

# Building Hope



UNIVERSITY OF  
GREENWICH



Co-producing trauma-informed space  
with women in the justice system

*Dr. Madeline Petrillo, Associate Professor, University of Greenwich*

## Introduction:

Since at least the Roman architect Vitruvius, there has been a belief that architecture and one's outlook will have an effect on a person's mood. Space has tremendous power to make us feel one way or another. Trauma theory – most famously Bessel van der Kolk's work - has demonstrated how trauma lingers in the body and can be triggered by what survivors see, hear, feel and smell (Van der Kolk 2014). Trauma-informed design starts with a recognition that all buildings have an effect on people and that there is constant communication between space and those who inhabit it. This paper summarises the co-production process employed to design Hope Street. Hope Street is a new type of space for women in the justice system, a space that intentionally attempts to use the built environment as a tool for supporting women to heal from some of the traumatic experiences common in women's pathways to crime.

## What is Hope Street?

Hope Street offers a residential community alternative for women and their children impacted by the justice system. Women can be placed there when they are subject to community orders, when on remand, or after release from prison. It provides a temporary home and move on accommodation for women and their children. It will also provide therapeutic support, education and training, and work skills with support from full time on-site staff. The overall goal is to reduce the number of women who are sent to prison and provide a more effective community alternative to the current arrangements for women in the justice system. A pioneering element of Hope Street is that it will be the first building in the UK to intentionally incorporate the values of trauma-informed practice into its design and build.

## Co-producing trauma-informed design

A key challenge for the designers of Hope Street was that there are few examples of trauma-informed design in architecture, and particularly not anywhere in the justice system. And none that are also intentionally gender-specific. There was no theory for the architects to apply, no model to follow. They not only had to design a new kind of building, but a whole new concept.

*I think a building is weak if its identity is only what it's not rather than what it is, and that's harder. It's easier to say, "Let's make it less prison-y," than to say, "What should it be?" when there's no real sort of starting point.*

*(SNUG architects focus group)*



*Hope Street design consultation session*

The answer to the question what should it be? didn't exist. It had to be created through action and experimentation.

## Co-production and trauma-informed design:

Co-production in architecture challenges traditional top-down approaches to spatial design. In the co-production of trauma-informed space specifically, co-production means giving those who have experienced trauma a voice in shaping the spaces that they will utilise. Rather than imposing a design, architects collaborate with trauma survivors to understand their specific needs, preferences and the things that 'trigger' or 'activate' a trauma response. This ensures the resulting spaces are not only physically accommodating but also emotionally safe and supportive. It embodies a commitment to creating environments using participatory design processes that honour the lived experiences of those who will ultimately use the spaces.

The co-production process for Hope Street involved four workshops with women who had experience of the justice system and/or insecure housing. The initial sessions encouraged the women to identify what kinds of spaces they needed in Hope Street. This revealed the need for a creche and children's space, outside space, a separation between residential private areas and areas that would be open to the public.

The next round of consultations gave women the opportunity to contribute to the design of the spaces for example the choice of materials, colour schemes, the balance of natural light and privacy. This was achieved by presenting the women with images and asking open questions about their response to the images.



Example of consultation feedback on 'how do these materials make you feel?'



Example of consultation feedback on what environment do you feel most comfortable in?

## Principles of trauma-informed practice (SAMHA 2014):

- 1 Safety:**

People inhabiting the space should feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe. The physical setting and interpersonal interactions within the space should promote a sense of safety.
- 2 Trust:**

Organisational processes and decisions are conducted transparently with the goal of building and maintaining trust.
- 3 Collaboration:**

Importance is placed on partnering and the levelling of power differences within the organisation/service. The organisation recognises that everyone has a role to play in a trauma-informed approach.
- 4 Empowerment, Voice, and Choice:**

Individuals' strengths are recognised and built upon. Organisations understand the ways in which historically clients have been diminished in voice and choice and have often been the recipients of coercive treatment. Clients are supported in shared decision making.
- 5 Peer support:**

Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and using stories and experiences to promote recovery and healing.
- 6 Cultural, historical and gender inclusivity:**

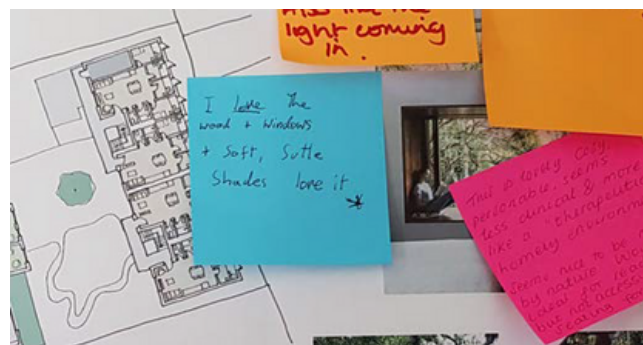
The organisation actively moves past cultural stereotypes based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender-identity, geography etc. It offers access to gender responsive services, leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections, incorporates policies, protocols and processes that are responsive to the racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of the individuals served, and recognises and addresses historical trauma.

## Translating principles of trauma-informed practice into the design of Hope Street:

### Trust:

I'll use the principles of trust and empowerment, voice and choice to explain how the principles above were translated into a physical space. Creating trust became the crux of defining the identity of the building. Women will be entering Hope Street at a very difficult point in their lives with the hope and intention of making changes to be able to live their lives less encumbered by experiences that have resulted in their involvement in the justice system. The building is then an environment and a tool to support the relational, healing work. Trust is essential to this healing process so a central question became "How might the building build trust?" What are the factors that will prevent trust and create associations with places where the women weren't trusted, or shouldn't extend their trust?

To have trust in a space, the identity of that space needs to be clear. From the consultations it came across very strongly that the women felt Hope Street needed to feel like a home. For them, this meant 'cosy and private,' 'carpeting, rugs and mirrors,' 'no hospital colours,' 'no strip lighting.' Hope Street as a home became the filter through which all decisions passed through.



## Empowerment, Voice, and Choice:

Where the principle of trust informed the identity of the building, the principle of empowerment inspired its layout. Trauma and victimisation erodes individuals' sense of autonomy and agency. Women's interactions with services often compound this sense that they have no control over their own lives. Research into the gendered pains of imprisonment has found lack of autonomy and control to be a factor in the most severe problems women experience. This acute lack of choice and autonomy reflects the lack of control and powerlessness that is a feature of abusive experiences in relationships. Therefore, having some control over the space and how they exist within it was important to the women.

Hope Street includes private space women can choose to retreat to, communal space only accessible to residents, space to host visitors and a public facing community cafe in a separate part of the hub building. Women wanted the ability to customise their space, choose household items and have lockable storage - "being able to unpack properly and feel 'at home'."

*There are a lot of shelves... you can start to put things up that start to mean something to the family... so there's that ownership. How can you occupy a building, and how you occupy it can be part of who owns it, you know, what is it saying (SNUG architects focus group)*

## A trauma-informed building:

*Having been in the consultations for the design of Hope Street, seeing the final building I felt proud to have played a small part in an amazing project creating a safe, secure home and the realistic hope of recovery for vulnerable women and their children. I noticed a homely, not clinical environment with a strong and committed staff team focused on delivering trauma-informed care, unlike anything I've ever seen before. I felt heard, seen and understood by those I was surrounded by in the consultation sessions, and felt really lucky to be a part of it (Consultation participant).*

Engagement between architects, the community, and users of the space, represents an open and creative approach to design which recognises the importance of different knowledges and experiences in the evolution of a spatial concept. As a building, Hope Street is steeped in complexity, but in its complexity, it challenges our notion of a penal space. It is an assemblage of spaces. It is a criminal justice space where community sentences of the courts are delivered. It is also a treatment space. A residential space. A space for children. A social space for the community. A trauma-informed space. As this quote captures, the story of Hope Street is bound up in the stories of the women who will inhabit it.



*Hope Street hub and garden, June 2023, Photo credit Fotohaus*



UNIVERSITY OF  
GREENWICH

Dr Madeline Petrillo: [m.r.petrillo@gre.ac.uk](mailto:m.r.petrillo@gre.ac.uk)  
Hope Street team: [hopestreet@onesmallthing.org.uk](mailto:hopestreet@onesmallthing.org.uk)

Launch and dissemination supported by

**one small thing**