DESIGN COMMISSION FOR WALES
COMISIWN DYLUNIO CYMRU

Design Review Report:	**16 November 2004**
Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	**3 November 2004**
Location:	**Willowtown, Ebbw Vale**
Scheme Description:	**Primary school**
Architects / Design Team:	**Blaenau Gwent CBC [Jim Allen]**
Client:	**Blaenau Gwent CBC [John Howells]**
Public/Other Body:	**Blaenau Gwent CBC**
Planning Status:	**Pre-planning.**
Date of detailed application, if known:	

Design Review Panel:

John Punter (chair)	**Paul Vanner**
Cindy Harris (officer)	**Ed Colgan**
Howard Wainwright	**Douglas Hogg**
Nigel Hansen	

Presentation

This proposal is for a new primary school which will amalgamate and replace smaller schools. The site, formerly a brickworks, is on an open playing field adjacent to the old town school. The immediate environment is congested with a complex road pattern and terraced houses typical of the South Wales valleys to the north. Consequently, the only practical means of access to the site is from the north east, which is not ideal. The site is generally elevated compared to its surrounding and slopes from east to west, within a north facing 'bowl'. The access road continues round to the south side of the building to a car park, drop-off point and turning circle. Community parking is provided on the north side. Recycling bins are recessed into the southern slope.

The approach to the building is contemporary, reflecting the modernising agenda of the borough. A single overarching roof and industrial shed type construction provides the envelope and lends itself to a rapid and cost-limited construction programme. Under this roof the different spaces of the school are disposed along a central daylit corridor or 'internal street', and expressed in the elevations as distinct components, breaking up the scale of the building and making it much more user friendly. The building is designed to be naturally ventilated.

Panel's response

The layout of the approach road and position of the building are largely determined by the topography of the site. Unfortunately this has the effect of pushing the building too close to the slope to the south, thereby shading the main play areas for a substantial part of the year. One solution would be to move the building further to the north, but then it would dominate neighbouring houses. There is a possibility of the local authority acquiring an adjoining piece of land to the south west, which would enlarge play areas and provide a better aspect. Traffic penetration could be stopped at the roundabout at the west end of the building and parking restricted to the north side, thereby freeing up space on the sheltered and sunny side of the building for children's play and socialising.

The panel welcomed the design approach, and the industrial aesthetic even though an industrial building style is not easily reconciled with educational functions, especially for younger children. The simple curved roof unifies the building while the elevations are carefully handled to humanise the scale and express the different functions within in a quite playful way. The bold use of colour and simple shapes that will appeal to young children works well and is consistent with the contemporary approach to the architecture.

The panel also applauded the energy conscious approach to the design. The environmental control of the building will be natural and accessible. An initial SEAM assessment (Energy Assessment Method for Schools) has been carried out and the current scheme is just a few points away from reaching the best score. The north facing 'brise soleil' shown in the plan will be removed.

The building could usefully be reduced in height by, say, 1.5 metres to minimise its local impact and make it seem more in scale with its surroundings. The requirements for extra height in the sports hall (community use for badminton) should not drive the whole design and scale (and cost) of the building.

The panel wishes to see the developers explore all possible means to encourage alternative transport methods, particularly as there will be an increased catchment area leading to greater travelling distances. There is an opportunity here to work with the 'safe routes to school' programme. Provision for cyclists, including lock-up spaces and showers, is an important part of this approach. There are unfortunately no bus routes to the site. The present drop-off arrangement to the south is unsatisfactory and we would strongly advocate a re-working of the access road and parking arrangements.

Summary

The drawings we were presented with had much artistic merit, but were not fully labelled and thus not easily comprehensible. In particular we found the lack of a contextual site plan and site sections made it very difficult to understand the design imperatives. This should be addressed in the detailed planning application.

In summary we would make the following points:

- Car parking should be kept away from the rear/south side of the building. The drop-off point for pupils should be re-located to the north side of the school and the pathways to the entrances re-thought.
- Better use should be made of the orientation of the building and the outdoor spaces, particularly to the south.

- We would like to see the parcel of land to the south west incorporated into the development as play / amenity space and well landscaped.
- The landscaping strategy should be integrated into the overall design at an early stage. Landscape architects should be involved in improving the access / parking arrangements.
- Specific measures to encourage cycling, walking and car-sharing should be prioritised
- A reduced height to the building would lessen its immediate local impact, especially as it is built on raised ground
- We applaud the design approach and the modern, non-domestic aesthetic. Any future value engineering exercise should not be allowed to detract from the variety of elevational treatments.
- We endorse the suggested palette of materials of terracotta, brickwork and render, used non-traditionally, and the bold use of colour.

The Panel would be happy to comment further on any detailed planning application.

End

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