

Living with the landscape

Christine Facer Hoffman FLS MBALI



Several years ago I was commissioned by Maggie's Cancer Caring centres to design a landscape fitting for a new centre in Cheltenham. I was to work alongside the renowned architect Sir Richard MacCormac, former President of RIBA. I was delighted to be asked yet rather apprehensive, having limited knowledge about what constituted a 'healing' or 'restorative' garden. Thus the project opened up a new chapter in my design portfolio.

Maggie's Centres were founded by the late Maggie Keswick Jencks (landscape designer and wife of the theorist and architect Charles Jencks) who lived with advanced cancer for two years. She used her knowledge and experience to create a blueprint for a new type of care: a drop-in counselling centre where cancer sufferers and their families can obtain support and advice completely free of charge. Fittingly, considering the Jenckses' backgrounds, stimulating architecture was key and the cream of the profession including Frank Ghery, Zaha Hadid, and Richard Rogers, have all designed buildings for the charity. Maggie was adamant that gardens around each centre should have equal importance as restorative and stimulating places "to create spaces that encourage a positive mind and that are stimulating to the senses".

The agency of landscape and its health benefits are currently a hot topic with surveys showing that mental and physical health can be maintained in the already healthy, and improved in the sick, with the RHS recently calling for gardening to be prescribed on the NHS. Most gardens offer a respite from the world, a chance to unwind and take stock but few are designed solely with those principles in mind. Yet it is these qualities that underpin the 'healing' or 'restorative' landscapes.

Creating gardens designed and constructed to operationalize the concept of the quality of

life, as places for restoration of good health and wellness, are considered essential in today's sometimes starkly institutional hospital environments. Instrumental in this thinking are the studies of the American landscape architect Roger Ulrich who showed that just views of trees from a window reduced hospital stays for patients who also experienced less pain and stress.

This research and that from other disciplines reveal a complexity of variables which prohibit a formulaic approach to garden design for best health outcomes. There are, however, several major factors of landscape design considered important; provision of nature elements, a degree of privacy, opportunity for physical activity and movement (passive or active) and artistic elements for distraction. Additionally, I was to design a garden for cancer patients undergoing a variety of treatments (chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery) so I needed to understand the physical impact (fatigue, loss of strength and stamina, reduced mobility) and psychological impact (loss, fear, social stigma, stress) of users and factor these concerns into the design.

Designers of other Maggie's centres had approached the brief in a variety of ways. Exercise and physical activity are a core part of Maggie's programme of support and one centre includes public domestic space in the shape of a kitchen garden with raised beds where users can grow their own vegetables (Maggie's Manchester). Other centres have designed woodland gardens (Maggie's Gartnavel); a labyrinth garden, an allegory of life (Maggie's Dundee); gardens embracing science and symbolism (Maggie's Inverness); and a heathland/wildflower garden (Maggie's Southampton).

Design has to be fitting for the site as well as fulfilling the brief. The site for Maggie's Cheltenham, set in a residential area adjacent to the hospital, was small, essentially a narrow

front garden sandwiched between buildings on a fairly busy road with most of the space non-dig. Dividing the site into three distinct landscaped parts would allow me to create the necessary requirements of the brief. An Entrance Garden encourages visitors in; an enclosed Courtyard Garden, adjacent to the centre, provides privacy; and a narrow garden alongside the road leads users from the hospital in the direction of the centre. The overall design is symbolic and metaphorical inspired by the Sigmoid Curve, a tilted 'S'-shape motif with a double meaning so relevant to Maggie's. It is a visual metaphor for life and living and is also used to assess the dynamics of drug-induced tumour regression. It did not need to be necessarily understood by visitors; its intention was to create patterns in the landscape that would evoke curiosity and stimulate conversation away from the everyday problems of cancer - all part of Maggie's philosophy.

The 'S' motif is repeated throughout the garden's design with sinuous turfed moundettes (small mounds) alongside the road and within the Entrance Garden weaving gently between the trees towards the centre; grassy spaces with scattered trees are known to foster restoration. I worked alongside the sculptor Bill Pye, who created 'Arroyo', a water sculpture with 'S'-shaped curves that track the winding path. With water events at either end, the sculpture provides both an art form and the 'sound' of a restorative garden.

An enclosed private space with seating, where users might have personal conversations, was essential in the design, enclosure being vital in making visitors feel safe and secure: open vistas can be intimidating. A bespoke oak pergola and trellis with inbuilt seating effectively screens a small Courtyard Garden from the road. With the knowledge that the sense of smell can be adversely affected by chemotherapy the planting here includes richly perfumed species - lavender, roses, Philadelphus 'Mexican Jewel'



and the Chinese magnolia vine, *Schisandra grandifolia*. During the summer months this area doubles as a space for gentle exercise with Tai Chi classes a popular event.

Visible from the road, a large flower border or 'flower forest' attracts attention to users with brightly coloured perennials and bulbs in hues of burnt orange, yellow and purple, colours of energy and optimism. It has proved to be a successful distraction with visitors stopping, smelling, touching and admiring the plants.

The garden has matured well and is maintained by a contractor and volunteers. Maggie's Cheltenham, together with several other centres, has been the subject of several PhD and MSc theses on restorative gardens with questionnaires to users. Replies show visitors greatly valuing the calming effect of the design, the bold colourful planting and the scented flowers, such a contrast to the stark clinical environment of a hospital. It's a sentiment that anyone who loves gardens will appreciate and one that fulfils Maggie's vision.

For the past fifteen years Christine has run a dynamic landscape and garden consultancy specialising in contemporary design and planting. She is known for her scientifically-inspired creations and has achieved recognition through her designs for large country houses and show gardens. Her work has been featured widely in the media including appearances in BBC TV Alan Titchmarsh's *Garden Secrets*, Belgian and Austrian TV, and features in *The Times* and the RHS *The Garden* magazine. Christine's own designed garden, *Througham Court*, is recognised worldwide and has been described by the *The Times* as one of England's

most remarkable gardens and chosen by Tim Richardson as an extraordinary garden for the 21st century. She lectures to Landscape Architecture students and helps assess student projects, and was awarded a BALI Design Excellence Award in 2013. Christine gained a Diploma in Landscape Design (Distinction) from the Pickard School of Landscape & Garden Design. Prior to establishing her design business she was a Consultant Haematologist and continues to use this scientific background as a source of inspiration for design. She lives and works in the Cotswolds, London and Venice.

www.christinefacer.com



