A little of what you fancy...
Will Alsop's plans for a new medical centre in London are brash, witty and practical. Why can't all hospital buildings be like this, asks Jonathan Glancey

Architect Will Alsop was shocked to see the view a friend had from his hospital room window as he lay dying from cancer. There was nothing to look at but a dreary brick wall. Such drabness is par for the course in Britain's hospitals. Only very rarely does delight or beauty feature in their design. Most are like factories.

Now Alsop has a chance to put right this wrong. His firm Alsop Architects, in association with the laboratory specialists Amec Capital Projects, has won a competition to design the new £33.5m Department of Education for Barts and the London, Queen Mary's School of Medicine and Dentistry.

This is a long and clumsy title for a scalpel-sharp new development at the Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel. The plan is to build a three-storey glass research pavilion linked by a glazed pedestrian bridge to a deceptively slender secondary building. This will house the technical equipment for the laboratories, as well as a 400-seat egg-shaped lecture theatre topped with a roof garden and a staff canteen.

The remarkable thing about the main building is that it will be largely transparent, which is not what you expect laboratories to be. If you peer through the walls of Alsop's architectural model you see what look like giant human cells, suspended as if in a viscous fluid. In fact these "cells" hang from a huge steel truss that runs across the top of the building. As do the glass walls, which look like curtains between hospital beds.

The huge-scale pods will serve as meeting rooms, though the largest and blobbiest of them - The Centre of the Cell - will be the first public display space in a British medical school. Open-plan laboratories for the 300 or so medical researchers who will work here when the building opens in summer 2004 will be on the ground and lower-ground floors. There will also be a solid block of about 30 glazed cellular offices on the ground floor; even this looks special, like a geometric slice of translucent quartz.

The twin buildings and the new pedestrian bridge promise to have an almost surreal quality, which is very much what the architects hope to achieve. The idea is to celebrate the secret, microcosmic world of medical science and to make the hospital campus a delightful place to be.

"The avenue between the buildings," says Christophe Egret, Alsop's project architect, who played a leading role in the design of the acclaimed Peckham Library in south-east London, "will be a new food and drink venue, with a kind of dining and drinking"
The building also raises an obvious question: why aren't hospitals designed by our best architects when we rely so heavily on medical practice and research? Why are laboratories so often tucked away, and scientific and medical staff so often shunted into dreary and uninspiring building blocks?

Professor Ian Sanderson, a specialist in paediatric gastroenterology at Barts and the London, played a key role in the brief of the building. He believes that the continuing divide between the arts and sciences is partly to blame. "What we wanted to do," he says, "was to give shape to an architecture that makes a positive, attractive and dynamic link between the disciplines.

"What you might find remarkable," he continues, "is how pretty much everyone involved agreed on the need for a distinctly modern structure. We all sat down one day and drew our ideal building. It was an interesting exercise: most of us appeared to want much greater transparency. In the new centre, experts who are researching various branches of medicine will work together in open-plan labs. The idea, of course, is the cross-fertilisation of ideas. Here, our expertise is in six areas: the digestive system, skin, oncology [cancer], microbiology, neurobiology and metabolic diseases. We will be undertaking research into cancer, leukaemia, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, Aids, TB, influenza and motor-neurone disease. There are common themes throughout these disciplines."

As for the architects, one of the Alsop team's ambitions is to design an entire hospital. Would this be a huge collection of playful pods containing cheery operating theatres and witty clinics?

"No," says Christophe Egret. "The pod architecture that we have developed partly from the experience of the Peckham Library is one thing; to design a humane hospital, taking into accounts wards and operating theatres, is quite another."

The Alsop architects' favourite model is the superb hospital that Le Corbusier never built in Venice. The designs were unveiled in 1965, the year the architect died swimming off the Côte d'Azur. These revealed a kind of modern monastery hospital that would have allowed patients to heal in a quietly inspiring setting and the mortally ill to die in a dignified fashion. Imagine the sound of water lapping gently against the walls, sunlight reflecting off the lagoon across vaulted ceilings - a far cry from naked fluorescent tubes.

Alsop is known for his flamboyant buildings, colourful structures that animate the streets and squares they are built in. They certainly cause eyebrows to be raised, and, at their best, spirits too. Coming across them unexpectedly is like catching a glimpse of the onion domes of Russian churches between the walls of Soviet-era office slabs, or of Gehry's curving Guggenheim shining at the ends of canyon-like Bilbao streets.

Along with the essentials of architecture as laid down 2,000 years ago by Vitruvius - commodity, firmness and delight - Alsop offers surprise. Certainly most people will be surprised by the Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, particularly those who expect hospital buildings to be unimaginative or just plain grim, giving their patients nothing more than brick walls to look out on.