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Design Review Report

Townhill Campus, Swansea

DCFW Ref: N168

Meeting of 14th June 2018



Review Status

Meeting date	CONFIDENTIAL 14 th June 2018
Issue date	27 th June 2018
Scheme location	Swansea
Scheme description	Residential
Scheme reference number	N168
Planning status	Pre-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.

Elfed Roberts was part of the presenting team in his role with POBL. Steve Smith was representing Swansea Council's planning department. Both Elfed and Steve sit on the Design Review Panel. All present were happy to proceed following the declarations.

Consultations to Date

Pre-application consultation with the local planning authority is underway.

The Proposals

This project consists of the redevelopment of the former Townhill Campus site, which is to be vacated by University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWSTD) to provide 150 new dwellings, together with a small convenience store and some public open space. It is proposed that all existing buildings on the site are demolished with the exception of the main four-storey southern flank of the Edwardian Training College Building. The site is set within a largely residential area but is bounded by woodland to the east. The site slopes steeply from north to south, with the upper levels of the site affording excellent views to the south over Swansea Bay.

The scheme is premised on a series of straight, predominantly 2-storey terraces, chiefly maintaining the same alignment as the retained portion of the Edwardian Training College Building. An upper plateau is created with the northernmost terrace set an oblique angle following the line of the site boundary to create a triangular area of open space with a shorter north-south aligned terrace forming its eastern edge. To the west, at the main vehicular entrance into the site, a convenience store is positioned with two storeys of apartments above. A lower plateau, south of the retained Training College Building has a more regular arrangement of two terraces, both with entrances from the south side. The Training Centre itself retains only its main southern-most wing with its northern side infilled with new-build accommodation for smaller apartments.

Main Points

The Commission welcomed consultation on the scheme at an early stage when there is scope for constructive dialogue to enhance design quality. The following points summarise key issues from the review and should be considered to inform any further design work:

Informed response to context and topography

To get the best value from this unique site with its important historic building, the design process should be informed by detailed analysis of the site and context.

DCFW's guide for Welsh Government, Site and Context Analysis: Capturing the Value of Site, can be found here:

<https://gov.wales/topics/planning/policy/guidanceandleaflets/site-and-context-analysis-guide/?lang=en>

Most of the drawings and the 3D model showed the site in isolation, whereas it would help the design team relate better to the context if it was always included in drawings and other design studies. Site sections are essential for achieving good design on this steeply sloping site but little sectional information was presented

Clear site strategy diagrams which set out the rationale for the following, in response the site and context analysis, would be useful:

- Capturing the valuable views over the bay
- Routes and connections
- Layout of the top and bottom areas of the site
- A strategy for fronts, backs, privacy and views
- Definition of edges and ends
- Purposeful landscape and open space

It would be useful to look at exemplary modern architectural precedents for housing which successfully deals with similar topography.

The relationship of the straight runs of housing to the parkland type landscape at the south end of the site could be dealt with more sensitively to get the most value from the landscape. Whilst the building terraces designs had been developed the types and character of spaces being created between them was less defined. With differences between the upper and lower groups of terraces being explored, this should be reflected in clearly defined landscape character. For example, could the lower group become more informal to adapt to the tree-filled landscape or be a formal courtyard facing the formal front of the retained building? Clear, bold decisions about character would help inform further design development.

The rationale for referencing the local Edwardian and Victorian architecture in some of the new housing is unclear and applied pastiche details should be avoided as they are likely to add cost but not value. Analysis of the older buildings using photos leads to a response which is about the visual rather than the functional. It may be more valuable for the forms of the new housing to be derived from a response to the topography of the site and the desire for views, or in response to an environmental design strategy.

Strategic approach to layout and landscape

Routes through the site and connecting to surrounding communities and nearby facilities are important. Walking and cycle routes should be designed to be convenient and feel safe, and should consider the local Active Travel Plan.

Routes and landscape design offer opportunities to connect to the surroundings. Including a landscaped pedestrian route through the site from top to bottom might be foundational to the design approach.

The Commission strongly encourages the team to challenge the local authority's parking standards which seem excessive for this site and contradict obligations under the Well-being of Future Generations Act. It would be better to reduce the dominance of cars in the street and provide more open space for everyone to enjoy.

A long term management strategy for the landscape and public realm should be considered at an early stage, including whether it is beneficial for all or only some roads to be adopted.

The design and alignment of the convenience store within its site is a weakness and needs further thought to integrate it with the site and surroundings.

Justified demolition and reuse strategy

The Commission would like to see a justified strategy for the demolition and reuse of the existing buildings on the site. It should be demonstrated that different options have been meaningfully tested and appraised. For example, there may be value in reusing the five-storey block for residential use.

A clear and rational approach to reuse and partial demolition of the Edwardian buildings will be important. Adapting and extending the building should give consideration to providing comfortable homes which promote well-being and a sense of community. There is value in retaining old buildings to automatically add character to the development, and this aspect should be appraised. The main Edwardian building makes sense of the rest of the site and landscape, and its future relationships with new buildings and landscape should be thoughtfully planned.

Privacy hierarchy, views and comfort

A hierarchy of privacy, from public street to threshold to private space should be considered and needs to work with the topography of the site and issues of overlooking, whilst making the most of the available views. Closely linked to this, every dwelling should provide a comfortable place to live, with single-aspect apartments avoided.

Almost all of the terraces are north-south facing: opportunities for more east-west orientation to improve daylight and sunlight penetration should be considered. apartments currently shown in the new build addition to the Edwardian block which are north-facing only should be reconsidered. Testing for daylight, sunlight, and thermal comfort during the early design process is important.

The consistent use of east-west linear terraces creates many 'end conditions'. The end units should be considered special and not simply a slice through the terrace – the retained building shows one of many ways that the 'ends' could be special.

Leaving a legacy, creating a community

The presenting team expressed an ambition to leave a good legacy and create a new community on the site. To achieve this, it would be useful to understand the story of the site up to this point, before thinking about how the story will unfold in the future. Creating a narrative will help inform the design process and justify decisions. The story should consider social, economic, cultural and community themes.

Overall, the scheme would benefit from simplification and better justification to answer the question, 'why is it like that?'.

Innovation and energy

The team expressed a desire to apply an 'Active Homes' principle, and potentially test this through the Welsh Government's Innovative Housing Programme. The principle should be used alongside a wider energy and environmental design strategy which considers passive design principles, comfort and placemaking. This may have a valuable impact on house form, orientation and site layout.

Time for good design and value

The Design Commission is supportive of the principle of development of this site, but believes that more time is required to get the design right and achieve the best value from the site. A phased approach and meanwhile uses could be explored to allow this to happen. A hybrid planning application may be beneficial, but it will be important to get all the strategic issues right before this is submitted. The team was invited to move through the next steps informed by the day's dialogue and return with strategic considerations. They may also wish to include significant stakeholders in the next meeting.

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

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer:	Elfed Roberts, POBL Emyr Wyn Jones, UWTSO
Architect/Planning Consultant:	Yvonne Gibbs, Arwel Hughes & Andrew Nixon, Powell Dobson Architects Greg Vaughan, The Urbanists Phil Baxter, Asbri Planning
Local Authority:	Steve Smith, Swansea Council
Design Review Panel:	
Chair	Ewan Jones
Lead Panellist	Richard Woods Jonathan Adams Steve Smith Amanda Spence, Design Advisor, DCFW Carole-Anne Davies, CE, DCFW