

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales

Design Review Report: 12 February 2004

Meeting Date / Material Submitted: 5 February 2004

Location: Junction of Ffordd Deiniol and Ffordd
Gwynedd, Bangor.

Architects / Design Team: Ainsley Gommon Architects

Scheme Description: New police station accommodating
40-50 staff, with staff parking and
vehicular access

Public/Other Body: North Wales Police

Brief history of site

The site is in a conservation area in the middle of Bangor, close to the Cathedral and Post Office, adjacent to the Town Hall, and dominated by university buildings on the hill to the North. It previously housed a stable block attached to the Plas (now the Town Hall) and, more recently, some council depot buildings which were demolished in 1996. The site is currently grassed and used as a public leisure space. Consent has been obtained to move a Grade 2 listed fountain, currently located in the middle of the site, nearer to the main road opposite the main Post Office. There is an existing sewer and culverted river running along the south side of the site, and easements relating to these have restricted the siting of the new buildings. Due to possible flood risks, and on the advice of the Environment Agency, the proposed new building has been raised, leading to fairly extensive ramps on the main entrance. Archaeological excavations in 1996 found mediaeval timbers on the site and further exploratory work may be required prior to construction. It is a design priority to retain all mature trees on site.

Brief history of development

A planning application for a much more modern design was rejected, against the recommendation of the officers, in May 2003. Because of time restrictions it was decided to produce a new design, rather than go to appeal with the first one. This second scheme was granted planning permission in January 2004, with a recommendation to consult with the DCFW Design Review Panel.

Current scheme

After refusal of the first scheme, the designers were given the strong impression that local councillors would prefer a more traditional form which was primarily 'gables and slate'. The new design aligns the building with the existing blank gable on the Town Hall, and is positioned to provide enhanced views of the university and cathedral.

The form and materials are intended to be familiar and traditional, treated in a clean and unfussy manner. The building should be identifiable as distinctively 'of its time' and different from its surroundings.

In the architect's words:

The recessed fenestration is intended to echo the Georgian proportions of windows used in the Town Hall. The minimal fenestration on the East elevation is compatible with the client's requirements for confidentiality and sound insulation. The projecting eaves are of local slate, and the roof is natural Welsh slate with pointed verges – all traditional local details. The full-height glazing is intended to maximise views and the signage as shown is not necessarily final.

Issues raised by the Panel and the architects' response

- Some concern was expressed that the development involved a loss of significant and attractive public space. It was pointed out that there were buildings on this site until 1996, and that there was still a lot of green space in the vicinity (eg the Cathedral Gardens).
- The developers reassured the Panel that there were no plans to increase the size or form of the building in the future. It was felt that the number of visitor/disabled parking spaces provided (3 in total) was insufficient and that the right angled setting of two on Heol Gwynedd, while it helped remove an area of illegal parking, would hamper pedestrians on a busy pavement route to the town centre and cause traffic flow problems from vehicles pulling in and out.'
- The façade facing the cathedral, which includes the main entrance, was interpreted by some Panel members as 'hostile', and the railings as 'institutional'. The designers stated that the railings were similar to those used on the Cathedral Gardens, and that the retention of the existing stone gate posts should vary and soften the approach.
- Further critical comments were made about the massing, the wedge shaped entrance canopy, the fenestration and the blank, east-facing gable.

In Summary

The Panel considered that everyone concerned with this project was now in a no-win situation, and that a significant opportunity had been lost. The Panel much preferred the first design which was a much more imaginative and creative response to what was a difficult design task, made much more difficult by the inevitable perception that the project was being built on attractive park land. Had the Commission been consulted at an early stage, as it prefers to be, or even had it seen the first application, it would have wholeheartedly supported the architects original approach. It considers that the obvious response to the refusal was to go to appeal, taking advantage of the officers' and the Civic Society's support. The Commission would have been prepared to appear at the enquiry to support this modern design.

As it is now, the Panel considers that the architects have been forced to adopt a design approach that is an unconvincing piece of modern vernacular, one that in fact looks rather dated, a throw-back to the 1960s. Its employment of white render under a slate roof, with narrow eaves, clean lines, monopitch roofs, varied fenestration and blank gable, emphasise that it is a new interpretation, but sits very uncomfortably next to the Town Hall, especially when viewed from the south.

The Panel is very reluctant to add any further design advice considering that the architects have already been forced into too many compromises. Insofar as they thought they could improve the design they offered the following comments.

- The area around the entrance be improved by replacing the right angled car parking by parallel parking, redesigning the ramp access, and rethinking the landscaping. Several Panel members felt that the fountain would be better placed on the small green space in front of the entrance
- The street frontage along Ffordd Gwynedd be rethought to try to create a more positive interaction between the building and the street, using hard and soft landscape, if the fenestration could not provide any overlooking of the street. This street is the link between the now severed pieces of green space and so its quality and its landscape are especially important.
- Screening the car parking with taller stone walls, rather as in the first design, to hide the cars and reinforce the sense of a secure building. The car parking seems to dictate the site planning which is most unfortunate, and the requirement for the additional emergency egress over the parkland is equally regrettable. Who will ensure that this exit is only used in cases when the main exit is blocked?
- It was considered that the Planning Authority should indicate that it would not look favourably on further development on this site should the need arise to add cell accommodation to the station.

Conclusion

There is a key lesson here for client, designer and especially the Planning Committee. Be prepared to back professional design advice and go for a bold solution that still respects its context, rather than attempt to mollify all critics with a 'safe' solution that demeans the town. A second lesson would be to ask the Commission for its advice early in the design process where it can offer a second opinion on design quality. A third lesson for the client would be to have recourse to the appeal process when design innovation and imagination are being subverted.

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