

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales

Design Review Report

Meeting Date / Material Submitted: 16 June 2003
Location: Caernarfon
Architects / Design Team: Willacy Horswood

Scheme Description: Retail & residential
Public/Other Body: Gwynedd Council
WJ Developments

Gwynedd Council's representative opened the meeting with an update of the scheme and an introduction of all those present. He described the background to the project and explained the historical context as well as the difficult economic challenge facing Caernarfon and its residents.

The WDA's representative explained the investment context from their viewpoint and the aim of extending interest and attracting more visitors to the town as well as providing local resident and business communities with tangible regeneration.

Further detail was provided through a description of the condition of Caernarfon's urban fabric and the poor condition that some properties had fallen into in recent years. Responding to environmental issues in the area as part of the improvement programme the WDA supported and delivered an extensive detoxification of contaminated land.

Euan Rees (ER) representing Gwynedd's Regeneration unit explained that following the cleansing operation the land had been earmarked for a flagship development of some nature and a design brief was established as a key framework document informing the process of attracting interest in the possibilities of the site. The brief included a vision for multi-purpose development utilising existing assets and delivering the "wow factor" of a new vision for Caernarfon, providing a physical link to its designated world heritage site. Clear economic targets were also established in the brief.

WJ Developments are the preferred developer and the WDA explained that they had been given exclusive development rights to the site following a competitive tender process. Both business plan and feasibility study are in progress. It was noted that the new arts centre by Richard Murphy Architects of Edinburgh is planned to occupy the adjacent site.

The planning status of the project was confirmed by Gwynedd Council. The planning committee has approved the application for full planning consent subject to agreement being reached between officers and the applicant on alterations to the design to meet concerns raised by Cadw and others.

Architect's Presentation

Willacy Horswood, referring to documents listed at the end of these notes, presented the design and described the approach, taking questions from the floor.

- The proposed building includes ground floor retail units, leisure facilities and upper floor residential units grouped around an open court which accommodates 64 parking spaces
- Vehicular access is via a bridge approximately 4 metres above ground floor level from higher ground to the east.
- The provision of significant floor space to attract retail occupants is a key element of the scheme.
- There are no listed buildings on the site but several nearby structures including the town walls, the dock walls and slipway.
- The external appearance is intended to have a maritime or dockside character to reflect its location. The form is intended to respond in size and scale to the nearby Edwardian castle.

Comments by Cadw

Cadw drew attention to the proximity of the Edwardian Castle, a World Heritage Site, town and dock walls and the particular architectural texture or grain shared by these in contrast to the proposal under consideration. The importance of scale and the need to avoid pastiche or false vernacular that would sit uneasily in this context was emphasised. It was made clear that there was some work yet to be done to address these issues.

- DCFW asked what studies had been carried out by the architect or others to analyse the architectural character of the setting in both physical and historical terms. It appeared that the only document that had been prepared apart from the drawings submitted with the application was the *Design Brief* prepared by TACP in 2001 (see below).
- There was an extended discussion on the overall form of the project. On the one hand Cadw and DCFW shared the view that the building appeared to be very bulky with a plot ratio approaching 1:3. The arrangement of the residential accommodation in a narrow band around the perimeter on the upper levels emphasised the bulk of the building. On the other hand the developer and the WDA expressed the view that the commercial and residential floor space included, represent the minimum acceptable in economic terms.
- DCFW suggested the possibility of accommodating the same volume of building in a variety of ways that would result in an overall building occupying the same footprint with less apparent bulk. There might be a trade off between floor area and quality of lettable space – a smaller area of higher quality space might realise an equal return.
- DCFW also enquired whether information was available on the compatibility of the physical development with local regeneration initiatives and policy and also the context of the WDA targets. DCFW noted that it would seek evidence

of this and other issues being addressed in the framework document as well as consideration and proper assessment of the “lifetime” of the buildings. DCFW suggested that some national and international comparisons would assist the process.

- Concerns regarding proximity to the dock walls were reiterated and better detail regarding activity at the site edge requested, including the relationship with the arts centre which continues the urban fabric; views up and down the dock; scale – in particular the single block nature and aspects of detail which were not viewed as having any real purpose other than pastiche surface articulation.
- DCFW questioned the claim to transparency made by the architect noting that there was no possibility of any views through the building at any level.

Comments by DCFW

- DCFW welcomed the initiative of GCC, the applicant and the WDA in bringing forward proposals for the development of a brownfield site along with the aspiration for mixed use and recognised the opportunity presented for economic development in Caernarfon.
- DCFW also noted that issues raised by this application under consideration were not unique to Caernarfon (although this is a site of special importance given the proximity of the castle and town walls). DCFW referred to widely accepted “best practice” standards that are relevant to this kind of design situation and to the CABE publication *Design Review* (particularly to section *Evaluating Designs* pp8-18).

DCFW then outlined its expectations for all design proposals of this significance drawing particular attention to the following

- **Permeability** -- the provision of a variety of public routes (preferably open 24 hours) through a large project at ground level (the related concept of urban “grain” is often referred to). A comparison of the footprint of the proposed building with that of the town centre streets a few hundred metres away reveals the proposal to be quite monolithic.
- **Relationship to context** – successful urban design and architectural proposals usually have “...a considered relationship with the character of the context.” (CABE, *Design Review* p10). It is surprising that in this case, given the strong variation character of the context on each side of this essentially rectangular site, the appearance of all elevations is essentially similar. We were not shown any work that suggested that a rigorous contextual analysis had been carried out – and if it had, it clearly had no effect on the design proposals.
- **Fitness for purpose**– It is fundamental to good design that the needs of the users are met. It is hard to imagine from the limited information available that this project would provide spaces that would fully meet the needs of residents and other users. While it may be the case that adequate floor space is provided for the various activities it appears that in some cases it would be difficult to provide for even the most basic functional needs (for example in the tourist cinema and the office workshop buried deep in the plan).

- **Sustainable development** – DCFW is specifically charged with promoting sustainable design as a key component of design quality. It is surprising that there is no evidence of a response to the idea of sustainable design in this proposal. The lower two floors would have to rely almost wholly on artificial lighting and ventilation. (DCFW noted that in the TACP *Design Brief* naturally lit internal courts are noted as “design principle”). A design based on one or more through routes at ground level would facilitate natural lighting and ventilation and create more active frontage.
- **Architectural coherence**– Successful architecture generally has a definable order or internal logic that relates the parts to the whole. Designs that are successful in terms of urban design make connections between the organising themes of the building and those of the setting. In this case there is perhaps a simply described architecture – a two storey rectangular base with a perimeter block of housing above – but it is quite inappropriate to the functional elements of the brief and the character of the context.
- **General** – The level of detail provided in the documents presented at the meeting was inadequate to form a view of many aspects of the proposal. (DCFW accepted that there may be more information in the full planning application.) For example there is no detail provided on the nature of the open space at second floor level that forms the shared space for the housing or the practical detail of servicing, refuse removal, public circulation space.
- DCFW reiterated its full understanding of the importance economic drivers in achieving viable development and expressed the view that it is possible to achieve a project that meets essential economic and financial, criteria but also achieves an excellent design outcome that will enhance the historic context of Caernarfon.

Conclusion

- Henry Roberts made a brief summary of key comments. He suggested a period of one month would be sufficient for the architects to address the issues raised during the meeting. While some felt that this was an optimistic view it was agreed that it was an appropriate target.

Appendix 1 Documents

Documents referred to during the meeting and supplied to DCFW at the end of the meeting

- 1 **Victoria Dock Caernarfon: Design Brief** October 2001
TACP 27/29 Grosvenor Road Wrexham LL11 1DH
TACP 10 Park Grove, Cardiff CF10 3BN

- 2 **Bound set of 11 Drawings** undated
Willacy Horsewood Partnership
1 Union Court, Canalside, Chester CH1 3LJ

The document includes drawings numbered: WH755/PE01revA; PE02 rev A; PE03; GF01revB; FF01revA; SF01revA; LT01; LT02revA; (all dated DEC '02). In addition four untitled elevation drawings are included.

All drawings have been reduced to A3 – the noted scales are not correct therefore accurate scaling from plans is not possible.

Appendix 2

Notes on the Design Brief

(prepared by DCFW after the meeting)

DCFW understands that the project originated in a development brief (which we have not seen) that sets out a mix of desired uses. On the basis of this brief, a competitive bidding process resulted in an agreement to sell the site to W J Developments. Following this agreement the design brief was prepared by TACP.

The design brief very briefly outlines the history of the town, sets out the current conservation designations and describes the site in some detail. It gives a brief summary of the intended uses (some of which are not part of the proposals currently under consideration including – hotel, conference facilities, theatre and night-club).

A diagrammatic site plan is included that suggests grouping the proposed uses into four zones around an inner court. In section 4.2 a number of general comments on design are made and key viewing points are noted.

We consider the design brief to be of limited utility in guiding the design of the development. It is essentially descriptive with some general advice contained in a series of bullet points. It gives disproportionate emphasis to a limited number of “key viewing points”. It provides no analysis of the physical context of the development and no plans or sections which communicate the nature and character of the site and its setting.

However we note that brief suggests (p12) that public access is provided to the inner part of the site. “The external space should penetrate the development ... leading to a meaningful protected space or spaces creating increased frontage opportunities and allowing natural light to penetrate deep within the development”.

End