

# DEVELOPMENT

## Máxima Impact

In Utrecht, a pediatric oncology hospital champions color and connection to serve young patients.

By Anna Winston



The Netherlands' new centralized child oncology hospital includes spaces for care as well as research. LIAG designed a building that would be welcoming and cheerful, and support patients as well as parents. Design elements include bright colors (as in the facade pictured above) and a mix of recreational areas (like the interior courtyard at left).

"Vibrant" and "colorful" are adjectives not often associated with hospitals, but the Princess Máxima Center doesn't feel much like a hospital. An espresso bar fills the triple-height reception area with the cheerful aroma of coffee. The floors are Dutch orange. A slatted wood staircase slices across the lobby. Floor-to-ceiling glazing reveals views of fields beyond, complete with grazing sheep. Digital animations dance on the walls. An elevator door slides open and a child rolls out on a tricycle that doubles as a drip trolley.

This is the Netherlands' new centralized pediatric oncology care and research hospital, located in Utrecht on a site adjacent to fields and forest. Designed by The Hague-based architecture firm LIAG, with interiors by Utrecht-based MMEK, and covering 483,000 square feet across five levels, it is the largest facility of its kind in Europe and one of the most unusual.

The center's site was ultimately selected for its proximity to the larger, existing Wilhelmina Children's Hospital at Utrecht's University Medical Center. A long bridge,

clad in rainbow-colored glass panels, connects Princess Máxima to Wilhelmina's facilities, including its intensive care unit and operating rooms. This share has opened space for a large research center at Princess Máxima with a secure laboratory, which—together with the hospital's parking garage—buffers patients from highway noise.

By linking research and treatment areas, LIAG intended to foster exchanges between user groups: "The researchers see why they are doing their work," says Thomas Bögl, >





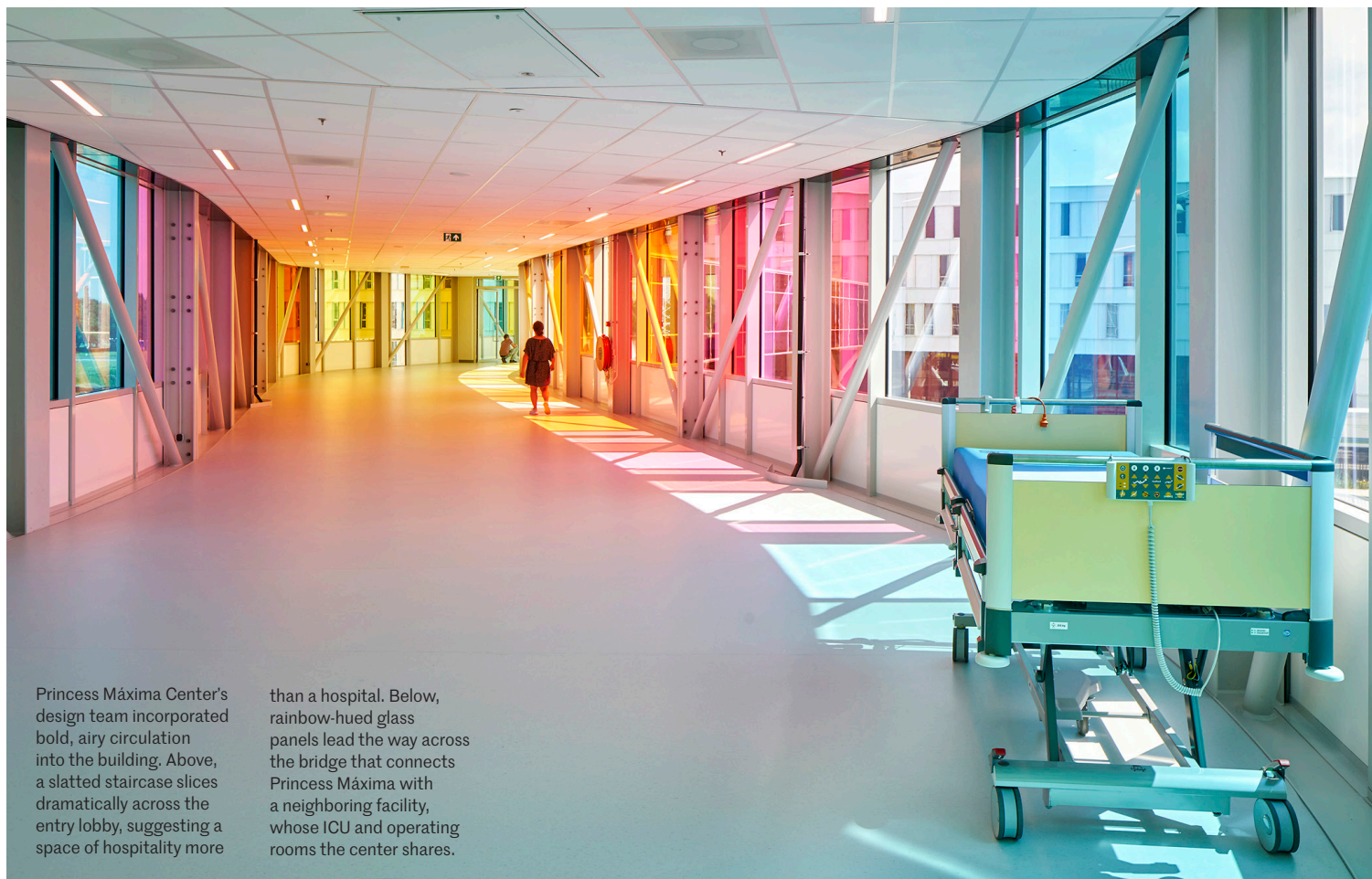
a director and partner at the firm. “At the same time, many of the children are quite interested” in the research, he says. “We wanted to make a child-friendly—not childish—building.”

Viewed from the entrance, the Princess Máxima Center looks like a standard white block clad in low-maintenance aluminum, with a concrete-frame structure and flooring system whose air pockets reduce its weight—important in a country of marshland. But the plan is irregular, with four courtyards: three enclosed and one that opens out onto the green space behind the building. Seen from an angle, the white exterior reveals bright strips of color set into the facade.

The same brightness is reflected in the center’s interiors, where the design team took care to support the mental health of all the hospital’s users through material and layout choices. “We talked a lot with psy-

chologists to get more of an understanding of the experience of a child, but also that of the parents,” says Bögl. Families put their lives on hold during a child’s treatment, but parents as well as patients benefit from an occasional break from one another. To that end, LIAG included a communal kitchen and small bedrooms with en suite bathrooms that adjoin individual patient rooms, so friends and family can stay overnight—or longer—with flexible privacy.

Throughout, the design team emphasized connections for the patients—with their families, their care team, and the outdoors, which has been shown to help the healing process. Balconies on each of the family rooms overlook wood-lined interior courtyards, for example. Similarly, LIAG located rooms for patients in the most critical condition on the third floor, where views of nature are best. ▸



Princess Máxima Center’s design team incorporated bold, airy circulation into the building. Above, a slatted staircase slices dramatically across the entry lobby, suggesting a space of hospitality more

than a hospital. Below, rainbow-hued glass panels lead the way across the bridge that connects Princess Máxima with a neighboring facility, whose ICU and operating rooms the center shares.



## Selected Sources

### INTERIORS

#### • Health-care finishes:

Forbo Flooring Systems, Gerflor

#### • Lounge surfaces:

Sikafloor, Moso bamboo, Forbo Flooring Systems, Topdeck Flooring, Modulyss carpet

#### • Walls: Knauf

#### • Ceilings:

Moso bamboo, Armstrong Ceilings

#### • Lighting:

Philips Lighting

#### • Sports flooring:

Taraflex

### EXTERIOR

#### • Facade:

WVH Gevelprojecten, Derako Solid Wood Systems

#### • Windows:

Norwin, Schüco

#### • Landscaping:

Bureau B+B

#### • Lighting: Philips Lighting

### BUILDING SYSTEMS

#### • Elevators:

Möhringer Liften



Both LIAG and MMEK strove to make sure children would be active beyond their rooms, with varied spaces where kids could safely explore, play, and learn. “The children are ripped from their social environment and everything they are used to,” says Erik van Kuijk, creative director at MMEK. “The big idea was [to]...provide an environment which helps them keep moving, keep learning, keep developing.”

To appeal to the full range of patient ages (the center serves toddlers as well as teens), MMEK took an abstract aesthetic approach in the spectrum of activity spaces, which include a reality TV-styled music room, a science center, and an indoor “park”—a double-height room filled with movable, climbable furniture. At times, the subtle intergenerational rationale of LIAG’s spatial strategy doesn’t quite match the more boisterous interior gestures. But the overall result is vibrant, alleviating some of the heavy anxiety that inevitably accompanies cancer treatment.

“We never say we design environments that cure or heal—I don’t think that’s possible,” says van Kuijk. “But what we do in a contextual way—that can make a difference.” ■



Experience-design firm MMEK mixed activity spaces for adults as well as children. Above: A café space in the lobby is a magnet for visitors and staff alike. Left: A hallway is designed to double as a place to explore and to stimulate patients’ imagination. “The big idea was [to] provide an environment which helps them keep moving, keep learning, keep developing,” says MMEK creative director Erik van Kuijk.

COURTESY RONALD TILLEMANN