

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales

Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	1 August 2003
Location:	Porth
Architects / Design Team:	Camlin Lonsdale Arup Glamorgan Engineering Consultancy
Scheme Description:	Porth and Lower Rhondda Fach Relief Road
Public/Other Body:	Rhondda Cynon Taf

**Ref 03/09578/DMB
Porth and Lower Rhondda Fach Relief Road
A4233/A4058**

The Design Commission for Wales were asked for their observations on the aforementioned planning application, particularly the design of the Rheola and Cymmer Bridges. The Commission's Design Review Panel received a presentation on the project given by the highway design team, bridge engineers and landscape architects with local authority planners and landscape architects in attendance. The route was then visited and the key sites on the road alignment walked with the Glamorgan Consultancy team.

The Panel were supplied with the Environmental Statement summary and key drawings in advance of the meeting, and received a presentation brochure with some different and apparently out-dated design work on the day. The latter was rather confusing.

It is important to note that this project has been in gestation since 1980 and underwent extensive public participation in 1989. The scheme is included in the current development plan, and an amended route was adopted in 1996. Further consultations with the public were held in July 2002 and minor modifications made to the scheme subsequently. The Panel are only too aware that they are entering the design process at a very late stage, and their comments are made with this very much in mind.

Road Alignment

Generally the Panel supported the decision to align the northern section of road along the line of the railway and agreed that this minimised its impact upon existing settlement patterns and their environmental quality. It was disappointed that the Wattstown roundabout alignment produced such a long section where the new and the old road ran in parallel and the way this created a long traffic island and required realignment of the river. The Panel wondered if there was an alternative solution with a modest junction closer to Park View footbridge (along the lines of the Britannia Junction).

The southern section of road is well aligned to minimise its impacts on existing communities and aside from the loss of the Cymmer Chapel graveyard there are no major negative impacts. The panel would like some assurance that the gravestones in the Chapel would be used in an appropriate way within the landscaping of the project and associated works if there is no other plan for their conservation.

The Rheola Bridge

The Panel applauds the approach taken here to create a new landmark structure, and the efforts expended to make the bridge as elegant and as light a structure as possible. It delivers a clean solution to the crossing of road, rail and river and offers significant opportunities to re-landscape the confluence of the two rivers and their immediate upstream sections. The Panel could not see how these could become a series of public spaces as suggested in some of the drawings presented to us on the day, but it did consider that the walkway on south side downstream from the Rheola Bridge might be brought much closer to the river to allow its enjoyment as an amenity. The river terraces are mentioned in the Civic Identity section of the presentation brochure and much more can be made of the opportunity here.

We support the idea of an obelisk to make a feature of the confluence. The North Bridge Abutment Park is unresolved and needs a clearer view of its function, and of the pedestrian connections through to Aberhondda Road. We trust there is to be a pedestrian footbridge across the Afon Rhondda Fach at this point as shown in some of the more detailed drawings. There was some confusion here as to what was proposed and what was feasible under the new bridge and the planning authority should make sure that detailed design conditions are imposed to deliver the amelioration of these left-over spaces.

Wyndham club environs

We considered that the land to the east of the club should be configured so that it is capable of development so as to avoid the 'leftover space' nature of this plot and its lack of utility. It is valuable to expose the listed wall on the west side of the High Street/ Old Cymmer Road as this encloses the space nicely, but tree planting here could be desirable if not too closely spaced.

Porth Square and Bridge

Ironically, perhaps, this was the most unresolved part of the scheme to the Panel. It treads carefully because it was told that the desire for a public space on the old bridge comes from the community. The panel were not convinced that a public space here would attract much positive use, and in terms of both the heritage and natural environment of Porth it would be better to demolish the old bridge and open up the river.

The Panel shares the Environment Agency's concerns about too much covering of the river. This seems to be becoming something of a trend in the valleys, and one that needs to be vigorously opposed.

The Panel considers their ecological concerns are reinforced by built environment / heritage arguments which would emphasise the river as the timeless feature in this valley, an ecological corridor, and the *raison d'être* of the town. We would re-site the War Memorial on the east side of the bridge where there seems to be adequate space and where it would add to the new landmark.

The Panel preferred to see the building of a new imaginatively engineered footbridge that really 'celebrated the river' and expressed the pedestrian desire line between the town centre and the car park. It considered that the design of the new Cymmer Bridge was disappointing and rather lumpen. Clearly the same imagination has not been applied to this bridge as to the Rheola Bridge.

The Panel understand that the Relief Road crossing at this point is to be a light controlled junction with a specific pedestrian phase, and we would want pedestrians to be given the opportunity to cross the road in one movement. If the idea of the Square is abandoned we would like a direct route across the new bridge to be created past the relocated War Memorial. The Panel look forward to traffic calming on Pontypridd Road / Porth Street to create a more pedestrian friendly environment at the entrance to the town.

Road Margins and Retaining Walls

The Panel consider that the use of Pennant Sandstone for all retaining walls is the correct approach and will ensure that the road blends with both the natural landscape and the built environment. Generally The Panel thought that considerable care was being taken to landscape the road properly and to minimise its ecological impacts. The Panel did think that the Pioneer supermarket car park needs to have a significant strip of landscape and tree planting because otherwise it will blight the new approach to Porth.

Community Routes

The Panel applaud the attention which has been given to community routes to ensure that the road creates new opportunity for people to walk and cycle through the valleys. A comprehensive map of these would have helped the Panel's assessment so that they could see how the new network would work as a whole and how it would connect into the countryside.

Environmental Statement

The final point is in part an *aide memoire* to ourselves but we think an important methodological issue for local authorities and the Assembly Planning Division.

Neither the Environmental Statement or the Planning Application report includes any holistic urban design assessment about how the road impacts upon the built form/public realm/movement patterns of the settlements a whole. This is an oversight.

Conclusions

The Panel are pleased to conclude that this scheme has many positive aspects and has been very carefully and sensitively considered. The Panel supports the new road not so much on the basis of the improved accessibility to jobs and services that it is projected to provide (we think it could reduce patronage of local shops significantly) as on the major environmental benefits it will bring to 1500 households. The new road creates a great opportunity to improve the main streets and the quality of life of all five settlements, and the Panel look forward to traffic management measures to consolidate these.

The Panel's key points for further consideration include:

- The whole idea of Porth Square and alternatives
- Less 'left over space on the south side of the relief road at this junction
- Screening of the Pioneer car park
- A coordinated series of pedestrian connections and landscape improvements under the Rheola Bridge
- A river terrace walk on the Afon Rhondda to the new bridge.

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