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Meeting Report

Maritime Centre, Porthcawl

DCFW Ref: N158

Meeting of 27th March 2018



Review Status

Meeting date
Issue date
Scheme location
Scheme description
Scheme reference number
Planning status

PUBLIC

27th March 2018
10th April 2018
Porthcawl
Mixed use
N158
Section 73 application

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 and meeting Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

None declared.

Meeting Purpose

This meeting provided a follow up to the Design Review meeting which took at DCFW on 15th February 2018. At the Design Review several concerns with the design quality of the proposed scheme were expressed and the team were encouraged to return with an amended proposal. This report sets out the key points of the discussion which took place during the meeting, and should be read alongside our report from the previous review which can found here: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/dcfw-cdn/158-Maritime-Centre-Porthcawl-DR-Report-Feb-18.pdf>

Main Points

The Commission welcomed the opportunity to review this scheme again because we are keen to see that this ambitious project in this important location is successful and the best it can be. However, whilst the dialogue was constructive and the team fully engaged, we remain seriously concerned about the quality and feasibility of the proposals. With a planning application submitted and funding time constraints adding further pressure, it is worrying that solutions to major problems and critical design factors are being sought so late in the day.

The project is supported by significant public investment from the Welsh Government, European funds and The Big Lottery. It is, therefore, important that the Design Commission scrutinises the design quality to ensure the highest levels of public value can be achieved. We are not concerned solely with the appearance of the building, but with testing the design strategies employed and seeking evidence to answer the question, 'why is it like that?'. Having objectively reviewed the scheme on two occasions, it is our view that the current proposal, or a version of it, would not deliver the quality demanded of the site, the community and user groups and the level of public investment being made.

Pre-Planning Design Processes

The Commission knows that the briefing and design processes which lead up to submission of a planning application are crucial for achieving design quality. A number of key stages and activities form part of this iterative process, including:

- Developing a sound brief and business plan
- Informative site and context analysis
- Strategic design
- Inter-disciplinary problem solving
- Iterative modelling and testing (including environmental)
- Cost planning

In this case, there appear to be significant gaps in the pre-planning design process which means that strategic issues remain unresolved. This increases the risks associated with developing the scheme and there is a significant danger that the project will not be deliverable or that quality and function will be significantly compromised.

Investing in Design Time and Skills

The project has a complex brief with a wide mix of uses and requirements to be housed in one building. Achieving a quality outcome will require proper investment in design time and a skilled multi-disciplinary design team to tackle this design challenge. Short-cutting the design stage stores up problems and results in unplanned expense later in the project. This is evident in the manner in which the project has come to the Commission so late and with so many unresolved issues. The different members of the design team, including architect, landscape architect, M&E/environmental engineers and cost consultants must work together closely to resolve the complex, interrelated issues which directly affect the ability for the project to meet its objectives. The unanticipated overspend and environmental performance results of the previous scheme, along with the many major issues which are still unresolved, demonstrate that a proper and systematic design process has not been carried out.

Whilst the architectural designer's passion, enthusiasm and ambition for the project as a building and community facility are extremely admirable, there is also a close personal attachment to the project – as client and end user – which may be contributing to a failure to take a fully objective approach to the design process.

Informative Site and Context Analysis

As discussed at the review in February, a thorough analysis of the site and context is required, and should be shown to inform strategic design decisions including those relating to routes, views, entrances, servicing, circulation, response to heritage and the environmental strategy. Site analysis should provide evidence to justify the architectural approach and any design changes. Analysis should help establish and prioritise a framework and a set of rules and ideas which guide the design process and result in a better building. This analysis should be evident in the Design and Access Statement and communicated succinctly and diagrammatically.

There is a concerning lack of evidence in the design outcomes that a proper, informative site and context analysis has been incorporated. Site analysis may have been undertaken and not presented at the review and this meeting. However, it is not enough to retrofit the analysis to the latest proposal. The analysis must be informative and lead to better, logical and justifiable solutions.

Strategic Design and Concept

The Commission is particularly worried at the lack of strategic approach in the design process. This is highlighted by the desire to rush to draw elevations and floor plans without first considering strategies and resolving fundamental issues including:

- Arrival and circulation
- Environmental design, comfort and sustainability
- Fire escape

The design process is also suffering from a lack of a single clear architectural idea or concept. This would help guide design decision and strengthen the justification for a proposal.

Legibility and Circulation

The two entrances proposed confuse the legibility of the building from the outside (as well as increasing staff and resource demands). Further exploration is required to achieve a legible and effective solution to address the level changes and multiple approach routes.

The entrance strategy should align with an internal circulation strategy which makes the different uses easy to locate and the navigation of the building intuitive. The proposal presented at the meeting involved long circulation corridors. The designer mentioned ideas about providing gallery space in the circulation spaces, but for this to be successful, the routes need to be of a generous width with spaces to stop, gather and reflect. Based on the material presented to us, the proposed corridors are narrow, dark and lined with doors to offices and toilets. To encourage people to circulate along a route, an attractive 'destination' is required at the end of it – the current material shows no design solution that would support anything beyond a perfunctory corridor. The stated ambition for the use of the space is therefore not borne out.

Swimming Pool Design

The training swimming pool will be a major part of the investment of the project, so it is important that its design allows it to function well and achieve good value for money. It should be designed to be comfortable and attractive, and to maximise usability by the variety of groups and organisations involved in the project.

The currently proposed south-facing position within the building is likely to create problems with overheating and glare. The length of the pool (16m) will restrict the range of functions and activities it can be used for, and it is not clear exactly which end user is being catered for in the current pool proposal. All stakeholders and investors in the project should be clear about the specification and limitations of the proposed pool.

Character and Materials

The approach to character and materials should form part of the architectural narrative and should take into account a clear response to heritage, context, building functions and the client's vision for the project, articulated in the brief. There is no right approach to character but the chosen approach should be well justified and executed with conviction.

Materials should be selected to reflect the architectural narrative (heavy, light, solid, timeless, delicate, robust...) and should be appropriate for the extreme weathering conditions in this location.

Post-planning process

If and when a planning permission is granted, there are a number of issues and risks which could prevent a good quality, successful scheme being delivered. These include:

- Compliance with Building Regulations
- Achieving good environmental performance
- Cost planning and viability
- Procurement routes
- Operation and maintenance

It is, therefore, important that these issues are considered and risks managed before the planning application is finalised.

Building Regulations

It is crucial that the design strategies on which the scheme is built at planning stage will be able to comply with building regulations, otherwise the project will not be deliverable.

We are particularly concerned about the approach to Part B – Fire Safety. The overnight accommodation in the building presents a high level of risk if a fire was to break out because occupants may be asleep and unfamiliar with the building layout. We are alarmed that the floor plans presented at this meeting did not appear to provide appropriate means of escape from many of the bedrooms. The positioning of both staircases in close proximity to each other creates long egress routes in one direction. Escape routes along balconies, as proposed, should be avoided due to the very expensive glazing specification that would be required to make this a realistic option, which would have a significant impact on capital and maintenance costs. The Design Commission is profoundly concerned about the inadequacy of approach to fire safety in the current material.

Environmental Performance

There is still no clear environmental strategy for the building. The re-orientation of the building along an east-west axis provides opportunities to maximise use of solar energy. However, care must be taken to ensure that south facing rooms will not overheat and that north facing rooms are not cold and unpleasant to occupy due to the lack of delight that comes with sunlight. In a building of this scale and nature, most of the rooms should not need air conditioning which is costly in financial and energy terms. Revenue costs should be considered for the lifetime of the project and energy will be an expensive commodity in the revenue mix.

The proposal to use the stair as a solar stack for heat recovery does not seem practicable or logical. It would require a large amount of ductwork and extensive glazing to the stair shaft, all of which would add significant cost and complexity and could outweigh the benefits. Capacity for such work is not shown in the current material. A high performance thermal envelope might be a more cost-effective way to reduce resource consumption and improve carbon performance as well as maintenance and running costs.

Again, we urge the team to carry out the requisite informative environmental modelling and testing before the form, orientation, layout and fenestration are fixed by planning consent.

Procurement and design quality

The Design and Build procurement route cannot be relied upon as a method of securing or enhancing design quality. Whilst the input of the contractor may help to improve 'buildability', design quality is unlikely to be a priority as the client will not have a direct contractual relationship with the contractor's architects and design team. Essential elements of the design need to be identified and protected. Clear Employer's Requirements, which lock in design quality and architectural vision will be crucial to the delivery of the building which the clients have an ambition to achieve. The quality of the planning-stage design will be important in this respect. The Design and Build contractor's architect is not usually expected to undertake a complete redesign, so it is important that the right design skills are employed before embarking on a Design and Build procurement process.

Operation and Maintenance

The long term running and maintenance of the building and grounds will be a true test of its success. Design strategies (including environmental design) and building planning need to align with a robust and viable business plan. The Commission currently has several concerns in this respect. In particular:

- Staffing requirements and working environment
- Viability of two cafes plus a restaurant
- Viability of a top floor restaurant with a convoluted access route and which is not visible from the street
- Running costs associated with energy demand
- Maintenance costs, particularly in relation to weathering in a marine environment

Phase Two

Towards the end of the meeting it was revealed that a second phase of development is planned which includes a separate café/micro-brewery building and an events structure. This raises several additional concerns, including:

- Capital cost and viability of a separate cafe/micro-brewery building
- Duplication of uses
- Relationship of additional buildings to the main building, pedestrian routes and outside spaces
- Overshadowing of external spaces by the separate building
- Obstruction of important views to and from the main building, especially from the café
- Alignment with the business plan

The Client and the Local Authority have a great deal to consider and the Authority also has duties upon it including the Equality Duty, the Well-being of Future Generations Act, regulatory compliance such as with Building Regulations and the use of public funds to maximise public value. National Planning Policy also sets out the need for good design quality which supports sustainable development and efficient use of energy and resources. Whilst the concept for this project is in many ways commendable, based on the information available to us, the Commission is unable to support the current proposals for realising it. We also question further the Phase Two proposals that have previously gone unmentioned in our discussions. We therefore remain profoundly concerned about the project.

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

Attendees

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