

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru	Design Commission for Wales
Design Review Report:	29 October 2004
Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	13 October 2004
Location:	Cardiff Castle
Scheme Description:	Visitor Centre
Architects / Design Team:	Niall Philips [Niall Philips, Dan Burt]
Landscape Architects:	Nicholas Pearson Ass.
Interpretation Consultants:	Furneaux Stewart [Laurie Stewart]
Developers:	RPS [Simon Warder]
Public/Other Body:	Cardiff County Council [John Edwards, Viv Williams, Lindsay Cuddy, Matthew Williams]
Planning Status:	Pre-planning
Panel:	
Carole-Anne Davies (chair)	Ed Colgan
Cindy Harris (officer)	Jonathan Adams
Lyn Owen	

Presentation:

Cardiff Castle embodies 2000 years of history and this development seeks to improve access to the whole site, including some areas open to the public for the first time, while maximising and optimising use of the existing structure. Visitor numbers are predicted to increase and therefore improved facilities are needed, which of course will lead to increased income. The value of the scheme is £8m, of which £5.7m will come from the Heritage Lottery Fund. A diverse team of experts has been assembled including consultants on visitor numbers and the visitor experience (Terry Stevens, Martin Barrett).

The brief requires an external gathering space (big enough for coachloads); undercover ticketing; an area for orientation and site information; exhibition space; retail and catering outlets. There will be provision for full disabled access to all parts of the site.

A full geosurvey of the whole site has been carried out which has determined the location and limit of any building works, and an environmental capacity assessment is in preparation. The north entrance will be opened creating a through route, with access to the north gate and watchtower. The proposed use of this sensitive site

has been endorsed by a Public Inquiry and by Les Sparks on behalf of HLF. The site for the new building has been identified to the east of the south gate.

Following the rejection of the Council's previous planning application, consultative group meetings and a 'Planning for Real' exercise have been held. A key issue has been archaeological disturbance, and different depths of excavation have been agreed for different parts of the site. These considerations have led to a reduced floor area of 1250 square metres, and the size of the restaurant and shop have been reduced accordingly. At basement level there is a single exhibition space with plant room and toilets, while from the ground floor with café, shop and gathering space, ramps lead up to the gate tower, and steps to the battlements walkway. Externally, the grass embankment has been 'drawn across' the roof of the new building, which will be planted with coarse grass and shrubs. Walls are of ashlar stone blocks and glass.

Panel's Response

Our main concern was that the building was too small for its required functions and that it was 'tucked away in a corner'. Its success will depend on the precision and finesse with which the different spaces and circulation routes are planned and detailed. In practice, the appealing simplicity of the drawings may change to include obtrusive items such as barriers, plant, escape routes etc. The architect stated that there was no option to increase the size, and this had led to a strategy of dispersing retail and catering outlets, together with office and exhibition spaces, over the whole site. A business case has been made for the limited catering services and the building is designed to be flexible and allow for expansion or re-allocation of use. He admitted that building services would have an impact but they were working to minimise that by, for example, controlling access to the roof with planting. He cited the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre, which has no visible flues on the roof and disguised service outlets in discreet locations. The plant room will be accessed internally and arrangements are in place for dustbin storage and strictly timed delivery and collection.

The site planning does not appear to maximise the number of paying visitors, with a relatively modest reception area off to one side. It was pointed out that this application, relating to the new building and its interpretation, is part of a 15 year development plan for the whole site. Separate charges will be made at the entrances to individual exhibitions. In addition, this is a public asset which should allow free public access, and the main house at least is full to capacity at certain times of the year. The facilities are already extensively used by school groups.

It was acknowledged that the location of the public toilets, in the basement and at the base of the towers, is not ideal.

Details of surface treatment and signage are especially important, to lead visitors towards the new centre which is offset from direct sight on entrance from the south.

Representatives of the Local Authority emphasised the importance of making the links with St Mary Street and recognising the impacts of St Davids 2. They also stated that this proposal is the result of a long process of consultation and compromise. The possible relaxation of rules on access and other Health & Safety issues, are part of the ongoing detailed discussion between the designers and the Council.

Summary

The panel recognises the constraints of the site and the interesting and innovative way in which the design responds to them. However, the difficulty of meeting the brief within these constraints gives rise to a number of reservations which we have:

- We are concerned that the environmental capacity assessment appears to be following on from, rather than informing, these design proposals.
- We are concerned at the number of functions the building is expected to fulfil, given its size.
- We endorse the built in flexibility as necessary to adjust as far as possible the operational capacity of the whole site
- The quality of materials, finish and detailing must be pristine in their simplicity, as well as durable and robust.
- We are not convinced that the simplicity and precision aspired to in the drawings that were presented can be maintained through subsequent design development, particularly in the incorporation of services, health and safety features and the detailing of the key architectural elements.
- The design of surface paving, signage and any barrier features should be integrated with the design of the new building
- For consistency with the older parts of the castle, we recommend that best efforts be made to obtain blue lias stone from the Vale of Glamorgan for the construction of the new Visitors Centre.
- Due consideration should be given in developing these proposals to the interface with the public realm and the rest of the city.

We accept that the drawings presented represent an early draft of the proposals, and that the panel's concerns may be resolved in subsequent design development.

We invite the presenting team to return to design review before submitting a full planning application, to present more information, and perhaps precedent examples to illustrate more precisely the treatment of detailing of the key elements of the building.

End