

Design Review Report

St Mary's Student Accommodation,
Bangor, Gwynedd
21st January 2014



Declarations of Interest

Panel members, observers and other relevant parties are required to declare **in advance** any interests they may have in relation to the Design Review Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

Review Status

CONFIDENTIAL

Meeting date	21 st January 2014
Issue date	4 th February 2014
Scheme location	Bangor, Gwynedd
Scheme description	Student accommodation
Scheme reference number	30
Planning status	Pre-application

Declarations of Interest

None declared.

Consultations to Date

Pre-application discussions have taken place with Gwynedd planning officers.

The Proposals

Bangor University intends to develop this former teacher training college on an elevated site to the south of the city. Accommodation for over 500 students will be provided in two converted buildings and five substantial new blocks with a split-level 'street' connecting them. The majority of buildings on the site are derelict. The steep escarpments that surround the site to the north and west are densely wooded, limiting potential views north to the city and also views of the buildings from outside. The site slopes more gently to the south onto scrubland, with a golf course to the east. The place feels isolated, although it is within walking distance of the city centre.

Summary

- Evolution of the site layout, massing and density could be better explained to give confidence that the best arrangement has been achieved.
- For the split level 'street' to become the bustling, social place that is desired, there must be a high density of activity located along its length, including a destination at the far end. The architects and landscape architects should work together to achieve this.
- The elevations and roofscapes should be refined and sophisticated, taking into account views along the 'street' and looking into the site from higher ground.

- Really good specification of materials and careful detailing are now required to achieve a high quality scheme.
- The presentation model is very helpful for explaining the scheme in the context.

Main Points in Detail

To be of most value, Design Review should first take place at an early stage of a project when there is more scope to inform the design process. This project is at an advanced stage, where the major design decisions have already been made, and there is limited opportunity for the review to influence the design.

Site Layout, Massing and Density

The architects have been working closely with the University's Estates department in planning the layout and size of the accommodation blocks, and the clusters and arrangement of rooms and social spaces. Drawing on lessons learnt from existing accommodation and feedback from students should improve the outcome of this proposal.

It would have been good to see how the massing and layout of the proposal had been developed by the architects, and how they tested different options on the site. For example: is there an alternative to the finger blocks and was a courtyard solution, as adopted in the original building, ever considered? This would give confidence that the best arrangement of building footprint and height has been achieved.

For cost reasons, there is obviously a desire to fit as many rooms as possible onto the site; and the maximum heights have been dictated by the ridge height of existing buildings. However, the same density might be achieved by increasing the height in places and reducing footprint areas accordingly, giving more space at ground level, and consequently more options for placement of the blocks. From the material presented at the review, it does not appear that these options have been fully explored.

A linear double banked corridor arrangement, which avoids corners, may provide an economically logical arrangement. The panel was not convinced that the arrangement also provides students with comfortable, pleasant places to live and study, with the right balance of attractive private, social and communal areas.

The split level 'street' running through the scheme is intended to be a social space in which students meet, gather and interact. To make sure that this happens, there needs to be a high density of active spaces and uses facing onto the street. The 'destination' at the end of the street needs to be better considered to encourage use of the full length of the street. The team should think about how often an outdoor amphitheatre in this shaded location would really be used. Any opportunities for activating the long blank retaining wall under the raised level of the street should be explored.

Spaces between the buildings must be well planned and designed, ensuring the right mix of communal and semi-private space with convenient access for pedestrians and cycles, including the proposed 'Bangor Bikes'.

Elevations and Roofscape

The repetitive nature of student housing makes design of the elevations a particular challenge. The design team should ensure that the window positioning and designs are refined as much as possible and quality materials excellently detailed to achieve sophisticated elevations that compare favourably with those of the buildings to be retained.

As the site sits on a steep hillside, any views of the roofscape from above should be carefully considered. In particular, the material used to cover the large flat roofs of the finger blocks will have a significant impact.

Views of the roof lines along the new 'street' are also important. The design should ensure that the new roof forms sit comfortably alongside each other and those of the existing buildings.

Materials and Detailing

The proposed predominant use of brick, if well specified and detailed, should provide long-lasting easily maintained building envelopes.

Render is less likely to be successful on this site, which is surrounded by trees and has a wet climate. If it is used it must be carefully detailed to minimise staining, and the university must be aware of the cost of regular repainting. The cores at the ends of the finger blocks will make an important contribution to the 'streetscape', so the quality, durability and appearance of the cladding materials used must be well thought through.

The materials and detail design of the split-level street will influence the quality of this significant element of the proposal, and help to ensure that this route becomes a pleasant, safe and attractive place for students to use.

The quality of external spaces, and the close integration of landscape design with built form, particularly where there are significant level changes as in the split level street, are essential to the success of this project. The landscape architects needs to work closely with the architects to ensure that this integration is achieved.

Presentation

The physical model is extremely helpful in understanding how the building forms sit in their surroundings on this steeply sloping site. The architects can be praised for providing this.

The photo-realistic perspective view of the street gives a false impression of the scale of the level change, making the drop appear larger than is proposed.

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

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer: Derwyn Owen, Bangor University Estates & Facilities
Chris Allen, Vinci Construction

Architectural/Urban Designer: Andrew Kane, Faulkner Brown Architects
Geraint John, GJ Planning
Warren Chapman, Landscape Architect, Gillespies

Planning Authority: Glyn Gruffudd, Gwynedd CC

Design Review Panel:
Chair Richard Parnaby
Lead Panellist Angela Williams
Michael Griffiths
Amanda Spence, Design Advisor, DCFW

Observing: