Out of Hours
Houldsworth Centre, Lanarkshire, Scotland:
A new civic facility

BEFORE THE HOULDSWORTH CENTRE
By 2015 our Wishaw Health Centre was no longer fit for purpose: too small with too few consulting rooms, no space for greatly expanded primary care.

Since joining my practice in 1988 consultant numbers in our local district general hospital have increased by a factor of five, but acute beds decreased by a third and long-stay beds in psychiatry and geriatrics almost completely closed with their patients now cared for in community settings. Also during this time undergraduate and general practice postgraduate teaching and training have moved into community settings. Our old building was simply inadequate for our increased clinical and teaching workload. What compensation? Popping downstairs to see a late night psychiatric emergency with a quick face-to-face chat with a psychiatric nurse. Finding a consultant older-age psychiatrist drinking coffee with a colleague, ostensibly sorting out a patient’s complex medication, but mainly to enjoy the view:

A crocodile of primary school children lining up in the foyer to visit the library. Scuttling down the side of the building on a filthy Scottish winter’s evening past a row of children making music. Leaving an evening surgery to go downstairs with colleagues to discuss modern democratic politics (with Owen Jones as it happened!).

The lovely any garden floor café, so busy and successful that they supply free smallie eats and coffee for our postgrad visitors. The last month from China and Lebanon. The setting sun picking out the spire of Glasgow University. 20 miles west north west.

LIFE IN THE HOULDSWORTH CENTRE

The new building was therefore planned as a joint undertaking between NHS Lanarkshire and North Lanarkshire Council, our local authorities. Two important early decisions. One, to build on an accessible central site in the heart of the community that the building will serve. Fortunately the site of the old library, swiftly demolished, exactly fulfilled that role. Two, to avoid the old building to a high specification, commissioning the Royal University of British Architects (RAIB) award-winning Scottish architectural firm, RSH+H. Serendipitously, RSH’s senior partner in charge of Houldsworth, Andy Law, is one of Europe’s most thoughtful commentators on the role of good architecture in healthcare provision.

The new Houldsworth Centre opened in mid-August 2015, on time and on budget.

LIFE IN THE HOULDSWORTH CENTRE
Now my practice has space, light, and boosted morals. We have three consulting rooms dedicated to teaching. Our consulting rooms themselves, the very beating heart of general practice, where doctor meets patient, are generously proportioned and immaculately finished. There are glorious views to west and south for over 50 miles. Irrevocably, there are some testing problems. The fire alarms are ever-so-sensitive. The lifts are underwhelming, too small and too slow. Mimoso to five-storey health centre designers, apply the specification for a luxury hotel; nothing less will do. And of course you can’t please every user every time. How to respond to a complaint that the new building is ‘Too big, too bright, and too new’?

But what compensations: Popping downstairs to solve a late Friday psychiatric emergency with a quick face-to-face chat with a psychiatric nurse. Finding a consultant older-age psychiatrist drinking coffee with a colleague, ostensibly sorting out a patient’s complex medication, but mainly to enjoy the view:

...architectural notes

Arriving in Wishaw by train involves an uncomfortable 20 minutes out of the station. Crossing the junction with Main Street, however, one reaches a commanding, compelling presence in the town. An important site given over to a key public building: the new health centre doesn’t disappoint or waste this opportunity.

An immediate impression is that the building, combined with the associated urban realm around it, is already exerting a considerable and positive influence on this central part of the town. This is in part a consequence of the fundamental decision to build high but also with more subtle decisions in the restrained (some might say severe) proportions and material palette.

The Houldsworth Centre will inspire a new civic pride in Wishaw and Lanarkshire. As the old railway station, an undistinguished walk up Hill Street from the station, however, one reaches a commanding, compelling presence in the town. An important site given over to a key public building: the new health centre doesn’t disappoint or waste this opportunity.

In summary

The new Houldsworth Centre is what investing in primary care can mean in reality, beyond vacuous electioneering. A building that clearly values and celebrates integrated public services.

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