

Design Review Report	8 September 2004
Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	2 September 2004
Location:	Victoria Dock, Caernarfon
Scheme Description:	Residential, retail and office accommodation
Architects / Design Team:	Willacy Horsewood Partnership (Mark Willacy)
Developer:	WJ Developments Rob Willis)
Public/Other Body:	Gwynedd County Council (Iwan Evans) WDA, (Jeff St Paul) Cadw (John Pavitt)
Planning Status:	Previous application called in by WAG
Date of detailed application if known:	
Design Review Panel:	
John Punter (chair)	Mike Biddulph
Cindy Harris (officer)	Alan Francis
Ann-Marie Smale	Jonathan Adams
Geraint John	Paul Vanner
Richard Parnaby	

Presentation

Following on from the last presentation of this scheme in July, the panel asked the project team to concentrate on the changes made in response to the last Design Review report. The design team thought that the observations and recommendations contained in that report had been useful and had enabled them to arrive at a better scheme. In particular, they identified improvements which had been made in the following areas:

- *Urban grain:* an attempt has been made to create a compatible grain rather than directly copying any of the three existing grains of Caernarfon. The aim was to simplify the street pattern; to ensure that all main axes have vistas through the site; to improve permeability by widening and realigning some thoroughfares; and to create a more legible hierarchy of routes.
- *Permeability and accessibility:* changes have been made to the vehicular entrance routes, separating residential from commercial and retail access. The public spaces have been rationalised, with the arts plaza forming a

- central focus. These changes led to a reconsideration of the high level footbridge on the south east approach, which has now been abandoned.
- *Residential blocks*: these have been completely redesigned to move away from comparisons with ‘social housing’, and to provide a variety of form and materials, creating an interesting facade in a contemporary manner. The contrast of styles between residential and commercial units is seen as positive and stimulating.
 - *Sustainable development*: environmentally positive measures have been incorporated such as: reduced office depth, allowing for natural daylight and ventilation; the use of local / sustainable materials; and the provision of roof gardens as a leisure resource (which will also attenuate rainwater runoff). If CCW decide to relocate here, they would require an office building which achieves a BREEAM ‘Excellent’ rating.
 - *The drawbridge*: although this lies outside the site and the remit of the developers, its reinstatement has been identified as making a positive contribution to pedestrian use of the waterside path, and links to the castle. Consequently the WDA and Gwynedd County Council are considering providing for its reinstatement.

In terms of the progress of the planning application, an environmental statement has still to be produced. The Direction 14, imposed by the WAG on the site, could be lifted once the new proposals have been viewed, objectors consulted, and the previous application withdrawn. A decision is expected from CCW by the end of September.

Panel’s Response

The Panel welcomes the simplification and rationalisation evident in these new proposals, and the way in which sustainability issues have been addressed.

However, the differentiation between private and public space needs further resolution, particularly in the area between blocks C and D and the residential units to the north west of the site. The design strategy is to use a change of landscape or paving materials to define public / private spaces. The Panel considers that the narrow pathway between blocks C and D is redundant in view of the new layout, and the two blocks would be better treated as one. The barrier or gateway separating the arts plaza from the service area is not conducive to an expansive and inclusive public open space.

The Panel were surprised to learn that the residential component represented only 50 units, most being three-bedroom, two or three storeys. The blank ground floor facades to car parking and utility rooms of the residential blocks facing the public dockside walk, is a serious concern. An 80% car parking ratio results in a requirement for 40 parking spaces. The semi-basement option for car parking should be re-visited, with an option of lowering the whole road.

It is essential that the designers find ways of animating the interface of the residential buildings with the street, possibly by creating small private outdoor areas, raised slightly above ground level. Ground floor studios planned for the corner blocks could be extended. Extending living space into ground floor areas would need the agreement of the Environment Agency who have a possible flood risk concern for this site. The design team should ensure that as much as possible of the level immediately above the maximum flood danger level identified by the

Environment Agency is devoted to habitable space that is compatible with immediately adjacent pedestrian public realm (kitchens, living rooms studios etc).

The viability of the roof gardens was questioned although they are deemed practical by the landscape architect, and would lead to a softening of the visual impact of the development when seen from above, which will be a frequent view from the east. The likelihood of obtrusive plant or flues should be integrated into the roofscape at an early stage.

The use of Eternit panels and cedar boarding does not represent a celebration of local sustainable materials. In terms of the residential units, the roofline, fenestration and materials need further consideration.

The servicing of the retail and office units is still problematic, despite the creation of a service yard to the south, which will be visually shielded by a steep bank. The danger remains of delivery vans accessing retail units along the dockside to the south west. There is a lack of clarity about the front and back of block A in particular. Glazing on all four sides could be problematic, although it may work well for a 'market hall' or 'craft workshop' type of tenant.

Summary

This scheme has moved forwards significantly in urban design terms. The Panel still has concerns in two main areas: the relation between public and private open space; and the details of the different architectural treatments. The different parts of the scheme need to better related to the whole and greater priority given to animating the streetscape.

Nevertheless, we are impressed by the robust responses from the design team and the number of positive changes which have been made in the last few weeks. We appreciate the sequence of views generated by the revised layout, and the increased massing on the corners of the residential blocks. We recommend the removal of the passageway between blocks C and D.

In terms of our most recent recommendations, the urban grain and permeability have been greatly improved, although the nature, quality and treatment of the space between residential and commercial blocks is still problematic. Our concern about the public square has been addressed and the re-design of the residential blocks represents progress in the right direction. Sustainability measures have been incorporated and we are delighted that the reinstatement of the drawbridge appears likely.

The panel considers that, subject to the comments above, the disposition and bulk of buildings and the proposed uses, together with the overall public realm strategy, is a suitable basis for the submission of a planning application. The Panel strongly recommends that the planning authority require the agent to reconsider the three-dimensional arrangement of the housing with respect to the relationship with the public realm and to provide comprehensive drawings showing external materials and detailing of the whole scheme.

End

NB
A Welsh language copy of this report is available upon request.