



Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales

Design Review Report: 10 March 2004
Meeting Date / Material Submitted: 4 March 2004
Location: Lakeside, Brynmawr
Former Rubber Factory site
Architects / Design Team: Alan Gaskell, Mountford Piggott
Howard Wainwright, PDP
Robert Chapman & Co
Scheme Description: Mixed Retail and Leisure Development
Public/Other Body: Welsh Development Agency
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Present: Designers/Developers

Hamish Munro, WDA
Robert Chapman
Howard Wainwright, PDP
Bernadette Kinsella, PDP
Alan Gaskell, Mountford Piggott
Steve Smith BGCBC
Richard Crooke BGCBC

Present: Design Review Panel

John Punter
Cindy Harris
Alan Francis
Rob Firth
Mike Biddulph
Lyn Owen
Jonathan Adams
Ed Colgan
Nigel Hanson

Observing

Carole-Anne Davies, DCFW
Steve Trigg, South Wales Police
Professor Zhu, China Academy of Urban Planning and Design

Presentation

The scheme was introduced by Howard Wainwright explaining the Powell Dobson masterplan of the entire former Brynmawr Rubber Factory/Dunlop Semtex site, a site that has been derelict for 17 years. A residential scheme is currently on site to the west of the main retail site. There is ongoing contact and discussion between Mountford Piggott as architects for the developer Chelverton, and Powell Dobson Partnership as the master-planners. It is hoped that this positive interaction will continue through the development of a detailed design.

Three major elements informed the masterplan: the lake; the open views to the mountains; and the industrial site's potential connections with the town centre.

The lake is an obvious draw and the topography of the site forms a natural amphitheatre focusing on the old pump house on the embankment that contains the lake on its south side. The masterplan works with the existing structures and topography to arrive at practical suggestions for development on this major, edge of town centre retail site.

Alan Gaskell of Mountford Pigott explained that the first scheme had turned its back on town; then a subsequent scheme had grouped the buildings round the lakeside, facing the town centre in an L-shaped layout, and using the lakeside to provide a linkage between the town and the leisure/catering facilities. However, the latter scheme did not satisfy the retailers' aspirations, including requirements for 500 car parking spaces, which would be segregated from service vehicles.

The revised layout now under review places the food store on the south east corner of the site, with an integral service yard accessed off the main road, more in keeping with the masterplan. The remaining retail units have been placed on the western edge of the site, aligned north-south and serviced from the rear. The free-standing pub and the coffee shop within the foodstore are felt to be better positioned, relative to the lake. However, the 'soft' landscaped feel of an amphitheatre has been lost, and there is a need for very careful landscaping and use of materials to ensure some landscape and architectural quality on the lakeside. Robust materials, such as stone, brick, and high quality metal cladding, well detailed, with rolling roof shapes are the main features of the retail store. The family pub is envisaged as a transition between the domestic, neo-vernacular styles of the housing to the west and the industrial forms of the retail box.

Steve Smith of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council pointed out that this is an edge of town centre site, and impinges on a lot of different aspects of the future development of the town. Of necessity, this development will have to turn its back on one of its four neighbours: the lake, the town, the main road, or the new housing development. Hamish Munro of the WDA thought that the design of the housing had improved through its different gestations, and reported a high demand for the housing units, with 4-bedroom houses now attracting prices of around £200,000. This was clear evidence that attention to design quality could add value to the development.

Due to this factor, the possibility of a more comprehensive scheme was considered, with more residential lakeside development. However, the current time constraints imposed by ASDA make this impossible. It is clear that ASDA has certain non-negotiable requirements and the challenge is to resolve these with the aspirations of the masterplan. Richard Crooke of Blaenau Gwent made it clear that the Local Authority were aware of the possible impacts on the community, but viewed the scheme in a positive light and were looking for added value through design.

Response from the Panel

The Panel began by exploring the nature of the brief and the mix of uses, and further explanations of the site acquired emerged. It was a major regret that the industrial site to the north had not been acquired as this would have allowed the foodstore to have been much better linked to the town centre. Pedestrian access from the town centre now would be problematic, and the development would not in any way reinforce the town centre. This would exacerbate the impact on the town centre which were likely to be severe, and to make matters worse prospective shoppers on foot would have to cross large areas of car parking.

There are obvious tensions between the commercial imperatives of the food store and big box retailers on the one hand, and the aspirations of the masterplan on the other.

The retail store will be the first major building announcing arrival at the town by car/bus from the south, and the high wall surrounding the service yard and its deceleration lane will be the dominant entry feature for the town. This is clearly undesirable. There also seem to be indications on the plans that the foodstore might need to be further expanded at a later date, thus increasing its impact on the site.

The all-important lake frontage is principally occupied by the blank side frontage of the foodstore, contributing nothing to the lakeside walkway. So a major amenity is negated.

The disposition of the retail space creates two service yards where only one should be necessary.

The public house relates poorly to the retail units, especially if it is treated in a more domestic architecture. Clearly its presence on the waterfront is desirable, but better use of the space and a modern architectural treatment that relates to the retail park design is far preferable.

The car parking demand for 500 parking spaces squeezes the lakeside landscape corridor so that only the walkway is left at the centre of the site below a retaining wall.

There is no demonstrable relationship between the pedestrian movement along the front of the retail units and that along the front of the foodstore. There is no satisfactory pedestrian route into the scheme from the north for either retail units or foodstore.

Summary

How can these objections be overcome? In subsequent discussion the Panel considered that the whole disposition of the retail space should be rethought and the retail units and foodstore disposed together on the western side of the site where they could be serviced by a single, well-screened service yard. The south east corner of the site could then accommodate the public house, and this would act as a better gateway to the town. There would have to be a reduction in the retail floorspace on the site.

The four schemes currently tested all demonstrate that the car parking and retail space levels severely compromise the amenity of the lakeside site. The industrial site to the north needs to be included with this site to accommodate this level of development and to successfully relate the retail park to the town centre of Brynmawr. The Panel's preference is for a fundamental rethink of the capacity of the site and its site planning to respect one of the town's most important amenities and to ensure good pedestrian links to the town centre. The Panel is of the opinion that the impact of this development on the existing town centre will be massive.

If the presented plan is retained the Panel considers that very little can be done to improve the design. There are limited opportunities to improve the big box buildings, and so the selection of the palette of materials and the quality of detailing become critical. So too does the landscape design, particularly the screening of the blank wall of the supermarket, and the improvement of the treatment of the walkway where it curves around the car park. Pedestrian movement into the site and between the retail units and the foodstore needs major attention. The coffee shop on the foodstore needs to be given maximum window space and a more generous terrace area on the lakeside. Better still, the foodstore could be sited further north and a terrace of apartments could be developed along the southern wall to front the lakeside and provide surveillance and vitality to the walkway. This would generate additional value from the site to compensate for loss of a retail unit or a reduction in parking.

The Panel urged consideration of the preservation, innovative re-use and maintenance of the listed boiler-house, linked to the development of this site through a Section 106 agreement.

DCFW are particularly concerned that:

- No adequate retail impact assessment has been made by BGBC failing to assess potential for distinctive retail opportunities in the town centre.
- The huge potential of the site remains unrealised, which is particularly disappointing in light of the history of the site and the opportunity for a high quality development on a highly visible, gateway location.
- Insufficient attention has been given to transport implications and public transport links in relation to the town centre and in consideration of the nearby schools and health-centre.

DCFW expressed further concern that this is the second BGBC town centre regeneration scheme to have fallen short of the high quality aspiration expressed in the masterplan and the huge potential for the Town Centre Study and Public Art Strategy, previously reviewed by the Commission. The masterplan combined with these additional background studies provide a framework for Brynmawr as an attractive destination of strong character able to attract and sustain cultural tourism, in particular given its proximity to industrial heritage sites of international importance including the Clydach Gorge.

DCFW would welcome further meetings with the designers and developers in order to support the best possible long-term outcome for the site.

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