

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales

Design Review Report:	27 April 2004
Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	15 April 2004
Location:	St Catherine's Corner Pontypridd
Architects / Developer:	Willdig Lammie Robert Willdig
Client:	Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC John Cunnane, Jacqueline Howard, Graeme May
Scheme Description:	Multi storey car park & offices 326 spaces + 29,000 sq ft
Public/Other Body:	Welsh Development Agency
Planning Status:	Full application submitted
Design Review Panel Members:	John Punter, Cindy Harris, Mike Biddulph, Ann-Marie Smale, Ed Colgan, Richard Weston, Richard Parnaby

Presentation

The Regeneration Officer from Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC emphasised that this development was seen as a catalyst for the regeneration of Pontypridd as a whole, and was urgently required to attract shoppers and retain a higher proportion of retail expenditure within the town. The site has been vacant for the last 12-15 years. He noted that the Planning Authority considers that the scheme is of significantly higher design quality than those submitted by other developers, is an improvement on the first proposal by the selected developer, the visual impacts are acceptable and the design criteria have been met. He expressed concern that fundamental changes recommended at this stage would have significant impact on a budget that is still short of its target.

The architect acknowledged that the design had not changed since DCFW's last comments on 22/1/04. Spaces originally intended for retail use had since been designated as offices, but this could change again if the commercial interest was sufficient. The design brief sets out the need to fill a gap in the built fabric at this point without entirely obscuring views of the St Catherine's church. The architect has responded to the desire for a gateway development of appropriate urban scale and density, with augmented pedestrian routes. He said that an active frontage on the south west corner would enhance the building's relationship with pedestrian routes and that there will be high quality materials on the elevations.

He noted that the car park has been made more transparent than the offices with metal balustrading and a parapet roof. The multiple gables are intended to relate

to the predominant Victorian and Edwardian architecture of Pontypridd. The facing blockwork on the main façade reflects the natural stonework that predominates to the north, and is used in cills and other fenestration details. Steel columns support the overhanging gables on the south side dormers and the wide pavement creates a useful public space that descends into the entrance to the pedestrian underpass by means of steps and a ramp.

The Panel's Response

The Panel considered that there had been no substantive design change since its first site visit in August 2003 and subsequent reports in Nov/Dec 2003 and therefore the comments made by DCFW at that time still stand.

The only additional material submitted since the Commission's first comments, the photomontages, simply describe the proposals more clearly. The panel was concerned that although apparently "photorealistic", much detail that would significantly affect the appearance of the building was missing - for example down pipes and flashings. These images were produced after all the design work had been completed and do not respond to the DCFW's earlier stated concerns.

There remains the fundamental concern that the design is not based upon a rigorous contextual analysis.

The Panel acknowledges that the architect is confronted by a difficult task. The large changes of level across the site, the constraints imposed by existing retaining walls, the need (imposed by the brief) to retain the existing cramped and unattractive pedestrian subway and the important listed buildings and conservation area to the north all add to the difficulties of handling a challenging building programme on a prominent site. The cost constraints and the architect's lack of a commission to execute a detailed design leave unresolved many issues that troubled the Panel.

The Panel's concerns fall into three distinct but closely related areas: the relationship to the urban context, the architectural character of the proposed building and response to the sustainable development agenda.

Urban Design

There is an uncomfortable relationship between the building and the pedestrian subway beneath Catherine Street. It was a clear requirement of the brief that this route should be maintained but on the evidence of the drawings - which include little information on levels and finishes and no information on lighting - this has not yet been satisfactorily resolved.

It may be possible to improve this critically important element of the public realm at the detailed design stage by the careful manipulation of ramps and stairs, the use of high quality finishes and well designed lighting. However experience suggests that it will be difficult to create an attractive public space in which pedestrians will feel comfortable and secure in this location given the significant changes in level, the constricted space between the building and the streets, and the experiential quality of the existing subway.

The panel urges the Council and the developer to investigate whether a more satisfactory solution could be achieved if the subway was replaced with a pedestrian crossing further north on Catherine Street.

The appendix to the Development Brief deals with design matters. It recognises that this is a significant site and that the new building should form a gateway to the town centre that should be legible as an urban structure through its massing and materials. In the panel's view this has not been fully achieved. The proposed building does not respond well to the townscape opportunity offered by the prominent corner at the junction of Mill Street and Catherine Street.

The architectural strategy of wrapping the parking structure (a notoriously difficult building type to make architecturally interesting) with the office element is sound. The three storey glazed element on the south edge of the site, an uncomfortable composition consisting of a series of five gables, is significantly lower than the structure behind. This has the effect of dropping the scale of the building just at the point on the site where, in urban design terms, the building could have its most positive impact. In the view of DCFW a strong corner feature the full height of the building has the potential to establish the building as a significant urban landmark.

The design brief rightly calls for the building façades to be located at the rear edge of the pavement - to clearly define a coherent three dimensional public realm. This has not been achieved in the proposed buildings. It is especially problematic on the north and west edges of the site on Catherine Street and Upper Catherine Street. The site is curved on its most prominent corners and edges but the grid of the car park and the offices create an angularity of plan that is at odds with this, creating difficult gaps between the old retaining walls and the walls of the new building. These would be litter traps and difficult to effectively landscape. The entrances are understated and arguably misplaced and do not help the building to command the corner as it should. DCFW accepts that the locations of existing retaining structures place strong constraints on the location of new structural elements but we have not been convinced that there are no ways in which this problem might be avoided or alleviated within the economic constraints.

Architectural Character

While the brief calls for a building that will “generally reflect the Victorian and Edwardian scale and character” of the town centre, the DCFW does not consider that this should be interpreted to mean that a Victorian or Edwardian style is required. A building based on a contemporary architectural language could be acceptable on this site. Equally DCFW does not suggest that it is impossible to design an appropriate building that draws directly on historical design precedent.

In our view the composition is not successful within the terms the architect has set out - the emulation of the Victorian and Edwardian buildings in the town. The design approach is to clad a frame structure with a facade that is an assemblage of elements that are intended to evoke the essentially masonry structures typical at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The low percentage of window to total wall area emphasises the thin “tightly stretched” character of the cladding. Victorian and Edwardian office buildings relied heavily on daylight and would have had more closely spaced and taller windows. The result is unconvincing.

The façades (particularly that facing Catherine Street) lack the visual solidity and intricacy of detail characteristic of the earlier buildings. Window reveals are narrow, the masonry unarticulated and the detailing plain. All of these might be acceptable if the composition of the facades more clearly derived from historical precedent - perhaps employing the convention of a robustly textured base, three

storeys of simply modulated window and wall and a more horizontally emphasised attic storey. The Panel suggested differentiating the facades of the car park and the offices as part of a strategy that would result in a more satisfying overall composition. The car park might be treated in a more straightforward functional manner contrasting with a more Edwardian treatment of the offices relating to the adjacent streetscape of the Conservation Area.

The panel noted the difference between the original sketch scheme, with its greater verticality, and the current proposals that have a less articulated faced and a more horizontal emphasis. The Panel considered that the life and interest of the sketch proposal had been lost in the design development process.

Sustainable Development

DCFW is working to advance the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to sustainable development, as are other national bodies such as the WDA. This commitment is nationally recognised and tied to specific aspects of the Government of Wales Act and Assembly policy. We consider that all building projects should take account of this agenda. The proposed development on a town centre brownfield site can be seen to be consistent with the broad principles of sustainable development as part of a strategy to improve the viability of Pontypridd as a retail centre and as a location for employment.

There is no evidence however that the building design itself responds positively to this agenda. It is unlikely that most of the offices could achieve best practice standards of energy performance as, given the low percentage of window to total wall area, they would rely on high levels of artificial lighting throughout the day. By contrast the three storey south facing offices appear to be overglazed and are likely to suffer from excessive solar gain. This problem could only be solved by the use of air conditioning, the use of expensive solar control glass, or the installation of external solar shading - which would radically change the building's appearance. Further attention to these issues are required.

Summary

The comments made above are largely similar to those made by the Commission in December 2003. The Panel as a whole has serious reservations about this scheme. The building does not command the corner or follow the curves of the street. More work is needed to resolve the issues of the pedestrian subway by opening up its entrance to create better sight lines and a less cramped public space.

The design of the office building needs to be refined .We believe that a design approach which refers explicitly to Victorian and Edwardian is appropriate given the conservation context. The car park elevations could be more strongly differentiated from those of the office building perhaps adopting a more contemporary design. (ref: Coin Street Housing in London by Lifschutz Davidson).

The need for this scheme to generate the expected long term economic development required in the town centre, and in light of the Angharad Walk project, is fully understood by DCFW. We remain concerned though that in its current form the proposal will not attract the desired occupiers in either the commerce or retail sectors. The investment of public money must be carefully considered and the scheme properly assessed for its capacity to deliver a number of expectations in economic development terms.

Given the investment of public money in this proposal, it is important that there is a clear commitment to the principles of sustainable development. It is also essential that any development proposed in a conservation area should be presented in sufficient detail to allow its real character to be ascertained.

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