Welsh Contemporary Architecture:
Maggie's Cardiff by Dow Jones Architects

Figure 1.0 - Maggie's Cardiff (Coleman, 2019)

The Cardiff Maggie's Centre (Figure 1.0), located on the Velindre Cancer Centre site, is situated in the Whitchurch, outskirt of Cardiff and was completed in 2019. Maggie's Cardiff is the nineteenth completed Maggie's Centre in the United Kingdom and aims to provide a place for hope and support. Design by Dow Jones Architects, a London-based practice founded by Biba Dow and Alun Jones in 2000. The practice is known for its beautifully crafted and thoughtful work across a broad range of typologies and scales. The practice was established with a vigorous and vital interest in art, culture, making

and place, within the framework of strong and coherent architectural principles. It is also notable that project director Alun Jones, who grew up in the Cardiff area, had a personal connection to the site (Mark, 2014).

Maggie's Centres, a global network comprising 29 establishments, 26 of them nestled in the United Kingdom (Maggie's, no date), have their roots in the visionary aspirations of the late Maggie Keswick Jencks. These centres are a testament to her unwavering commitment to offer individuals diagnosed with cancer a haven of hope and abiding support. Regrettably, the expansion of the portfolio is indicative of an escalating demand. Presently, the United Kingdom is home to a population of two million individuals living with or survivors of cancer, a statistic that exhibits a consistent upward trajectory (Maxwell, 2019). In this context, the Cardiff Maggie's Centre, designed to accommodate an annual footfall of 20,000 visitors, stands as the second of its kind in Wales, the first being the Swansea centre (2011) designed by Kisho Kurokawa (Mark, 2014). As aptly articulated by Charles Jencks, "If you look after the carers, the carers can really look after the patients – you create a virtuous circle" (RIBA, 2021).

The project was challenged by a tricky triangular site bordered by an unsightly expanse of car park, the architects at Dow Jones Architects harnessed their unique artistic design process to create a space that seamlessly harmonised with the Welsh identity while also catering to the practical needs of its users. The entrance, strategically positioned at the southwestern corner, invites visitors through an open portal. Once inside, a small courtyard envelops the visitor, orchestrating a rapid shift from institutional to domestic, and from a potentially hostile environment to a homely one.

The predominantly open-plan layout (Figure 2.0) finds structure through the incorporation of three distinct 'freestanding' timber elements. Each element serves a specific function, housing amenities such as toilets, storage for the reception area, and the 'cwtch,' which

nestles at the heart of the building. These elements subtly divide the space and guide occupants towards the central kitchen and dining area, a reassuring and familiar locale where individuals naturally gravitate, whether for the comforting ritual of brewing a cup of tea or simply engaging in casual conversation (RIBA, 2021). Architect Alun, in reference to the client presentation booklet, explains the endeavour as "trying to make connections between art, landscape, and the way that buildings are made in that part of Wales" (Arch-ive, 2021). Maggie's Cardiff received numerous awards, including RSAW Welsh Architecture Award 2021, RIBA National Award 2021 and shortlisted for the 2021 Stephen Lawrence Prize (RIBA, 2021).

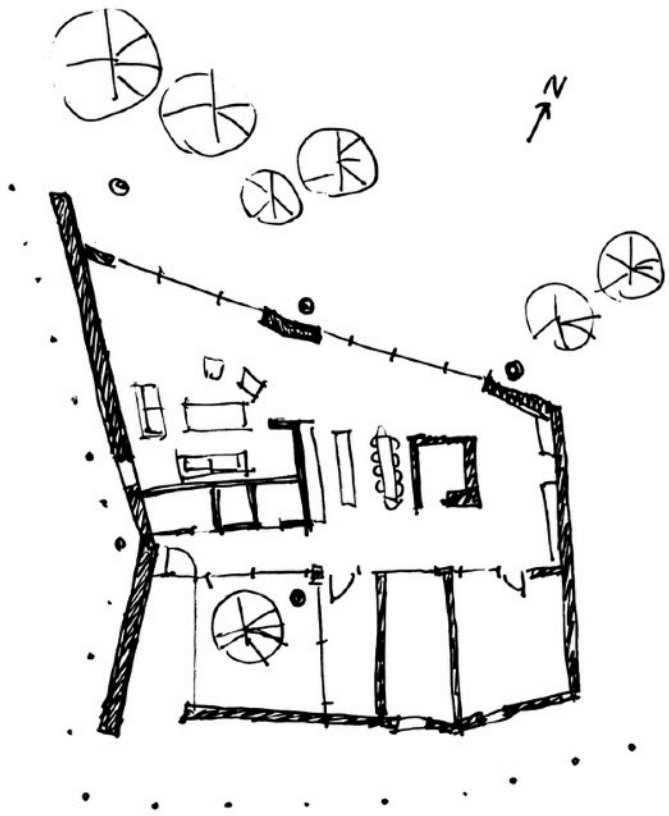

Figure 2.0 - Plan of Maggie's Cardiff (Drawn by myself)

Overall Beauty

The Cardiff Maggie's Centre stands as a captivating Welsh architectural scene, notable for its visually striking design. A careful viewer will immediately notice the intricate interplay of vertical shadow lines and sloping roofs, which, at an initial glance, may appear as a complex and chaotic composition. However, upon closer look, this seemingly convoluted structure unveils a remarkable simplicity and pleasing sense of proportion. The vibrant and bold colour palette employed in the design stands in stark contrast to the verdant backdrop of the surrounding trees, creating a visually captivating and dynamic juxtaposition. Furthermore, this vibrant red scheme serves to infuse a lively vitality into what would otherwise be a rather somber atmosphere, primarily due to the expansive presence of a surrounding car park.

Enhancing the exterior's aesthetics, sculptural bollards envelop the building, contributing a layer of complexity to an otherwise straightforward façade. These bollards, formerly part of Antony Gormley's Peckham regeneration scheme in 1994 (Maxwell, 2019), have been thoughtfully repurposed as weathered sentinels, serving to safeguard the public side of the structure. The utmost simplicity in form, rich colouration, and the harmonious interplay with artistic sculptures collectively afford visitors a modest yet tangible experience of artistic appreciation and delight.

Regionalism

The architects have adeptly showcased, through their innovative design concept, the compelling rationale for locate this building in Wales. According to Dow Jones Architects, their imaginative vision draws its inspiration from the surrounding landscape. The building's form is thoughtfully fashioned to mirror the distinctive silhouette of the Welsh hills and the recurring gables that grace the valley villages.

The chosen colour palette pays homage to the region's indigenous red sandstone, the autumnal fern hues adorning the nearby hills, and even the industrial-heritage characteristic of the valley. It artfully amalgamates these diverse elements into a harmonious whole piece of art. Nestled within the heart of the building is a distinctive zone known as the 'cwtch.' This particular space exudes an intimate ambiance, characterised by its towering dimensions and overhead illumination, a design ethos firmly rooted in the architectural tradition of Wales, specifically drawing inspiration from the simnau fawr (big chimneys) of vernacular welsh architecture. Infused with the essence of Welsh heritage, art, and locally sourced materials, it emerges as a genuinely restorative and poetic enclave—an antidote to the looming shadow of cancer. The architects' meticulous attention to local context and their astute design choices underpin the building's profound connection to its Welsh locale (Ridout, 2021).

Sustainability

While the installation of photovoltaic panels (PVs) were obviated due to restrictions imposed by the hospital authorities, the primary heating system relies on a gas boiler. Nevertheless, the architectural approach to the building is underpinned by principles aligned with *Passivhaus*, notably featuring a high-insulation, prefabricated timber frame system. This design philosophy is geared towards the minimisation of cold bridging, the maximisation of airtightness, and the provision of thermal compensation, surpassing the standards stipulated by heat building regulations (RIBA, 2021). Notably, the building stands as a testament to efficiency, occupying approximately 25% less space compared to most Maggie's Centres, and its cost is less than half the average expense associated with such establishments.

It's imperative to recognise that this building, although currently serving as a Maggie's Center, is, in fact, planned to be served as 'temporary' building. The stipulated usage period spans a decade,

coinciding with the relocation and redevelopment of the Velindre Cancer Centre to a nearby site (Architecture & Culture, 2019). This temporal nature has, in many ways, instilled a heightened focus on sustainability within the architectural endeavour. The building's sustainability ethos is rooted in simplicity, notably exemplified by the absence of any interior finishing materials beyond paint, thus streamlining resource utilisation to the fullest extent possible.

In terms of long-term sustainability, once Maggie's relocates to a new site in the 2030s, this elegantly designed structure has the potential for future reuse, potentially as a kindergarten, given its adaptability and uncluttered interior (RIBA, 2021). Furthermore, the materials employed, such as the rustic corrugated steel and structural Douglas fir, have been selected with an eye towards the possibility of disassembly and reuse in other architectural applications, thus reflecting a forward-thinking approach to resource conservation and sustainability that extends well into the distant future.

Conclusion

Maggie's Cardiff is a noteworthy addition to the Maggie's Centres portfolio, demonstrating the architect's skill in designing a high-quality architecture on a budget and within a constrained site (Ridout, 2021). There are only few drawbacks in such critical point of view, First, squeezing in courtyard is not too necessary, especially given the beautiful green space behind the building. Second, the cwtch space seems a bit cramped for users. However, Wayne Forster, Professor of Architecture at the Welsh School of Architecture, had this to say about the Maggie's Centre:

> This new Maggie's contains all the requisite components set out in the brief – a range of activity spaces, private and group consulting and the quiet space – the cwtch and the hearth and the central table – inter-connected spaces all under a

> sheltering roof – daylit so that one is always aware of time and place. The poetic here, and what distinguishes these places including furniture and fittings, is a quiet modesty deliberately sought. A place that will have an easy and comforting familiarity. Familiarity is a common word in briefs for care environments – commonly embodied in pastel colours and risable art. Here the idea is familiar but with meaning (Dow Jone Architects, 2019).

In essence, the architect's approach to the project underscores a clear emphasis on people and sustainability. The Cardiff Maggie's Centre serves as a compelling testament to this approach, representing a thoroughly satisfying and well-designed Welsh building.

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