



Design Review Report

Picton Yard, Swansea

DCFW Ref: N211

Meeting of 17th October 2019



Review Status

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

Public

17th October 2019
28th October 2019
Swansea
Mixed Use
N211
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 Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

None.

Consultations to Date

The scheme was reviewed by DCFW as part of the IHP Programme on 19th June 2019.

The Proposals

The proposal is intended to create a landmark mixed-use development in the heart Swansea City Centre. Through alterations and extensions to the 4-storey former Woolworth Building, the ambitious plan will comprise 20,000 sqft prime site retail, 2,000 sqft A3 facing onto a new city square, 22,000 sqft Grade A commercial office space, and 44 residential units with 40% being affordable. Highlight features include a new 11 storey residential tower with green roof amenity and urban farm, and a new public event space in the proposed new city square - Picton Yard.

The proposal aims to set a benchmark for future developments by achieving a net-positive energy building and introducing a community urban farm based on an Aquaponics system.

Main Points

The panel was supportive of the ambition and the integration of the ideas proposed for this location but have some significant concerns regarding the deliverability and viability of the proposals. The following outlines the main concerns of the panel.

Practical and Financial Viability

This project is in receipt of significant public funds through the Innovative Housing Programme. While the intention of the programme is to test new ideas and the funding enables experiment of the proposed biophilic living concept, everything must be done to ensure that the experiment succeeds. There are a number of outstanding concerns.

It was reported by the presenting team that the urban farm will not be a commercial venture and is likely to be run by residents and others from the wider community, but the community interest has not yet been adequately identified. If commercial viability is not an aim, the desired outputs and aims must be set out in order to determine the success of the project.

It is important to establish how access to the green houses will work and whether there should be an independent lift to keep the residential access secure and avoid conflict over use and service charges, for example. Management and security measures will be required.

The long-term viability and the sustainability of the scheme remains a concern with a number of outstanding questions. The stepped levels reduce the efficiency of the vertical farm – is this the most efficient arrangement of space? How much produce is likely to be produced? How much and what input is required in terms of person hours and expertise and how likely is it that this will be met? Is the suggested £250 per household per annum to maintain the aquaponics system and urban farm realistic and has any market testing been done?

There appear to be a great number of potential risks to the success of the scheme which need to be fully addressed to ensure that public investment is used wisely. The potential benefits, how learning might be used and what benefits could be replicated following this trial should be clearly set out. Using the WellV2 assessment tool is positive and should feed into this. Learning from other urban farm schemes in other areas and the response to such situations would assist in establishing the robustness of this project and ultimately ensure its success. As this is one of the first such schemes in Wales a successful outcome is essential.

Access and Servicing

Access into and around the site is critical to the success of the building and potential improvements to the urban form of the city. It is positive that connections are being made to the south to Lower Oxford Street, but it is not yet clear whether a connection will be created to Union Street. Without the latter, the access to the commercial element of the development becomes very unappealing. The treatment of building edges on such access routes needs to be carefully considered so as to ensure secure, vibrant and safe routes into and out of Picton yard.

Fire fighting access must be considered at this stage.

Residential Accommodation

The design results in single aspect apartments which is disappointing. This could be addressed for some apartments by reviewing the north elevation which requires further articulation.

Conservation Area Context

There was little description of the influence of the conservation area and listed building opposite the site. Although the proposed development is clearly modern in nature, there should still be reference to the immediate context and consideration of how this might impact on the expression of the building.

Form, Scale and Massing

The proposed development is located within a 'Consider Zone' for tall buildings according to local guidance but introduces a new scale to this part of the city. Full visual testing of the scale and mass is needed to refine the proposal and test how it impacts on the urban form and historic townscape.

The impact of overshadowing from a tall building in this location, particularly on Union Street, must be understood.

Public Space

It is positive that a new public space is being considered but this is a very challenging location that requires a bespoke approach. The comparison with Meeting House Square in Dublin is a helpful gauge of scale and potential activity but the space should be original in its design responding to the specific context and with a local identity. The introduction of permanent umbrellas or shades may conflict with servicing requirements in the square.

Wind and solar shading analysis of the space will be critical as there could be significant downdraft.

Further expression of why the building is special in relation to the urban farm and aquaponics system should be pursued at ground level to promote the project and enable members of the public to engage with it. A more natural, whole design approach could help to reflect the aims of the development.

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

Attendees

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Design Review Panel:
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