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Finding Peace



Walking into Maggie's feels like being enveloped in a huge warm hug. I'm greeted with a calming, heartfelt welcome from the friendly faces around the kitchen table. Cancer support specialists, clinical psychologists, an art therapist, benefits advisor and trained volunteers are on hand in person and online to support people affected by cancer and their families. Maggie's, which has been housed in repurposed staff accommodation since 2012, sees about 10,500 visitors each year, and with more space in a new building (opening 2028) they hope to triple that. Designed by RIBA Stirling Prize winner Niall McLaughlin Architects, the low-carbon 484m² timber construction will sit sensitively in its protected woodland setting. Flooded with light, the building will have a *Ficus* tree at the centre of its winding staircase, truly bringing the outside in. "This exceptional organisation," says Niall, "deserves a thoughtfully designed and inspirational setting, and we believe that the proposed building and landscape will do much to complement the care and support provided by the centre's remarkable staff." Enabling visitors to decompress and connect with nature, gardens are so important to Maggie's cancer centres, they're an integral part of their service provision. Indeed – awarded a gold medal at RHS Chelsea in 2024 – Tom Stuart-Smith's National Garden Scheme garden, supported by Project Giving Back, is being adapted for the Cambridge site. Fittingly for a design which celebrates owners who generously open their gardens to the public through the National Garden Scheme (NGS), raising funds for caring

One of RHS Chelsea's most peaceful, contemplative gardens – which won a gold medal for designer Tom Stuart-Smith – will be rehomed at the new Maggie's cancer centre in Cambridge. Velvet's Melanie Taylor reports



**Maggie's Cambridge centre head
Lisa Punt**

*Picture: Melanie Taylor/
Hazelwood Landscapes*

causes, it will be open to all. I ask centre head Lisa Punt what it was like to see it at Chelsea in May 2024. "It was an incredibly emotional day actually, for both me and my fundraising manager Hayley Webb," she says. "To step into that tranquil oasis of calm and beauty was just phenomenal. Obviously to meet Tom and for him to share his visions and thoughts on what he was trying to create for people affected by cancer was so insightful." The white and green planting palette created a serene reflective space, yet the white tones made the vibrant greens pop.

One of my favourites, sweet woodruff, *Gallium odoratum*, sat patiently at the feet of the multi-stemmed hazels, its tiny starry white flowers carpeting the woodland floor and softening the bright chartreuse green of the *Euphorbia schillingii*.

I loved how the white foxgloves *Digitalis purpurea f. albiflora* stood like sentries, guiding your way down the winding path of handmade clay pavers to the standout feature in the garden, a beautiful 'shed'. Crafted from cleft oak, the beech-clad interior was formed entirely from a single tree that fell down at Tom's home. Designed by his architect son Ben Stuart-Smith and built by furniture maker Fenton Scott-Fielder and his team in Bristol, Tom describes the shed as being "rather like a gardener: it's rather rough on the outside and very smooth on the inside".

Lisa continues: "Tom was keen to learn how we might use the shed. He'd spoken about volunteers using it for potting and doing gardening tasks, but the space was so beautiful it felt really important to bring some of our other activities into the garden, like mindfulness workshops, or our therapy group. To utilise that beautiful space in the midst of a peaceful garden will really enhance our work."

Tom's stunning hazel trees *Corylus avellana* have been lovingly cared for since the show and will be transplanted to Cambridge. "The real beauty of the garden," says Lisa, "is the tree canopy that will create a backdrop for the centre. We often see people pausing at the door with a level of anxiety about walking through it. So if people are nervous about coming in, they'll be able to just sit outside."

"We can even go and sit with them and do our work in the garden if needs be, so it's really extending our capacity and ability to reach more people. We'll be able to enhance our programme with mindful gardening, even just spending time in the garden brings huge benefits for mental health and wellbeing."

"We know when we've got our creative, self-soothing part of the brain working, we calm the part of the brain that is responsible for the high levels of anxiety, worry and fear that often people affected by cancer will present with."

Lisa continues: "For me it's a real privilege



The new Maggie's centre
Picture: Niall McLaughlin Architects



The National Garden Scheme Garden. Designed by Tom Stuart-Smith. Sponsored by Project Giving Back
Picture: RHS/Neil Hepworth

to be part of the Maggie's organisation and the fantastic team I have here. We're unique because people don't need an appointment, and they're guaranteed to see a specialist in cancer support within that space of just walking through the door. "We focus on empowering, enabling, and supporting people to feel an equal partner in the cancer care relationship with their healthcare professionals. The transition to a 'new normal' can be very challenging for some, so we give them strategies and tools to help them learn to live as well as they can alongside a sense of uncertainty and to manage those difficult conversations with friends and family."

Maggie's has informed the national discussions on NHS reform and Lisa, who was a consultant radiographer, plays a key change-making role at a strategic level, representing the organisation at an all-party parliamentary group on menopause and women's cancer journeys.

"Partnership working is invaluable," she says. "We've got amazing clinical care here at Addenbrooke's, but I feel quite passionate that third-sector organisations and charities can provide a really good holistic approach to managing patients. I think our model of care is incredibly unique. We're very heavily governed so can sit alongside the NHS in a very safe way. It's



The National Garden Scheme Garden. Designed by Tom Stuart-Smith. Sponsored by Project Giving Back
Picture: Melanie Taylor/Hazelwood Plantscapes

important that we have the opportunity to influence change and share the added value we can bring to patients and their outcomes at a national level."

Feedback from visitors about the care they receive from Lisa and the team is overwhelmingly positive. "It's such a privilege," says Lisa, "for us to hear people express how they feel about the warm welcome they get here, but also noticing that there can be laughter, there can be tears, but all of that feels safe. The warmth in our volunteers and in our staff ensures that feeling of safety for anyone walking through the door."

The same will be true on entering the garden. Lisa concludes: "One of the things that I articulated to Tom was that it's not Maggie's garden, it's not the hospital's garden, it belongs to the Cambridge community and I'm hoping that people will use that space, even if they're a member of staff who just wants to come and have some time away from their busy day."

I've been so inspired by my visit to Maggie's; the quality of their care and their passion to make a difference in people's lives is clear to see. The door is always open, so if you or someone you love has cancer, wander in, the kettle's already on. You'll be really glad you did.

Maggie's Cambridge is one of 27 centres across the UK. Most funding comes from voluntary donations – support at maggies.org/our-centres/maggies-cambridge/

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