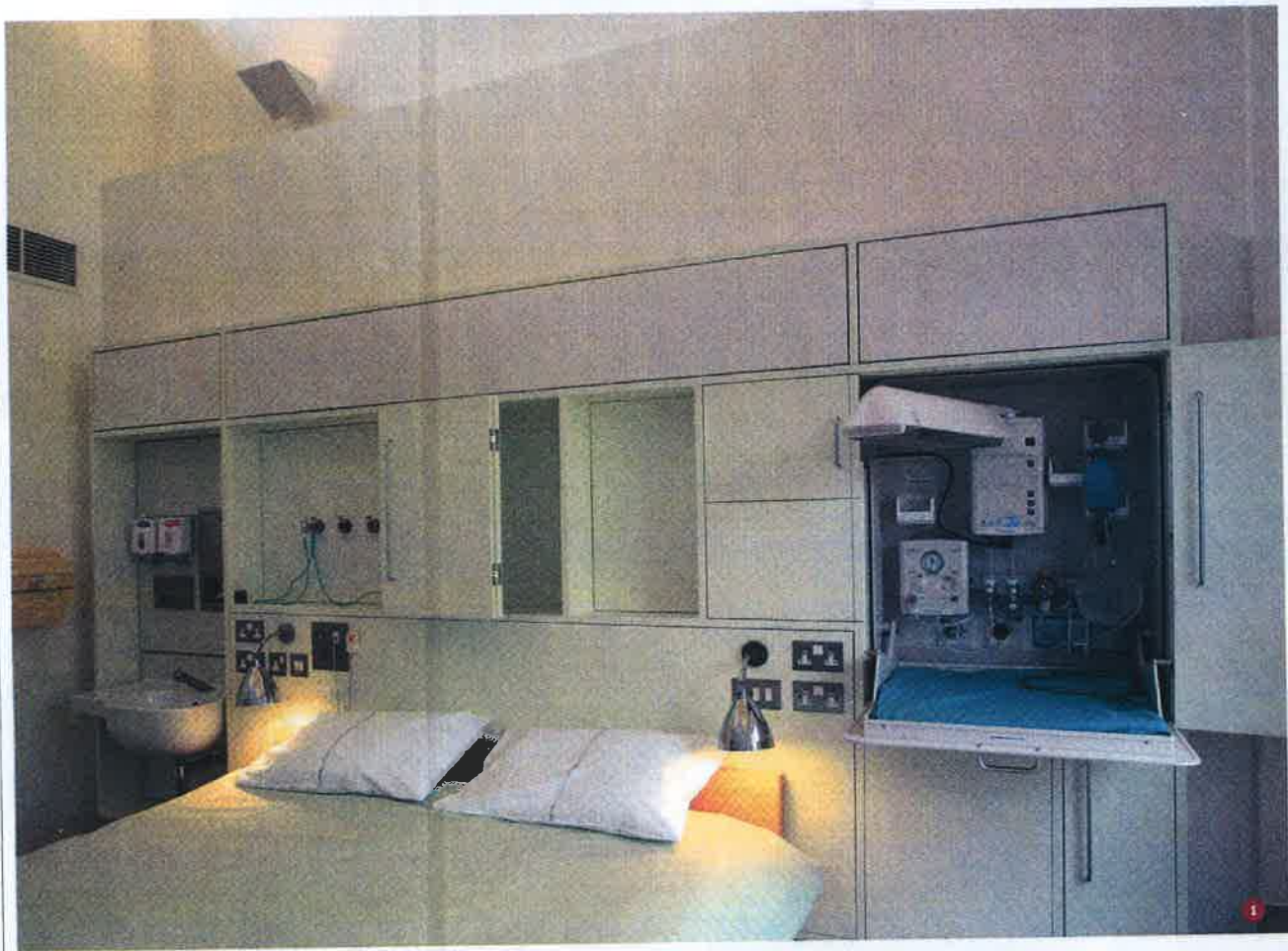


The birthing centre at Central Middlesex broke new ground in hospital design. Two years after completion, its architect Barbara Weiss pays a visit

Growing up very fast



The birthing centre at Central Middlesex Hospital was intended as a home from home for women who'd normally have their babies at home. The idea is that it would be a midwife-led centre, with very few white coats. But since the building was completed, the doctors have muscled in. They're running more clinics, and changing the use of some of the rooms. It's sad, but architects have to move on.

The building consists of a wing of six birthing rooms overlooking a courtyard, a more public area for antenatal clinics and classes and a waiting room, with the entrance lobby and reception in between. It has been very successful — it was one of only two

health buildings to win Civic Trust awards last year. I've lost count of the number of architects and health service managers who've visited. And since it was completed, two PFI consortiums have contacted us about bidding for future projects.

The specification was crucial to the design: there isn't a big infection risk here, so we thought it shouldn't be treated as a normal hospital environment with all the usual trappings. We had never done a health project before, and our background as a practice is in residential projects. So I wanted to include a few items we would specify in private homes, to give the women a little luxury. If a few nice

Above: Birthing rooms include items more often specified in private homes. Opposite: The exterior render, in pink, peach and white, is wearing well.

things lift the spaces, then the rest can be pretty basic.

The other important factor was that we wanted to get as much natural light and ventilation as possible. The birthing suites all have big picture windows, with cherrywood window seats. The Velfac windows are looking smart and wearing well. The corridors and waiting room are top-lit by electrically operated Vitral rooflights.

The exterior is in Sto render in pink, peach and white. It still mostly looks good, although rain splashing up from the ground has discoloured the pink render under the windows of the birthing rooms. There was meant to be a water canal feature underneath the



windows to ensure privacy for the women that would have prevented this – but like the rest of the landscaping, it hasn't yet been completed.

For the rooms, I spent hours finding washable, hard-wearing, infection-resistant furniture. I think there is a gap in the market for beautiful, institutional furniture. The armchairs were chosen from an NHS supplier and were covered in a fabric more stylish than what is usually found in hospitals. The rooms all have double beds that are lower than normal hospital beds but higher than domestic beds. The tables throughout the unit are by Aalto.

In the rooms we chose non-standard Axis basins, with curves that look a bit like pregnant women. The square basins in the washroom are Arne Jacobsen Vola lookalikes – they weren't expensive but they look contemporary. Both types were supplied by **Aston Matthews**. The doors by **Leaderflush Shapland** are in sapele hardwood that you wouldn't normally expect to find in a hospital, and the door handles are by Jasper Morrison. They were affordable, so why not?

As in all hospitals, there are huge amounts of clutter, so I designed large fitted cupboards. In the rooms, the bedheads have folding doors that can be closed to conceal all the medical apparatus – including the taps for gas and air, and a Resuscitaire and jaundice lamp for newborns – so that it isn't intimidating for the women. There are also built-in cupboards in the

midwives' offices and a built-in magazine rack in the staff room and waiting areas.

We obtained permission from Building Control to use domestic lighting. The pendant lamps in the waiting room and reception are by Alvaro Siza; they give the space a different quality. The bedhead lamps are by **Best & Lloyd**, a make we specify a lot. Here we used them with a special bulb that doesn't get hot. But in places where the quality of light was less important, such as the nappy-changing room, we use compact fluorescent lamps.

This rubber flooring in the corridors and rooms is by **Freudenberg**. It comes in rolls and in lots of nice colours. Despite a flood, it has worn well. People have to know how to maintain it; it's not meant to be polished. But if you observe the correct laying and maintenance instructions it's a good product. In the shower rooms we used non-slip flooring by **Altro**.

I had my own children at University College Hospital, where the environment was horrible. I lay there and thought how much I'd like to design a different setting for this life-changing experience, so when this commission came along, it was like an answer to a prayer. We had a brilliant client, and the birthing centre was very much his concept. But he has since moved on, and now the building is changing. But the important thing is that the women who have their babies here love it, and the staff love it too.

An eye for detail



Suppliers

1. Best & Lloyd bedhead lamps
2. Sto render
3. Velfac windows
4. Leaderflush Shapland doors
5. Freudenberg flooring
6. Altro non-slip flooring
7. Aston Matthews basins
8. Vitral roof lights

