

Interior Graduation Studio Fall 2014/2015

Reflection on the design of a cancer care centre for young adolescents in Amsterdam North



Linda Brembs
4009800
design@lin-da.de

Many people think of cancer as a disease, which only affects much older people or very young children. During my research I investigated the problematic situation young adults between 18 and 30 years of age have to face, after being diagnosed with cancer. Adolescence and young adulthood is a period of life, which is characterized by struggle. It is the time when we as young persons develop our self-identities and our independence. Having to deal with cancer at this critical life stage can be very hard. Those young people have to face all the challenges, other people of their age do. Additionally they need to cope with a serious illness, the treatment and the linked side effects. Besides normal insecurities and social milestones, cancer affects the sense of “I can do anything in life” , which is normally very ubiquitous among teenagers and young adults.

This project is based on the perception that traditional care models are not meeting the needs of adolescent cancer patients adequately. The premise for the design of a new cancer care centre for young adults is that architecture reacts on the complex of problems that young patients have to face. The essence of the research was to understand the patients’ needs and setting goals for the new cancer care centre, which might help improve the conditions of the young cancer patients. Of course architecture cannot heal, but it can provide an environment that supports people in coping with stress or other symptoms of the illness. During my research I focused on the question: what program features could stimulate adolescents to feel independent in a cancer care centre?

The site in Amsterdam North functions clearly as a connector between different worlds. The building is situated at the north-western border of the Vliegenbos Park along the Meeuwenlaan. In front of the building the urban fabric and the green area of two parks come together. Nature forms the boundary for the access to the building. Very naturally the building fades into the park, being surrounded by trees. The idea of redesigning a building that has the charisma of a tree house or a fairy tale house appealed to me. The new cancer care center should offer space, where young people can escape from boredom and the feeling of having lost control.



The design process was based on a variety of different methods. Multiple reference projects had been analysed in order to learn more about currently used programs in the cancer care sector. The research showed that the cancer care centre should offer smaller spaces for individual talks. How to transform the large classrooms of the existing building into smaller spaces, was tested by making multiple models. As a result space was divided into public platforms of different sizes, connected by staircases inviting people to take a stroll. The rooms transmit the feeling of openness and not being locked up. Various visual axis enhance the feeling of being in control by allowing the patients to do as much as possible by themselves.

The new care center provides a large diversity in facilities. Young adolescents will get the possibility to tailor their own alternative therapy program, in order to find strategies to manage an everyday life. First of all rehabilitation programs can help the adolescents to learn to function independently again by being creative and physical active. Furthermore an information center can give the patients control in decision-making by providing the right information. Space for academic support can be offered to the patients, in order to help them to reintegrate in school or work. Furthermore as an answer to the question, how to increase the feeling of independence, a unit specifically designed for assisted living for young people with cancer has been designed next to the existing building.

The process of the design finding was supported by a variety of hand-drawings and several study models on different scales from 1/500 to 1/20. The elaboration of the project had been based on both drawings on scale and multiple presentation models. Literature was studied in order to get information about the

problems of the specific group of young adolescents with cancer. Additionally, conversations with the young patients themselves, their families and several experts were very important for the understanding of the specific needs of this particular users group.

It turned out that the survival rate of young adults seems not to improve, compared to young children or older adult patients. Young adults have a 50 per cent less chance of surviving the disease than children or older people.¹ They frequently fall into a “no man’ s land” between paediatric and adult oncology, without having a specific facility offering them the right treatment and support to their specific illness and needs. The consequences are that things are slowly changing for the forgotten generation of cancer patients. That is why I believe that the establishment of a cancer care center is absolutely needed. My ambition was to design a place where young people can gain hope. In this building, young adults can find support for the challenging time from being diagnosed with cancer to becoming a survivor of cancer. But beyond that they need to feel supported with the transition from psychological and economical dependence to independence.

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Linda Brembs

¹ www.cbsnews.com