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### Healthcare centre, Copenhagen

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## Healthcare centre

**COPENHAGEN (DK) - NORD** presents an alternative to mammoth hospitals: a recuperative kind of architecture.

Denmark has the dubious honour of being the Scandinavian country with the highest per capita cancer rate. More than two hundred thousand Danes are diagnosed with cancer, and the public healthcare system is under constant political pressure to do more, to act faster and to open up new, experimental healing programmes. The tendency in Danish public healthcare management at the moment is to centralize facilities in order to concentrate all the available expertise. Many small, local hospitals are shut down while a few strategically located 'super-hospitals' get bigger and bigger in order to be able to offer more and more advanced treatments. Despite its many advantages, this strategy also has some drawbacks. The new mammoth institutions are also supposed to trim public spending, and cost-efficiency often constrains any architectural ambition in their design. Modern super-hospitals always start as very ambitious projects but they often end up as dull architectural dinosaurs, where every little detail has been pared down and rationalized.



Patients diagnosed with cancer – and many other patient groups – who may struggle with a life-threatening disease for years, need more than just medical treatment. They need hope and comfort. They need spaces for recovery and places to meet and exchange their personal experiences with other people in a similar situation.

This clash between an efficiency-driven environment and a more empathic way of

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healing has created a growing demand for new kinds of healthcare institutions focusing on soft treatments and individual recovery. The Danish architectural firm **NORD** has just completed one such novel institution in Copenhagen. Their design for a Healthcare Centre for Cancer Patients is based on the notion of a healing architecture and represents a stimulating alternative to the usual stigmatizing institutional environments.

The building is situated next to one of Copenhagen's major hospitals; patients diagnosed with cancer can literally cross the street and enter the healthcare centre to start their recovery process. The building is clad outside with aluminium plates and inside with wood. The overall volume has been subdivided by an origami-like roofscape, giving the healthcare centre a row house character and a human scale – despite its relatively large size of 2500 m<sup>2</sup>. Harmonious fenestration, small niches and balconies reinforce the domestic character.

The healthcare centre is operated by the municipality and has both professional employees and volunteers assisting the patients and relatives seeking help – but there are no authoritarian white coats and no hint of institutional tristesse.



The healthcare centre is organized like a small monastery: two storeys high with an inner courtyard. The entrance, indicated with a rectangular cut at the northern corner, welcomes people with an informal atmosphere and café-like reception. Private consultation areas, physiotherapy rooms, offices and a kitchen are at the same (street) level, meandering around the courtyard to create a walkway with furnished alcoves and clear views of both the courtyard and outside gardens.

The second floor has double- and triple-height spaces containing the more voluminous programmes, like the centre's athletic facilities. Scientific research has shown that physical activity helps cancer patients recover, and even very ill patients in chemotherapy go there to exercise. These and other recovery programmes are placed on the second floor to reduce direct exposure to the outside.

The healthcare centre's interior appears both open and well organized, with good contact with the outdoor areas. The building is neither exclusive nor pretentious. The main attributes are the intelligent orchestration of the programme, its human scale and delicate general appearance.

NORD's strengths – besides good design skills – are their research-driven approach and ability to both investigate and innovate organizational structures and building programmes. We have known for a long time that hospitals, prisons and panoptic constructions can be used as a controlling and disciplinary apparatus. I really applaud NORD's attempt to move in the opposite direction towards a recovery-focused kind of architecture where illness and its effects can be counteracted with a spatial prophylaxis.

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