concept sketch — it is the device that first welcomes children and their families to the hospice.

The nave certainly invites light, air and views and is striking, but is it quite right here? Can the concept of 'home from home' really be reached through this spatial type, or does it rather cut us off from it? The philosopher Massimo Cacciari writes of this difficulty facing the architect in a commentary on the architecture of Adolf Loos: "The form that once stood, 'great as Chartres', 'like a thing that is' and now displays itself prodigiously in the invisible of the word, in the utterable, yearns for the tectonic. This is what we must say to the Angel: 'house, bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window -/ at most column, tower'".





Above
Specialist therapy rooms are provided, together with family accommodation, most opening directly to the landscaped gardens (stair ph: James Balston).

Extending Loos' famous dictum that "only a very small part of architecture belongs to the realm of art: the tomb and the monument", Cacciari explains how that which is truly of 'home' lies beyond the architect's power. It's not so much that a nave is the wrong form, but rather that no 'form' created by an architect could be right. A home is a space with certain things in it: a jug on a table; a view of a fruit tree through a window; a gate that swings shut as you return. Here, instead of a table and jug we have rather corporate-looking furniture (very generously donated, and presumably specified for its suitability to a healthcare environment). Instead of a swinging gate we have a curtain wall with inset sliding glass doors and a stripped-down brick aesthetic that evidences the sort of didactic architectural control to which Cacciari refers.

Aldo Rossi (who was of course heavily influenced by Loos) seemed to understand the import of this insight from Cacciari in the latter part of his career as he traded the severe rationalist forms of his early social housing for more traditional ones and/or a preoccupation with the things he could not create as an architect, but only remember: a coffee pot, a dog, a farmhouse kitchen. The architect's attempt to exercise an 'architectural' stylistic control — as in the carefully detailed brickwork — can only be ineffectual in recreating home.



In a sense then, where life is at its most intense, architecture necessarily fades to the background. At the hospice, life is indeed intended to be lived at its most intense with well-appointed facilities for soft play, sensory play (for children with limited mobility), music therapy, art therapy and myriad toys and games that animate the necessarily bare, easily-cleanable rooms with life and colour.

The playground is small but fully accessible, providing wheelchair-using kids with a swing, see-saw and a trampoline. Even the cold blanket room, so un-architectural it doesn't even have a window, simply appears to be the bedroom of a much beloved child, outfitted as it is with 'memorable' things: a dresser with a few favourite toys and a small bed with a patchwork quilt. My one gripe with this space is that the light is activated by PIR, when the ability of a parent to switch on the light manually when they enter to be with their child might have made all the difference.

Perhaps this design decision was driven by the need to tightly control running costs; certainly budgetary constraints are the explanation for the scene that greets you immediately outside the building's back door. You encounter a covered external space that resembles a hospital's ambulance entrance, and is in fact designed to allow bodies to be transferred to waiting hearses, which arrive via a private road constructed for the purpose. Perhaps a gate that swings shut as you leave would have been appropriate, but you are instead greeted by bare concrete walls and floors. Brown explained that these surfaces will eventually be painted in bright colours, but that will come when funds allow; as architects, they were constantly faced with impossible decisions on where to spend the limited resources available (which included their time) and where to withhold them. An impossible task inadvertently bequeathed to them by a receding state?

Noah's Ark won't win the architectural prizes that place great emphasis on fine finishes or the full execution of distinctive concepts, but it provides a place where terminally ill kids can live as kids, if only for a short while, and one that would not be there but for Squire & Partners' involvement. I know which is more important. /t



Project team

Architect
Squire & Partners
Landscape
Gensler
Planning, project manager
JLL
Client advisor
Pears Property
Structure
Ramboll
Contractor
8Build, Erith Demolition

Selected suppliers & subcontractors

Timber
Jewson's
Oak frame
Carpenter & Oak
Ceiling tiles
SAS
Joinery
Ardmore
Beds
Dreams

