

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT



When thinking about the built environment or even design in isolation, it's easy to underestimate the impact that it can have – especially in the context of something as serious as cancer. This study by The Futures Company really challenges that thought. It demonstrates how design plays an integral role in helping young people fight cancer by providing a non-institutionalised medical environment within the National Health Service.

The study shows that the Teenage Cancer Trust environment creates positive benefits for patients as well as catering for the needs of family, friends and staff – all of whom are important and have a role in providing support, care and treatment.

In March 2009, The Futures Company, a respected strategic insight and futures consultancy with a history of supporting government in service transformation, was commissioned by Teenage Cancer Trust. The charity wanted to better understand and define the impact the design of their specialist units has upon the lives of those who use them.

To fully explore the issue, The Futures Company developed a multi-layered approach, which covered both detailed

desk research and in depth interviews. Stakeholder interviews were conducted with designers and architects, and a total of thirty interviews were carried out with patients, their friends and family and staff working on the units. Bereaved parents who had lost their children through cancer were also interviewed to gain a complete picture of the needs of different groups at various stages of their cancer.

Findings from this evaluation clearly demonstrate that the built environment is one of the key components through which Teenage Cancer Trust is able to deliver its philosophy. It works hand in hand with other key components including the staff, the equipment and the culture of the units to support the delivery of five key benefit platforms. Together,



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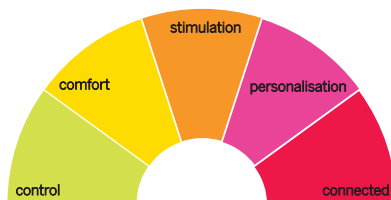
these benefit platforms work to facilitate 'normality'.

In the context of young people's fight against cancer and the devastation and disruption it can cause, normality becomes highly valued by patients and their families. Normality provides comfort, safety and reassurance. For patients, it makes the process more bearable, makes it easier to engage with the treatment, easier to keep going, and easier to maintain existing social and support networks.

"YOU'RE AN ADULT SO TO SUDDENLY HAVE TO LIVE BY SOMEBODY ELSE'S RULES THAT JUST DON'T HAVE ANY RELATION TO HOW I WAS LIVING BEFORE I WAS DIAGNOSED IS JUST REALLY DIFFICULT"

(Patient Traditional Ward)

These benefit platforms build on, as well as support the primary benefit of Best Medical Practice which is recognised to have utmost importance.



The five main benefits areas which work together to facilitate normality are:



Control

- the capacity for patients to take control of important

aspects of their day to day lives on the units, for example when to get up and go to sleep, what and when to eat, and their immediate environment including control over lighting and levels of privacy. Control is all the more important for young people who, just as they are starting to gain it, suddenly have so much control taken away due to a diagnosis of cancer. And the more ill a patient is, the greater the desire to retain some element of control.



Comfort

- both physical and emotional comfort

- appropriate and comfortable furniture and space for patients and their visitors. The creation of an atmosphere that is less institutionalised and threatening to both patients and their friends and family so that they all feel more comfortable spending time in the units.



Stimulation

- the capacity and facilities for patients to be engaged

and stimulated through organised activities and equipment, access to outside space and graphics or designs on the walls and ceilings - all of which help to distract from the day-to-day reality of cancer treatment.



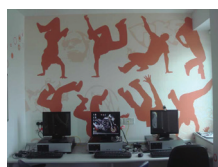
Personalisation

- the ability for patients to take ownership of

their space and create a sense of home - often particularly important for longer term and end of life patients.

"JUST BEING ABLE TO HAVE MY OWN DUVET COVER AND A DUVET RATHER THAN SHEETS MADE IT FEEL MORE LIKE MY SPACE"

(Patient on Teenage Cancer Trust Unit)



Connectivity

- the ability to keep in touch with normal social support

networks, such as friends and family and to maintain all aspects of life including education. This is facilitated through flexible visiting hours, social spaces to hang out in and free access to laptops.

"WE SPENT A THOUSAND POUNDS USING PATIENT LINE IN ABOUT A MONTH - IT WAS RIDICULOUS BUT I COULDN'T GET THERE FOR WHEN THE VISITING HOURS WERE SO IF I WANTED TO SPEAK TO HIM WHAT ELSE COULD I DO?"

(Wife of patient on traditional ward)

"THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICED WAS THE MIRROR AND THE LIGHTS - YOU WOULDN'T GET THAT IN A NORMAL WARD SO IT JUST TELLS YOU STRAIGHT AWAY THAT IT'S A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT"

(Patient on Teenage Cancer Trust Unit)

With regards to staff, working regularly on these units enables them to develop a level of expertise, which is recognised and appreciated by patients and families. At a higher level this pooling of knowledge also acts as an enabler for the development of best practices within the professional community.

Finally and very importantly the study found that to maximise the impact of the built environment, design must consider practical details and the specific needs of young people undergoing treatment. This includes details such as the angle of the TV when patients are lying in bed for hours on end and easy access to bathrooms that patients can visit several times a night. It is this attention to detail and ability to understand the needs of the different groups within the medical environment that creates the greatest impact. The less glamorous but practical side of design - it all matters.



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