

## **Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales**

### **Design Review Report**

<b>Meeting Date / Material Submitted:</b>	<b>2 October 2003</b>
<b>Location:</b>	<b>Blaenau Gwent</b>
<b>Architects / Design Team:</b>	<b>Various (See report)</b>
<b>Scheme Description:</b>	<b>Blaenau Gwent Regeneration Projects</b>
<b>Public/Other body</b>	<b>Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council partnership with Welsh Development Agency</b>

#### **1 Brynmawr Town Centre**

##### **Urban Design Strategy and Guidelines (including Artwork Proposals)**

The Design Review Panel received a presentation on the progress being made on the implementation of physical works in Brynmawr identified in the original town centre strategy, and on the informal adoption of Urban Design Guidelines prepared by Macgregor Smith.

Public realm improvements are in progress underpinned by the Urban Design Guidelines and resulting from a strong collaborative approach by Landscape Architects Macgregor Smith and public art commissioning agency CBAT. This team forms part of a wider multi disciplinary team focussed on the Strategy for Blaenau Gwent commissioned by the WDA and BGCBC. This phase responds to the Ebbw Fach Regeneration Strategy and Action Plan and specifically to the Brynmawr and Nantyglo Regeneration Strategies.

The client partnership and collaborative team are to be commended on a comprehensive approach. Brynmawr is topographically the highest market town in Britain and despite its recent history of post-industrial decline, has considerable potential for renewal and tourist development based on its industrial and cultural heritage. This aspiration is recognised by the client team.

The urban fabric of the town centre remains largely sound with some key buildings and areas of public realm highlighted for improvement.

##### **Urban Design Guidelines**

The aspiration of the client partnership is recognised and welcomed. However it is apparent that the Guidelines offer little more than a rationalisation of approaches to street furniture, paving and open space. Street frontage is treated traditionally remaining within the boundaries of late Victorian architectural styles. Similarly soft landscaping and plant species guidelines promote the use of indigenous species and responds to the prevalent climatic conditions specific to the locale.

The guidance could be strengthened for Brynmawr with more innovative approaches to highlighting the industrial vernacular such as the railway arches along Warwick Road and improvement of traditional pedestrian and vehicular routes within the town such as tram and foot paths which remain in active use. The guidelines on paving materials, for instance, are largely indistinct from any UK town centre and undermine the aspiration of the strategy to strengthen local distinctiveness.

Stronger encouragement could be given to more contemporary but still contextual approaches to street frontages avoiding Victorian pastiche and the creation of a “19<sup>th</sup> century model village” effect. Whilst this is expressed as a desired approach, illustrative figures in the guidelines do nothing to move toward a twenty-first century approach to the design of infill development. Greater reference to best practice in similar types of town across Europe would be useful.

The Urban Design Guidelines for Brynmawr aim to reflect the original objectives of the Urban Design Strategy and Masterplan originally commissioned from and prepared by Macgregor Smith. Those aims of greater accessibility; job retention and creation; economic development and competitive advantage through environmental quality are those that form the basis of many regeneration and renewal plans for the post industrial valley towns of south Wales. More is needed here to strengthen the ability of Brynmawr to realise its potential as a viable alternative to Abergavenny, its closest competitor in Market town terms.

### **Artwork Proposals**

Again DCFW applauds the collaboration between client partners and design teams and the aspiration from the outset to integrate a public art strategy into the urban regeneration and renewal strategies for Brynmawr and throughout Blaenau Gwent. In particular the attraction of several professional artists of national and international reputation is a key strength.

The majority of artist interventions are properly integrated into the scheme as a whole and this is a direct result of the collaborative nature of the team and the relationships between client, design team and community. A particular strength is effective public engagement with artists making strong commitments facilitating genuine ownership.

Proposals for physical works vary from more traditional freestanding works to landforms, integrated street furniture and inventive use of lighting. The proposals draw attention to existing features and strengthen the presence of otherwise forgotten landmarks. Some provide fresh approaches to landscape and public open space while others such as the treatment to Eastern Gateway Phase 1, resolve significant urban difficulties and maximise the potential of the urban design strategy.

DCFW is concerned though that there is a reliance on artworks to provide “gateways” to the town centre in the absence of an urban design approach. This concept is often accepted as a means of creating a sense of arrival or departure in many urban centres. Whilst we do not object strongly we are of the opinion that the concept of gateways needs to be carefully assessed as a means of providing containment or as a solution to urban “straggle”. This is an aspect which should be addressed through a strong element in the urban design strategy.

The approach from the A465 would benefit from enhancement of the public realm at the bottom of King Street prior to the Alma Street fork and this should be more strongly addressed in urban design terms. Similarly the current bypass arrangement diverting vehicular traffic from the A467 Blaina approach needs significant attention in order to stem the “leakage” of traffic past the town centre and on to Blaenafon or Abergavenny via the link with the A465. The current proposal for this Southern Approach has great strength in its landscape or “earthwork” elements but is formally weaker as a traffic island landmark. The team recognises the need to deliver an innovative scheme here however this could be more explicit in the urban design strategy and reinforced in the guidelines. Resolution of the former Rubber Factory site is a key component in drawing together strategies for this area.

Despite the need for stronger, more courageous urban design in the areas detailed above the overall strategy for Brynmawr is sound. It is heavily dependent on two aspects - the success of the artworks proposals and the ability of the local authority and the emerging development sector to respond innovatively to the basis of the strategy and guidance.

The client partnership must secure the resources necessary to deliver the aspiration of the strategies and the local authority needs to work hard to address environmental quality beyond the boundaries of the immediate town centre. Brynmawr stands to gain a unique environment which could become a cultural tourism attraction in itself, building on European precedents set in Holland, Germany, Norway and elsewhere. Their success is also due to the deployment of strategic tourism assistance and excellent maintenance of public realm. The town's European Objective One status offers a huge opportunity Brynmawr could become a magnet for international visitors and a unique residential and retail location, able to attract and retain the trade, residential and visitor vitality it currently lacks.

## **2 Llanhilleth Town Centre**

The proposals under consideration consist of a series of projects that contribute to the regeneration of the small community of Llanhilleth. The main elements are a new road bridge crossing the river and railway, a new school, refurbishment of the Grade I listed miners' institute and a new sports pavilion. As part of their partnership focusing on the regeneration of a series of towns in the Borough, BGCBC and WDA commissioned an urban design study of the central part of the settlement from Austin Smith Lord who were also the first stage architects for the school (now proceeding as a design and build contract with different architects).

### **Urban Design Study and Masterplan**

DCFW welcomes the co-operative initiative of BGCBC and WDA in commissioning the urban design study. The study proposed sensible small scale interventions to enhance the character of the settlement by providing a modest open space, a town square on the east side of the river and railway and immediately to the north of the new road bridge. The drawings presented showed the main elements of the proposals but did not show clearly the existing pattern of development making it difficult to judge the full impact and appropriateness of the changes. It would have been helpful if the architects and engineers had provide more sections or other images to explain the complex three dimensional character of the site which it is impossible to convey with plans alone.

It was evident that the design was very strongly influenced by the rigorous application of traffic engineering standards; in fact the visual character of the place is largely determined by obtrusive standardised design elements. The proposed town square is an attractive idea – a modest but appropriate open space that has the potential to provide an attractive visual and social focus to the settlement. However this potential is entirely undermined by the obtrusive kerbside safety fencing that almost completely surrounds the square. We are not convinced that this fencing contributes significantly to pedestrian safety; indeed we fear that in some senses it represents a danger to both pedestrians and cyclists. Similarly the requirement for road access to the railway station is so difficult to achieve given the levels of the site that the potentially attractive visual and experiential quality of the public realm is effectively destroyed.

The Commission fully accepts the need to make proper provision for access for the less able to public facilities. It is especially important that transport facilities must be accessible to all. However we are concerned that standards which are appropriate in less difficult terrain (and were drawn up with such locations in mind) are not appropriate in Llanhilleth, and perhaps other places, where the topography is especially challenging in terms of both changes of level and proximity of natural features and existing elements of infrastructure.

We consider that engineering and accessibility standards should not in all cases be “non-negotiable”. There should be procedures under which in some exceptional circumstances – perhaps where topography is especially challenging and usage levels are relatively low -- reasonable measures to improve access which do not fully conform to the standards possible in other locations may be negotiated. We suggest an investigation of such opportunities. Otherwise we fear that “the best will become the enemy of the good” and investment that would benefit the majority will not happen because the ideal standards for the minority have not been achieved.

### **The School and Community Facilities**

We commend Austin Smith Lord for a design proposal on a difficult site that sensitively combines existing buildings with a creative approach to the design of new buildings. The relatively advanced proposals that were presented have the potential to achieve high standards of architectural quality. They showed buildings that were well disposed on the site to benefit from its natural advantages and mitigate disadvantages. The curved geometry, notoriously difficult to handle successfully, had been developed with assurance although it appeared that some spaces and formal relationships needed further work to produce a fully satisfactory resolution. We also commend the designers for aspiring to use best environmental practice in the design – for example the use of passive stack ventilation which has the potential to produce, in parallel with other measures, high standards of environmental comfort with very low energy use and running costs.

However we were concerned to hear that the designers who presented the proposals were no longer directly involved in the project, and we understand that the project is now proceeding on a design and build basis with different architects engaged by the contractors. It was reported that a number of changes had been made to the design since the drawings that we saw had been prepared – including raising the building for flood protection reasons and the elimination of the passive ventilation measures.

This gives us concern on two grounds. Firstly, the process of Design Review is unlikely to be fully effective if the panel does not see the most recent design proposals presented by the team responsible for their delivery. It may well be important to understand how the proposals have evolved through the design process but there is little point in commenting in detail on proposals that it is known will not be built in the form presented. We invite the team to meet with DCFW again for this purpose.

Secondly, and more generally, it is becoming increasingly clear as the Commission reviews project proposals that methods of building procurement can have a decisive impact upon the quality of the end product. The various methods of procurement available have advantages and disadvantages – in terms of certainty of time, capital cost, life cycle costs and responsiveness to user needs. We consider it to be of the utmost importance when selecting procurement methods and managing individual projects that very high priority be given to achieving the best in design quality, paying full attention to cost certainty and speed of delivery.

It appears that, in this case, there is a strong possibility that changing the design team part way through the process will have a negative impact on the quality of the completed buildings.

The partnership between BGCBC and WDA at Llanhilleth is a very positive development. The committed teams from both organisations have worked well with skilled and determined design consultants to produce proposals that have the potential to produce real improvements in the quality of life of the people of the community. But their work has highlighted barriers to the achievement of the best design outcomes. We are particularly concerned about the negative effects of the universal application of engineering standards that may be highly inappropriate in some situations, the use of standard design details in locations where their potential benefits do not outweigh their negative effects, and the negative impact that building procurement methods may have on design quality.

### **3 Ebbw Vale Town Centre Urban Design framework**

We were updated on the progress being made on the implementation of the Town's Urban Design Framework, and the attempts to increase the amount of retail trade. It was clear that there was a need to contract the spread of the town's retail offer, and to reinforce the footfall between the multi-storey car park and the indoor market. Two phases of public realm improvements have been completed but the main space to the north remains largely unimproved.

The indoor market conversion and reuse was nearly complete, restoring an important Edwardian landmark, but also improving retail and residential premises, and adding office space, to strengthen the southern end of the town centre. The improvements to the very visible rear of the Market were being executed with modern details and this seemed appropriate. The artist-designed, steel frame canopy offered weather protection for the pedestrian and encouraged pedestrian flow down Bethcar Street, while adding a new attraction to the streetscape, providing a foil for the Edwardian architecture. Bold colouring of the glass still allowed a high level of translucence. The WDA were to be congratulated on taking on this complex project to anchor the southern end of the town centre. The artist's intervention had also proved to be very popular and raised local people's consciousness as regards achievable design quality

The improved access to the Walk development has created an opportunity for a new space to be created adjacent to the HSBC bank on Bethcar Street. Another artistic intervention had been undertaken and a small plaza with seats focused on a modern fountain had been designed, with a Pennant stone wall to screen the side of the properties. The wall was decorated with steel panels interpreting the steel making and 'rolling out' poetry. This was awaiting funding and planning permission. It was an attractive ensemble that would fit well into the town and relieve the linearity of Bethcar Street. How much the space was used would depend on how safe (overlooked) and comfortable it was, and while it had a southerly aspect it might be rather exposed on the corner of the new road.

The WDA were offering Town Improvement Grants to upgrade retail premises in Bethcar Street and with grants up to 80 per cent of costs the take-up was beginning to improve dramatically. The grant mechanism was used to encourage higher design standards, and more sympathetic treatments and these were beginning to upgrade the fabric of the area. This was good news but required the continued vigilance and informed judgment of those awarding the grant.

Four important projects remained to be implemented. The refurbishment and 'civilising' of the multi-storey car park, adding a Learning Action Centre and some office space, is in the pipeline. The calming of the traffic on the A4046 at the northern end of the Market Place is a long term aspiration when the trunk road designation is transferred to a new road up the valley (see on). The location of the bus station and creation of an upgraded facility remains an important but rather unresolved part of the strategy (see on).

The final project seeks to upgrade the east-west pedestrian links into the town centre which are generally in poor condition. Another artist project on the 'ginnels' has seen three artists working with eleven different community groups to develop a series of artistic installations in a number of these locations that will make them a feature of the town and imprint them better into the public consciousness. These installations are only part funded so far. It would have been useful to know a bit more about the pedestrian connections east-west. With the redevelopment of the steelworks site these desire lines become much more important, and there is some important design thinking to be done linking the town centre and the northern end of the steelworks site.

A general and very positive feature of the public art programme was that it had a clear relationship with the urban design strategy and was contributing significantly to an increase in civic pride and a raising of design aspirations. The Commission would wish to see the car park scheme and the Market Street/Sterling Triangle improvements when these were developed.

#### **4 Ebbw Vale Steelworks Masterplan**

The Commission was impressed with the ambition of this masterplan, with its compact urban forms and strong landscape frame, and with the potential for a mix of important public facilities alongside a range of private development opportunities. The lack of contextual clues to guide the site design was explained, along with the opportunities presented by the man-made topography, the basements and the water on the site. We found much to admire in the overall design though we wondered where all the car parking had gone, and whether the dimensions of the spaces, and the layout of the public realm, were purely schematic.

We saw great potential in the close juxtaposition of the station, hospital and learning campus and the links that could be developed up into the town centre. We were dismayed to hear that the hospital was reconsidering this location as being too noisy. From our perspective an accessible location like this, at the heart of the community, is exactly where a community hospital ought to be. The potential for sharing facilities with the Learning Campus is a further powerful argument for this location, as is the impetus that collectively these three public investments can give the project at large.

The masterplan starts to resolve some of the difficulties experienced in the town centre, particularly the ability to traffic calm the A4046, if a new north-south trunk road is built on the east side of the valley. Good links into the town centre, and strong urban forms, are essential to overcome the topographic difficulties and to knit the new projects in with the old core. Further design work is needed here and there is a need to resolve issues like the best location for the bus station.

There is considerable potential for advance landscape works that can define the green space in the project and start to enhance the site's biodiversity. These could be relatively cheap, would rapidly green the site, and would enhance site values when the land was disposed. Ideas for temporary nurseries on the site should be encouraged.

This is of course a massive project that requires huge public investment to kick start it. It is also a project that will take at least two decades to complete. We were most interested in the way that the project might be implemented and how the aspirations in the masterplan might be translated into reality. Everyone around the table seemed to grasp the importance of ensuring that the first few projects lived up to the standards implied in the masterplan. The WDA's land ownership powers are a powerful means of ensuring quality design, but the quality of the development briefs, and the weighting of their evaluation criteria, will be critical to the achievement of quality in a difficult development climate. The possible appointment of a full time project (design?) champion was also suggested

There is enormous potential here for a model project that brings together public transport, educational, skill development, health improvement and affordable housing aspirations in a sustainable urban form, meeting all the Welsh Assembly Government's political aspirations for community regeneration. The design quality of these public investments will set the standard for the rest of the site and they need to be exemplar projects. The Commission was delighted with the ground work that had been laid and would do what it could to help secure successful implementation.

## **5 Tredegar Business Park Phase II**

The proposals under consideration consist of a single building containing both offices and production spaces on a large site to the north east of the town centre. Phase one of the Business Park, a single building at the north end of the site was completed in 1997. Construction of a second building, the VITCC centre adjacent to phase one, is about to begin. As part of their partnership focusing on the regeneration of a series of towns in the Borough BGCBC and WDA commissioned an urban design study of the town from Powell Dobson Partnership. This study includes the site of the business park.

### **Tredegar Town Study and Masterplan**

Tredegar is a town that has suffered badly from economic decline. It sits in a valley which, while offering attractive and often dramatic views, poses difficult topographical challenges for planners and architects. Some of the developments of recent decades, including the Gwent Shopping Centre, have responded poorly to topography and the strong existing urban form and the distinctive architectural character of the town.

DCFW welcomes the co-operative initiative of BGCBC and WDA in commissioning the town study and master plan. The study represents a useful analysis of the formal qualities and character of the town. It identifies strengths and weaknesses in the existing town form and proposes a strategy to build on opportunities and address deficiencies. Like all strategies it is to some extent speculative but it provides a clear framework within which current and future proposals may be considered. It has great potential as a tool for both strategic site planning and development control. We hope that its proposals will become an essential part of the brief for all proposed developments in the town.

## **Business Park Phase Two**

The immediate context for the phase two buildings gives few obvious clues to siting, form or architectural character. The phase one building – a relatively small building on a large open site – appears from the site plan to be arbitrarily sited. On closer examination it is clear that its designers were responding logically to the topography (the building is aligned with the foot of a steep bank on the west of the site) and the cost-driven access road layout. The design of phase one is unexceptional and typical of business park architecture of its time, but it is constructed to a relatively high standard.

The proposed VITCC centre, on which construction is about to start, is neat and well mannered although it appears to be an assembly of voguish design features rather than a holistic response to the brief and environmental imperatives. Its siting bears no considered relationship to the phase one building. Now that the master plan has been completed the Commission suggests that the position of the building be reconsidered to relate better to the carefully considered geometry of the master plan.

The location of the phase two building again looks arbitrary in relation to phase one and the VITCC centre. However in this case it has been carefully placed in relation to a well considered overall strategy. Its logic of siting will only be fully appreciated if future development takes place and is designed in accordance with the principles of the master plan. The logic could begin to be appreciated earlier if the siting and the landscaping of the VITCC centre could be reconsidered before construction begins.

The building, as far as was evident from drawings presented, appears to be simple and well proportioned. The clear plan that separates office and production space by a glazed central street offers the opportunity for a varied pattern of use and high standards of natural lighting and ventilation.

We commend the client and architect for their commitment to applying the best current practice in design for low energy and water use and environmentally responsible material specification. We were surprised to see the completely internal toilets – would it perhaps be possible to locate them so that they might benefit from natural light and ventilation? Some of the “green” elements of the building may be deliverable only with additional funding – for example the photovoltaic array – but consideration of these issues at the design stage allows for future retrofitting should the relative costs of energy technology change in future.

## **Conclusion**

The Tredegar town study and master plan and the proposal for phase two of the business park clearly demonstrate the value of strategic three-dimensional design thinking. We are convinced that if such studies had been a normal part of the strategic planning process in earlier decades many of the mistakes in urban development that are now generally recognised might have been avoided. The environmentally aware and architecturally sophisticated design of the phase two building is an encouraging development in business park architecture in Wales.

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