

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru	Design Commission for Wales
Design Review Report:	14 October 2004
Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	7 October 2004
Location:	Eagles Meadow, Wrexham
Scheme Description:	Mixed use, mainly retail
Architects / Design Team:	Bernard Engle Architects
Wieszyczycki]	[Natasha Higham; Chris
Developers:	Wilson Bowden
	[Will Robinson; David Ward]
Public/Other Body:	Wrexham County Borough Council
	[Bob Dewey, Tim Mc Coughlin,
	Rebecca Lowry, Isabel Watson]
	WDA [Imogen Sheriff]
Planning Status:	Pre-planning
Panel Members:	
Alan Francis (Chair)	Nick Davies
Cindy Harris (Officer)	Ed Colgan
Lyn Owen	

Presentation:

These proposals are for a high quality, mixed use scheme which will be retail-led but will include leisure and residential uses. The site is currently in use as a car park bisected by an elevated ring road. The developers intend to take a long lease on the site with Wrexham CBC retaining the freehold. A detailed planning application will be submitted in December 2004.

The proposals involve re-routing the Wrexham ring road to the east in order to form a larger unified site. Ground levels are generally lower than those of existing buildings to the west and north west, and to streets to the north east and east. They fall to the level of the streets to the south. Surrounding development to the north, east and south is dominated by large freestanding retail and bingo units of undistinguished design quality. These issues of level and surroundings present challenges to producing a design integrating with the existing townscape and street pattern.

To overcome the issue of levels it is proposed to develop two extensive floors of car parking and storage across the base and first storey of the scheme. These would be accessed from a roundabout on the ring road to the south and from a one-way link from Yorke Street. About 1000 car parking spaces would be provided, an increase of about 300 on current levels, to include provision for long stay, shopping and residential.

Above the parking decks, the design builds on Wrexham's history as a market town and the desire to attract and provide for a busy street life and maintain linkages with the town. An elevated pedestrian link from Yorke Street establishes views back to St Giles church from the newly created and appropriately named Church View Square - an 'urban piazza'. On the southern edge of site there will be a feature entrance incorporating 'Spanish steps'. Leisure uses to the east will include a bowling rink, restaurants and possibly a cinema. The tower over the entrance to the department store will be a focal point of the scheme, though it is acknowledged that the rear façades of the retail blocks present a greater challenge.

Panel's Response

The panel welcomes the concept of a large scale mixed use scheme at this location and the prospect that it should be linked to and reinforce the existing town centre.

We explored the proposed link with Yorke Street as a possible 'pinch point', and were told that more radical solutions had been considered. Ideally the link needs to be stronger and to this end the developers have acquired a building on the east side of Yorke Street and are negotiating for others including the hotel to the north. An expanded stronger link at this point is not seen as necessary by the developers, as the new development will be an attraction in its own right, but it may be necessary if the town itself is not to suffer.

This appears inevitably to be an inward-looking scheme and the treatment of the perimeter is therefore important. The quality of materials and detailing will have a significant impact on the success of the finished product.

The successful permeability and flows across the site will depend on whether desire lines are clear through to main attractors such as the Department Store, leisure facilities and site entrances. Open spaces should be designed so that they did not include visual blocks to the routes through. Developing the view of St Giles Tower from public spaces and the residential units is an asset. Some frontages to the retail units appear to be very narrow in relation to the internal space. The Spanish Steps entrance is an attractive and innovative feature but overlooks the ring road and roundabout car park entrance, although adjacent uses outside the site to the South may in time be upgraded so that the feature has a better context. The residential units at the west end of the site will help maintain 24 hour activity and the scale of the site suggests that it could accommodate more residential units. The potential for a residential element to the east of the site would improve activity and security outside shopping hours and have the potential to produce an additional and taller residential block which could produce a more varied roofscape.

The existing number of parking spaces will be increased and a section of the car park will be dedicated to long-stay use during business hours, reverting to short-stay shopper spaces at other times. A Car Parking Management Agreement with the Council will govern use, pricing, operation and management. Any future reduction of long stay spaces would depend on Council policy changes, although discussion is moving towards less car dependency and 'park and ride' schemes are being considered elsewhere in the town. Public transport provision will be supported by the development of bus stops on the northern edge of the site.

Summary

The panel supports the redevelopment of this brownfield, edge-of-town-centre site for a mix of uses. In particular:

- We urge provision be made for a stronger connectivity between this development and the rest of the town and particularly one which avoids problematic suspended access walkways and balconies.
- We would like to see the residential use maximised, possibly extending to the east of site, if this could be done without compromising the employment potential.
- We think the density of residential units could be greater and the built form could be higher, provided this occurred in specific locations to the benefit of the townscape.
- We would prefer a more varied roof form, especially with regard to the massing of the perimeter blocks.
- Clear routes through the development should be established, reflecting desire lines and avoiding visual blocks.
- High quality, durable materials should be specified and the quality of the detailing should be given high priority
- Effective management of the car park should be established, in order to ensure safety and security.
- We suggest a review of the functions of the 'left over' green spaces to the rear of the retail blocks adjoining the ring road, with a view to bringing the rear elevations of the blocks closer to the road.
- Finally, we would urge that this development incorporates "a little bit of Wrexham". Initial sketches suggest the predominant use of contemporary large format cladding panels, whereas the bulk of the historic centre of Wrexham has a quite finite character and human scale, which bears no relation to this. A detailed study of the architectural quality and typical detailing of the existing townscape would provide a very useful reference point to the new development.

End