

Architecture

# User involvement makes for better solutions

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“Through incorporating user involvement, a building’s functions and flow can be better optimised and the future users can be given added ownership by contributing to the vision of the new building. Basically, through the user, we are creating a common dream, common goals and a shared understanding of the best way forward towards our shared vision. Then it’s just up to us to realize the dream”, says Martin Wienberg, Partner and Creative Director at Friis & Moltke Architects.

User involvement is crucial to the Danish architectural studio Friis & Moltke Architects’ vision to create buildings that bring more than just the physical environment to the users. With their newly won tender to build a new psychiatric ward at Bispebjerg Hospital in Copenhagen, they know their design must add value for both the hospital staff to carry out their duties and for the patients for their comfort and healing. This sentiment towards involving the users perhaps also helped the studio win the tender to create the new Hospital.

“We could draw a nice building design and then just inform the users about how we thought they should use it. But by integrating staff and patients in the design process we increase the quality of the patient and user experience in its daily use”, added Wienberg.

Friis & Moltke Architects, together with PLH Architects, Søren Jensen A/S, Sintef A/S and Møller & Grønborg A/S, won the tender competition to build the 24,000 square metre New Psychiatric Hospital in Copenhagen, which included a space for an additional 200 ward beds and an emergency Psychiatric department at Bispebjerg Hospital.

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It was crucial that Friis & Moltke Architects created a process for interaction with the users and understanding their working methods, processes and desires for the future building. According to Wienberg, the architectural practice can only ensure the maximum utility of the new design through dialogue and mutual understanding of the users' needs. At the same time, it is the company's task to dress the future users the best possible way, to understand both the possibilities and the limitations inherent in the process leading to the finished building.

The ambition of the project was to create attractive, modern surroundings for the psychiatric patients, so that the very patients become the central focal point and the hospital becomes the functional setting. In this matter, user involvement is a central topic to ensure the best possible hospital is built.

“For a psychiatric patient to reconquer their sense of reality and normality, as well as to help prepare them to be independent, the physical surroundings have to support this work. The surroundings and architecture must support the psychiatric treatment thoroughly and the experience of being in an institution should be minimised”, says Wienberg.

According to Wienberg, the healing architecture in the new psychiatric hospital deals with general physical elements that counteract undesirable situations and, if possible, absorb and eliminate aggression and anxiety when many patients are together. Healing architecture also includes elements that promote stress management and supports the positive development of the patients' sense of reality. A positive development will in many cases require recognizable surroundings, which feel domestic and not alien in their own idiom.

“With a starting point in this understanding, our central architectural vision evolved from three leading fundamental ideas. Dignity, which is about using the architecture to create worthy surroundings for the individual, so that his or her stay can be experienced as a recovering stay at a refuge instead of in a tabooed hospitalization. Functionality, which is all about creating a clear and functional architectural disposition that supports a professional and safe psychiatric treatment. And harmony that focuses on a harmonic interplay between the existing structures, landscape and garden space at Bispebjerg Hospital and that ensures a sustainable vision for the whole area”, says Martin Wienberg.

He also states that there have been other exciting challenges in the process of designing such a complex building. Focusing on the aforementioned basic ideas of dignity, functionality and harmony, the practice has faced ongoing challenges in getting through to the finish line with this vision. These challenges include the fact that Bispebjerg Psychiatry Hospital is located in the middle of an area close to existing buildings, which makes certain demands on the structural volumes, scale and design, in order to maintain a harmonious whole – a total architectural development that is prepared to meet the challenges of the future on both small and large scale.

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