

# Addroddiad Adolygu Dylunio Design Review Report

## Review Status: **Public**

Meeting date:	19th May 2010
Issue Date:	2nd June 2010
Scheme Location:	near Chirk, Wrexham
Scheme Description:	Leisure
Planning Status:	Pre-application

## Part1: Presentation

This proposal is for a dragon sculpture and cultural centre set in a landscaped park adjacent to the A5 near Chirk, at the gateway into Wales from the north. The site – a former colliery – divides into two plateaux. The lower one will be used for car parking and the upper one will accommodate the tower and statue, cultural centre and landscaped park. Native woodland planting will be used on the access route between the two plateaux and around the edges of the upper plateau to create clearings for outdoor activities and woodland walks. A double avenue of oaks offset around the statue will be allowed to grow to full maturity. Permeable paving will be used throughout and earth embankments will mitigate traffic noise.

The bronze dragon is intended to be a true representation of the emblem on the Welsh flag and will be placed on a 40m high tower which houses stairs and lifts. The dragon will face southwards, dominating views on the main approach, and the glazed entrance to the cultural centre allows views through to the central space. The client stated that they have taken inspiration from the Statue of Liberty, rather than from the Angel of the North.

The project will achieve BREEAM Very Good as a minimum. The tower will be heated and ventilated naturally, and the cultural centre will incorporate a ground source heat pump, MVHR and rainwater harvesting.

No comment has been received from the Local Authority in response to several DCFW approaches.

## **Summary of key points arising from discussion, to be read in conjunction with Part 2 of this report.**

The Panel was impressed by the quality and commitment of the team, the charitable aims of the scheme, and the serious effort that has gone into the project and into this presentation. There could be obvious benefits for the local economy, employment and tourist strategy if this project is successfully realised. We think the landscaped park is well conceived, the parking is well separated, and the landscape and planting strategy could create attractive amenity spaces.

However, we are deeply sceptical about the 'iconic' nature of the project, its appropriateness as a cultural statement in contemporary Wales, and its wider landscape impact. For these reasons we think the proposal is fundamentally flawed. Furthermore:

- We have concerns about the relationship between the dragon and the tower and suggest that they should be designed by the same team, as a single work.
- We appreciate the complex engineering and structural issues involved in the dragon statue but we question the positioning of the dragon on the plinth.
- We think that a more open process of commissioning the artwork as a complete piece from the ground up, such as a recognised process of open commission and selection in line with recognised best practice, would carry more validity in terms of cultural reference and public consent and involvement.
- We urge the team to commit to BREEAM Excellent for the main building.
- Views to and from the statue should be included in the planning application and all written material should be bilingual.
- The idea and appropriateness of an 'iconic' structure such as this needs to be tested more thoroughly

## **Part 2: Discussion and Panel Response in Full**

The site selection criteria included the desire for a gateway site. The Panel raised the possibility of a dedicated access to the site, avoiding a MacDonaldis restaurant, but we were told that improvement to the existing roundabout was envisaged as part of this project. There is a possibility of obtaining the adjacent site to the north west which the client would like to use as a learning centre.

The Panel understood that the site has fallen out of specific plan designations, and is now deemed unviable for employment, which was its previous designated use. In the absence of direct contact between DCFW and the Local Authority, the project team stated that both the planning and regeneration departments have been generally supportive, and political support has been noted in a variety of press and public platforms. It was noted that the Council as landowners are concerned to maintain their impartiality through the planning process.

The business plan for this project suggests a total of 230,000 visitors a year after 3 years of operation. The deliverability of the scheme will depend on the success of fundraising and sponsorship efforts. However, the financial model for the whole project works purely on debt and payback. Ideally, the development would be completed in time for the National

Eisteddford in Wrexham in August 2011, but a more realistic date for completion would be the end of 2011.

The car park and outer areas of the site will be free to enter. There will be space for 400 cars in the lower car park while a dedicated drop off space will be provided closer to the tower for elderly and disabled. The use of electric cars/train is being considered to transport visitors the 400-500m distance and 5m change in level up to the base of the tower.

The Panel thought that the relationship between the dragon and the tower was clumsy and would be improved if both elements were designed in tandem by the same team as a single artwork. The architectural treatment of the visitor centre building is undistinguished, and its bulk will not be disguised by earth mounding. The team stated that it was not intended to create a low key building, but that both the building and the tower should be subservient to the dragon. The Panel thought that a stronger architectural concept might help resolve the contradictions. It was confirmed that solar shading to the south facade – using opaque glass fins and solar control glass - had been modelled.

The Panel commended the passion, vision and energy used to drive the project so far, and noted the degree of public support signalled by the team, although DCFW has no knowledge of how wide that consultation extends. In addition, the invitation to buy in to the project in the form of sponsorship may help to widen the support base. However, we thought that the project would benefit from a more open procurement process, and that this would sit well with the democratically accountable nature of the planning process.

A recognised process of open advertisement, interview and selection, in line with recognised precedent and practice, would increase the project's legitimacy and claim to be a national 'icon'. Such a process would have allowed for professional artists with experience of working at this scale in the public domain to have provoked more imaginative responses. This process would also have encouraged experienced local, national and international artists to come forward. The custodial tradition is important, but could still be open to a modern re-interpretation.

The Panel understood that it was the prerogative of the private developer to put forward a scheme for planning approval, but we were not convinced by the argument that anything other than a faithful representation of the dragon would mean a national re-branding exercise. The risk inherent in the approach adopted is that an emblem which arouses such passion and pride could be undermined if the project is not executed to the highest possible quality, both in terms of the park and the dragon as its focal point.

The BREEAM pre-assessment currently shows a score of 70% and with this in mind we encouraged the team to commit to a BREEAM Excellent rating, and to consider the financial returns available from investing in renewable energy systems, via the feed-in tariff.

Material to support the planning application should include simulated views from the tower, and views of the dragon from surrounding vantage points to be determined by the planning authority. All written material relating to this project should be bilingual.

**The Design Commission for Wales Design Review Panel and staff welcome further consultation and will be happy to provide further feedback on this report and/or where appropriate, to receive further presentations. Thank you for consulting the Commission and please keep in touch with us about the progress of your project.**

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

## **Appendix 1: Attendees**

Asiant/Client/Datblygwr: Agent/Client/Developer	The Frank Wingett Cancer Appeal [Simon Wingett]
Pensaer/Architect:	TACP [Matthew Gregory, Luci Clark]
Consultants:	Gifford LLP [Chros Rhodes] Pochin Construction Ltd [John Rayner]
Awdurdod Cynllunio/ Planning Authority	Wrexham CBC
Y Panel Adlygu Dylunio: Design Review panel: John Punter [Chair] Cindy Harris [Officer] Carole-Anne Davies [CEO] Toby Adam	Kedrick Davies Phil Roberts Chris Jones David Harvey
Lead Panellist:	Chris Jones
Sylwedyddion/Observers:	n/a