



PROJECT

The Ark Squire and Partners

Words by
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There are over 6,000 children in London with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions, yet across the city's 33 boroughs there is just a handful of children's hospice facilities, all built over a decade ago. So for **Noah's Ark Children's Hospice**, a charity founded in north London 20 years ago to provide support and care, to be opening its first purpose-built care home in the city is momentous. Chief executive **Ru Watkins** sums up the mood when he recounts showing the new facility, named **The Ark**, to some of the families it supports: 'We all had tears in our eyes.'

The Ark is located on the outer fringes of

north London on a site that is far from urban — it borders a sizeable nature reserve in **Barnet**. The hospice offers care and support to children of all ages, from babies to teenagers, and their families. But not just in the medical sense: its design, by **Squire & Partners**, is intended to encourage conversation and play as much as rest and recovery. 'We didn't want it to seem like a hospital,' explains partner **Murray Levinson**, 'even though it has to perform like a hospital.'

For sure, there is nothing sterile about the space affectionately referred to as 'the heart' of the building. This double-height, oak-

framed hall was designed in the spirit of a barn, and it shows. You might even think of it as an ark, although Levinson insists this was never the intention. Functioning as the main entrance and reception, it extends across the site from front to back. There are glazed gable walls at both ends, as well as clerestory windows lining the roof, so not only is the space filled with light, you can actually see right through it to the trees beyond.

This heart was almost going to be very different. The charity had previously been granted planning permission for another scheme, which would have seen the building organised around a courtyard rather than a hall. 'It was too introspective,' says Levinson. 'We felt it should be more welcoming.' The alternative that Squire & Partners proposed is functionally a much better solution. In plan it looks a little like a butterfly, with the central hall acting as a spine and four wings stretching out in all directions like, well, wings.

What is particularly clever about this arrangement is that it allows different functions to be kept separate — a must in a facility where joy and grief exist side by side. Squire & Partners director **Barnaby Johnston** highlights how crucial this is by comparing The Ark with the **Maggie's Centres**, which wrote the rulebook for how you make a medical institution feel more like a home. 'Maggie's Centres are about living through cancer as adults, but this is about children living children's lives,' he says. 'Children need space to play, spaces they can make mess in, as well as quiet spaces where they can recover.'

The children's wing is designed with this adaptability in mind. There are six bedrooms, >



1 The entrance to the new facility in north London

2 The double-height, oak-framed hall at the centre of the building was inspired by the design of barns



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Murray Levinson

organised in pairs around three bathrooms. Unlike the reception hall, these spaces are much more hospital than home. The dream of carpet had to be dropped for practical reasons, and the walls are, at least for now, blank canvases. But there are certainly opportunities for personality, the most obvious being smart storage systems, integrating recesses that will function easily as desks as well as seats or display surfaces.

Here, like everywhere else in the building, large doors ensure that beds and wheelchairs can be easily moved between rooms and out on to the terraces. There are also hoist systems discreetly integrated. It's clear that accessibility was high up on the priority list, and rightly so.

Family rooms can be found in the adjacent wing, while more private spaces such as bereavement suites and a prayer room are tucked away on a small basement floor below. Thanks to a rigorous consultation and collaboration process, these rooms incorporate details including separate entrances and divided sleeping areas, ensuring they welcome people of any faith and are sensitive to the needs of families dealing with trauma.

Of the two remaining wings, one accommodates staff areas while the other contains a varied assortment of therapy spaces, including a cinema room, a soft play room, a music room and an art room.



3 A series of gardens and terraces around the building, designed by Gensler, creates space for play and connection to nature

4 Beds and wheelchairs can be easily moved out of rooms and on to the terraces

5 A soft play room for the children



Gensler was tasked with designing a series of gardens and terraces around the building, and has done a good job of making these spaces feel very much like part of the design rather than an afterthought. Each one has a character suited to the wing it adjoins; for instance, the therapy room opens out to a wheelchair-accessible playground, while a contemplation garden flanks the bereavement suite.

Levinson says the only reason the building is here at all is thanks to 'the energy and the enthusiasm of the charity', but that's only half the truth. It is also a testament to what can be achieved with a lot of good will. The project relied heavily on the generosity of suppliers, contractors and sponsors, so much so that many design decisions were made based on what others were willing or able to discount or donate. For instance, the bio-solar green roof was never originally part of the design, but

because it's the first of its kind in the UK, adding it meant the project became eligible for a hefty donation from the **European Federation of Green Roof Associations**. The kitchen looks like a **McDonald's** kitchen because it was provided by the fast-food giant (UK chief executive **Paul Pomroy** is a local). Even the bricks chosen for the external walls were selected based on a cost reduction. Everyone on the design team uses the word 'flexible' often, and it's clear that they've had to be. With that in mind, it is remarkable quite how cohesive everything feels and it's probably one of the building's biggest successes.

Last year saw Noah's Ark provide care to 300 children. The charity estimates that the new facility could be used by as many as 1,200 children. All that's left now is for some of these children to start making their own mark on the building.