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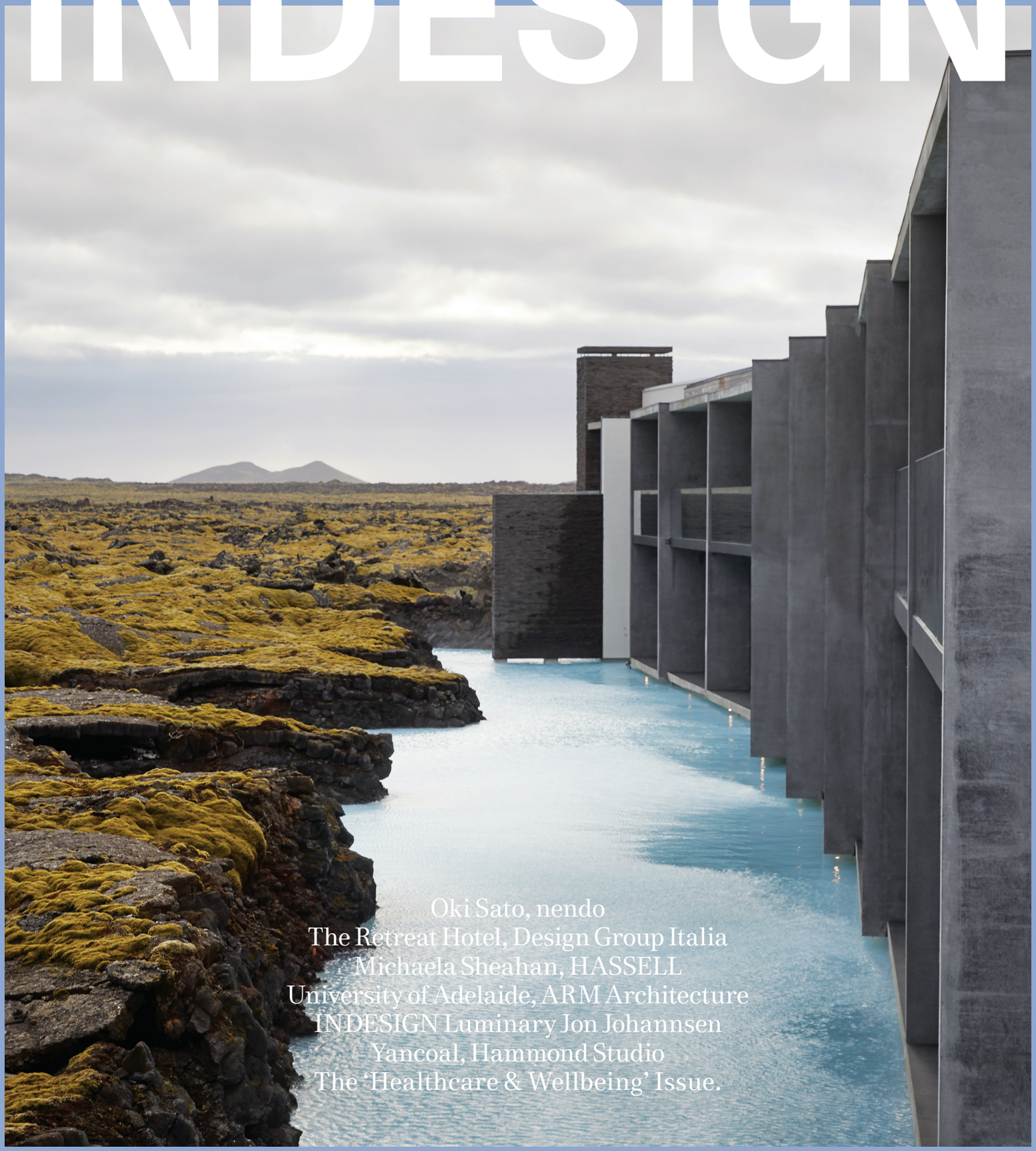

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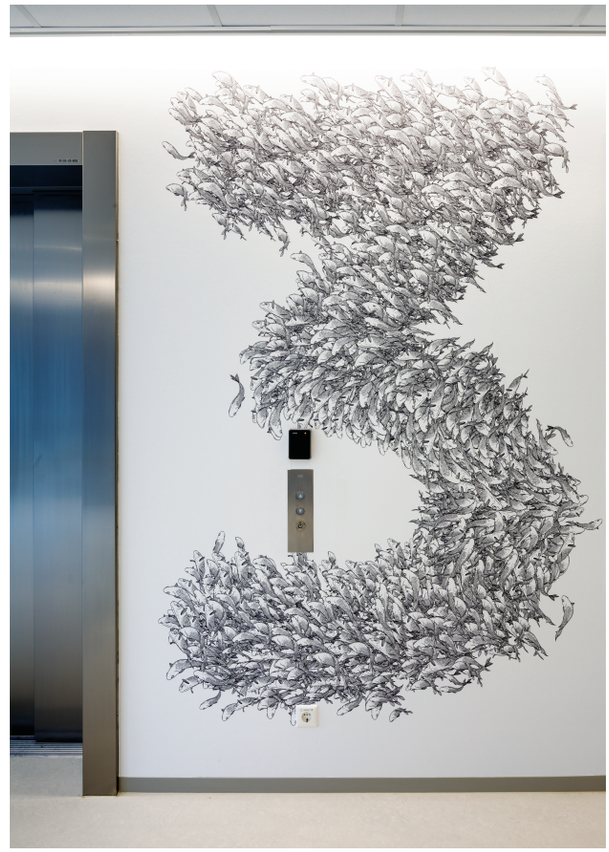
When the fight or flight instinct kicks in, there's no time to read a sign. Recognising that many visitors to hospitals and emergency departments are stressed or panicked, these designers have used artistic and architectural mechanisms to navigate patients to their destination.

Words *Tracey Ingram* Photography *Various*

IN TIMES OF GREAT STRESS



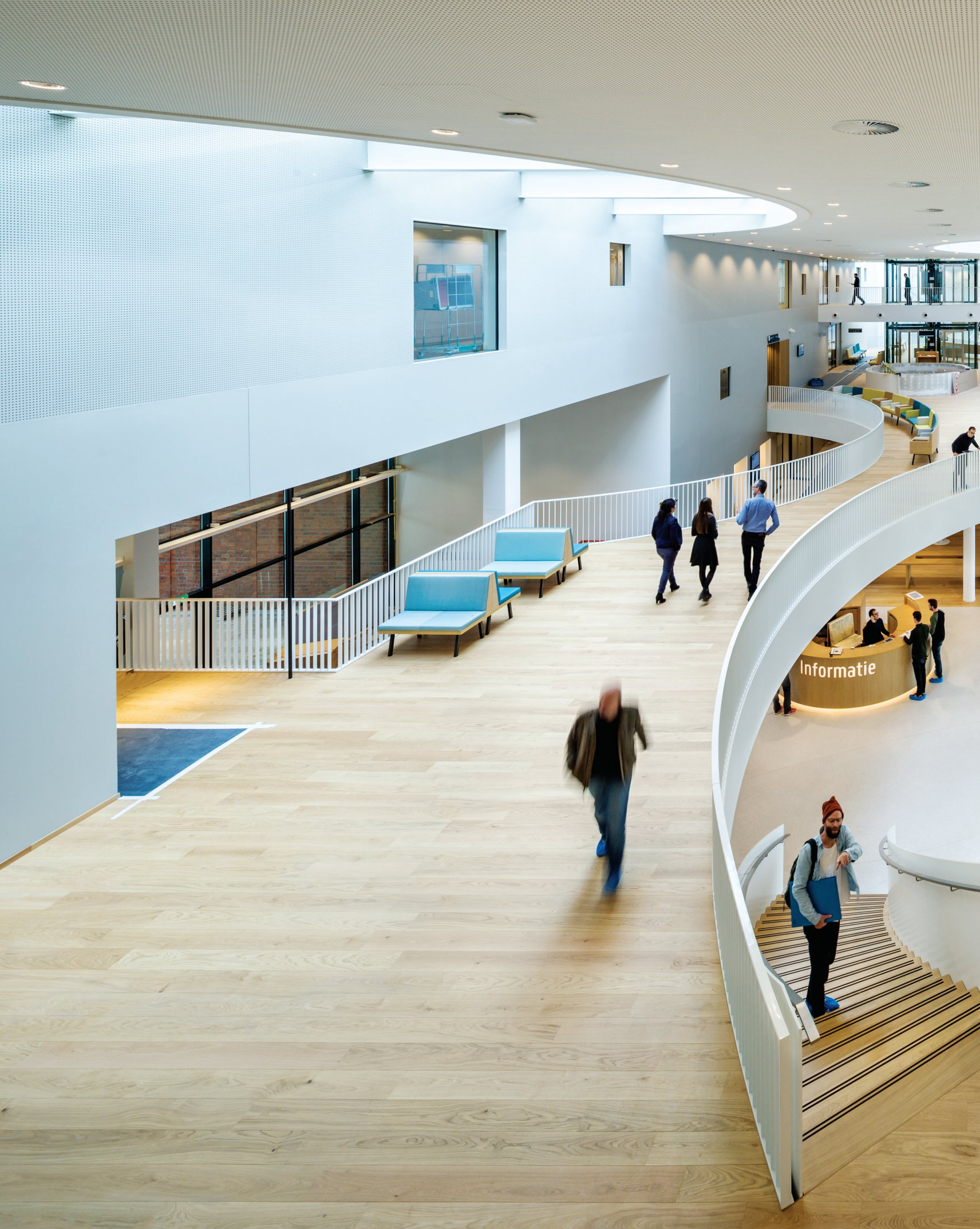
Navigating a labyrinthine building can be stressful enough, let alone in a moment of fragility. In our current era of information overload, how can designers help hospital users know where to go – and where not to go – without exacerbating an already anxious adventure?

Topping the list of stressful hospital scenarios is a trip to the emergency department, which is "often someone's first visit to a healthcare facility", says Tonya Hinde of Billard Leece Partnership (BLP). She and colleague Mark Mitchell are explaining why their design for Austin Health Short Stay Unit in Melbourne's Heidelberg treats the building as a signpost. The project is an extension to an existing emergency department that was notoriously difficult to locate. "Since people are often quite stressed when going there," says Mitchell, "we wanted to make sure they could easily find the front door." BLP achieved its goal with animated arrow-like panels and lighting, even more evident by night. The next step was to implement intuitive wayfinding inside. Aware that natural light plays a vital yet subtle role in spatial navigation, BLP established sweeping panoramic views from within to help users orient themselves via landmarks, and incorporated skylights on the south side that abuts other buildings. "People within the unit can remain in tune with what's happening outside," says Mitchell, noting that balanced circadian rhythms are important for patients and shift workers alike – especially since 'accidents and emergency' is a 24/7 affair.

Often overused in institutional architecture, signage can become problematic in healthcare environments where visitors may be visually or lingually impaired, and where technology is changing so rapidly that what's here today might not be there tomorrow. Instead, BLP gave colours and patterns a definitive role while basing its scheme on what Mitchell refers to as "areas of intensity versus areas of nothingness." People in transit, for instance, might encounter only blank walls – no distractions – whereas clusters of furniture and lighting can act as destination points.

Azad Chichmanian of Neuf architect(e)s agrees that wayfinding should be intuitive and rely as little as possible on signage. He was the partner in charge of Canada's Centre Hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal (CHUM), conceived together with CannonDesign. Citing stress and the complexity of hospital buildings as factors, Jocelyn Stroupe of CannonDesign says, "Wayfinding can be more difficult and confusing than it would be for a normal, healthy population. People may not pay attention to standard cues; often they don't even see signs in times of stress."

At CHUM, architectural elements become guides. Daylight helps to orient visitors, while bold colours – visible from afar – differentiate departments. Aware that colour isn't a global language, the designers articulated programs into volumes. "The changes of plane mean you see the volume before you see colour," says Chichmanian, "which helps visitors create a cognitive map of the various spaces."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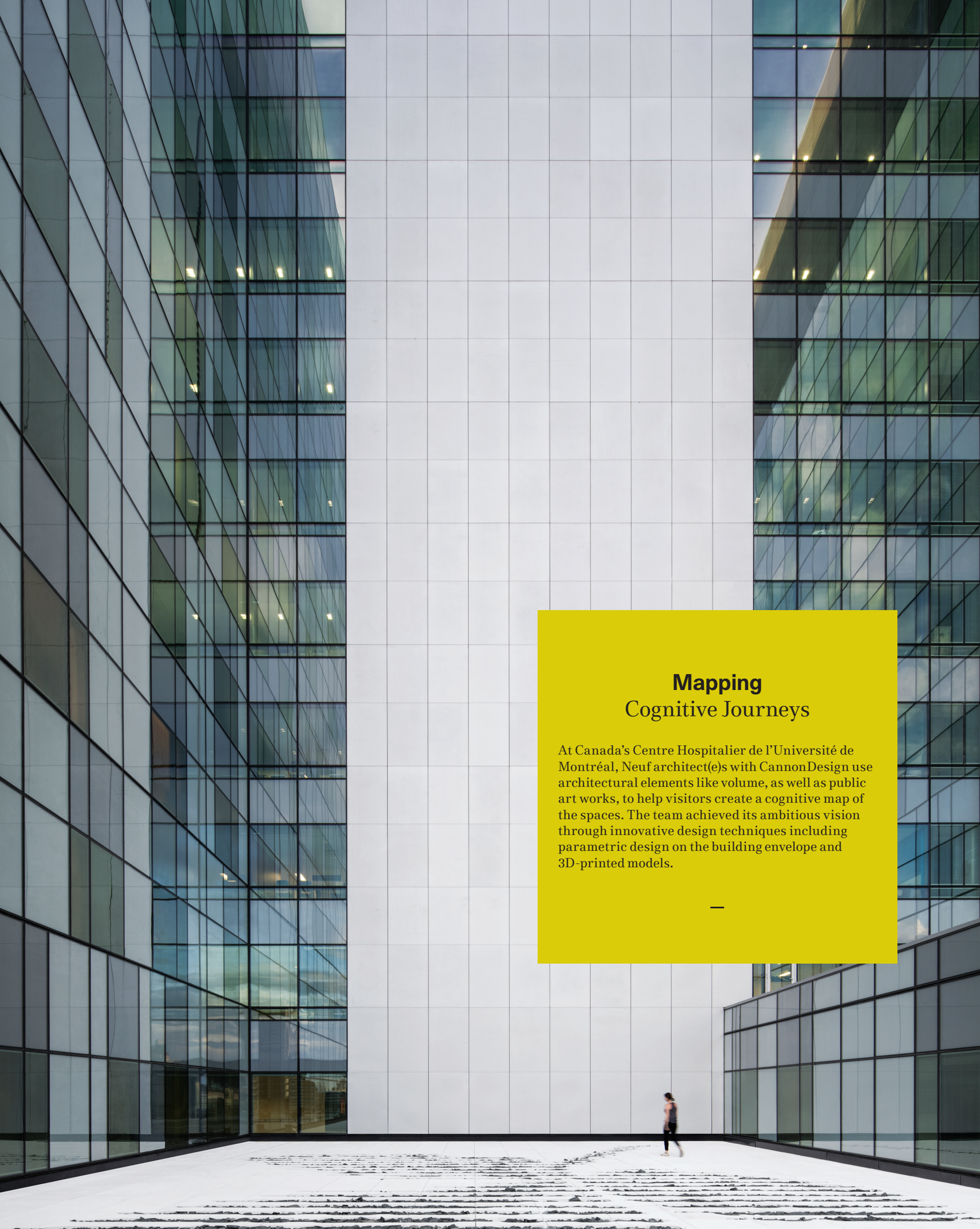

Mapping
Cognitive Journeys

At Canada's Centre Hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal, Neuf architect(e)s with CannonDesign use architectural elements like volume, as well as public art works, to help visitors create a cognitive map of the spaces. The team achieved its ambitious vision through innovative design techniques including parametric design on the building envelope and 3D-printed models.

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What sets CHUM apart from others is its focus on large public art pieces. “Both a distraction and a wayfinding tool,” says Chichmanian. “The art is significant, memorable. People will know where they are when they return to a certain piece.” All works in the main circulation area are therefore located at decision points, such as junctions.

Silo Agency’s Rogier Coopmans believes in the importance of the customer journey, which is why a trip to Zaans Medical Centre in the Netherlands begins before patients even enter the facility. Mecanoo architects brought in Silo to design the spatial identity and wayfinding at a very early stage in the project – “a key factor in making sure they aren’t simply additional layers in a building”, according to Coopmans. Invitations arrive at visitors’ homes, complete with imagery and information to help them reach their destination. Upon arrival at the centre, patients scan themselves in and receive a day ticket that details such data as appointments and route. The latter is clearly signposted throughout the building. Visitors who don’t feel like reading, or are less able to do so, can follow a pictogram – a Dutch tulip, for example – to their destination.

Silo’s process involved defining the best positions to help patients find their way, in a natural way. Putting themselves into users’ shoes, they “walked” through a digital model to get a feel for the surroundings. Running through every scenario for visiting different departments – from entrance to journey’s end – they assessed not only what visitors would think along the way but also when they might appreciate something else. A coffee, for instance, or a specific view. “It’s the same story after a visit. Instructing people how to leave a building is often forgotten.”

While they did include some child-specific wayfinding elements at a lower eye level, Silo specifically chose a straightforward approach. “Wayfinding can of course be more subtly integrated into architecture. Walls, ceilings: it’s all possible. But those methods should be employed in buildings such as schools – places that can use a bit of fun. For hospitals, this is serious business. You don’t want to mess with wayfinding; you can save lives if you do it well.”

blp.com.au, cannondesign.com, neufarchitectes.com, siloagency.com

Page 151-155: At Zaans Medical Centre, visitors can follow pictograms to their destination, the designers tested every wayfinding scenario using a digital walk-through, photos: © Thijs Wolzak.
Opposite and above: At CHUM, volume, colour and artwork help to create an intuitive wayfinding experience, photo: Adrien Williams.
Page 158: Areas of intensity contrast areas of nothingness in BLP’s Austin Health Short Stay Unit, photo: Ian Ten Seldam.

“Aware that natural light plays a vital yet subtle role in spatial navigation, BLP established sweeping panoramic views from within to help users orient themselves via landmarks.”