



DESIGN
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Design Review Report

Conwy Cultural Centre

DCFW Ref: 80

Meeting of 16th July 2015



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.

Review Status

Meeting date

Issue date

Scheme location

Scheme description

Scheme reference number

Planning status

PUBLIC

16th July 2015

31st July 2015

Conwy

Library/Cultural Centre

80

Pre-application

Declarations of Interest

None declared.

Consultations to Date

The team have carried out substantial consultation with the local community and local businesses.

The Proposals

The site is on the corner at a busy junction at the edge of Bodlondeb Park and opposite the town walls which form part of a World Heritage Site. There is an existing old school building on the site, which is currently used as a youth centre, and an electricity substation. The existing building is not listed and the site is outside the conservation area. However, the close proximity to the historic town centre is important. Pedestrian access to the site is difficult due to the narrow pavements and busy traffic junction. We understand that 52 site options were appraised before deciding on this site, but we do not know the criteria applied in that process.

The brief is to provide a new cultural centre for arts and heritage, including: a new area library, archive search room, collections storage, youth centre, community rooms, external reading courts and an accessible roof garden.

Proposals involve moving the electrical substation and demolishing the half-hexagon tower of the existing building. The proposed new 'contemporary style' extension is part single-storey, part two-storey with a roof garden over the lower level. Three parking spaces are to be provided for disabled users.

The site is well known to the Commission and, as a result, on this occasion, a pre-review site visit was not made.

Main Points in Detail

The following points summarise key issues from the review, and should be considered to inform work ahead of making a planning application.

Brief, Vision & Budget

The client team has clearly put a significant amount of work into finding a good site and developing a sound and inspiring brief for this exciting project. The Design Commission commends the ambitions of the client team. The brief and location for this new cultural centre could be ingredients for a successful, award-winning building which would make a valuable contribution to the community and the already outstanding context at Conwy. The brief and ambition warrant an appropriate design response.

The material submitted prior to this review suggested the concept of a 'pavilion in the park'. However, this idea did not come through in the proposed design or drawings presented at the review. Whilst there are several possible approaches that could be taken to this project, the idea of simple, elegant, pavilion-like structure which maximises the benefits of this park-edge site could provide a successful and appropriate solution. There is a danger that this strong concept will be compromised, however, if it is diluted by other ideas or ill-resolved components of the design, which are currently evident in the proposals.

The Design Commission supports the idea of a sensitive, modern building on this site.

If spent in the right ways, the budget allocated should be sufficient to deliver an exemplary scheme. However, all decisions made in the design process will need to be well-considered and tested to make sure they add value to the scheme. Setting broad strategies which respond to the site, the brief and the clients' vision for the project will help to direct these decisions.

Site & Existing Building Strategies

Based on thorough analysis of the site and existing structures on the site, a broad site design strategy should be set out. Clarity at the strategy stage appears to be missing in the information presented at the meeting. The strategy should fully consider the following issues:

- The existing substation and the cost/value/benefits or otherwise of its removal
- The existing old school building and the benefits of retention/removal
- Site topography and existing hard and soft landscaping on the site
- Site access and highways issues (consider pedestrians and vehicles)
- Environmental conditions and their thorough analysis to inform the design response (sun, prevailing wind, traffic noise, etc.)
- Relationship to the park and the best views
- Relationship to main road (this will be noisy)
- Relationship to the historically significant town wall opposite the site
- Proposed siting, orientation, massing and form of the building
- Proposed building entrance location
- Proposed landscape uses (including parking, vehicle and pedestrian access, bin stores, service areas and access provision, any steps etc.)

- Proposed hierarchy and layout of spaces from public to private and main spaces to service/support facilities
- Hours and patterns of use, including security and partial use of the building

Moving the substation would be an expensive and time consuming process, and the need for and value of doing so should be seriously reconsidered. Negotiations with the network company responsible for the substation would need to commence well in advance of the proposed start of works on site. There is a danger that moving the substation could upset the progress of the rest of this project and divert essential resources to little benefit or added value.

The scheme presented at the review proposed retaining most of the existing old school building, refurbishing it and joining a new building onto it. It was considered by the team that demolishing the existing building would be more expensive than retaining it. However, there is always the risk of uncovering hidden costs when refurbishing an old building. The long term running and maintenance costs will also be significantly higher than for a new, energy efficient building. Retaining the existing building also appears to be creating problems and adding complexity to the proposed scheme rather than adding value, and severely compromises the 'pavilion in the park' concept. Whether or not the existing building and other structures on the site are retained, a clear and justified strategy is required. The strategy should also include an approach to the existing boundary walls which potentially prohibit good connections to the park.

The site entrances, routes through the site and parking must all be carefully considered and detailed, otherwise they will undermine the design concept. There is a danger that a poorly designed 'ordinary' road through the site would cut off the building from the park. The design should promote pedestrian priority particularly at the entrance to the park.

The overall massing, orientation and layout of the building should be designed in response to site conditions. The proposal presented at the review showed a reading court next to the noisy main road which may not be conducive to the creation of a pleasant space to use. Much more careful thought is needed on the nature of these and other spaces. It would add significant value to the scheme if the layout made best use of views into the park by locating those spaces which will be most used by visitors, such as reading and meeting areas, to take advantage of the views and amenity.

In order to communicate the site strategy effectively to the client and other stakeholders, the scheme must be drawn with more of the full context shown.

Use, Function & Delight

The brief requires a number of functions to be accommodated in one building whilst allowing for flexibility day to day and over the long term. To successfully achieve these requirements, the layout of spaces within the building must be carefully designed and should fit with the overarching site strategy.

A more detailed layout strategy should consider the following:

- Arrival and entrance(s)
- Hierarchy of public to private spaces
- Adjacencies of facilities and flexibility of use

- Day time and evening uses including need to secure parts of the building whilst others remain in use
- Security (including number of staff required to operate the building)
- Accessibility and inclusiveness – a full design response should address inclusive design for all users respond to non-discriminatory provision. The outcome may or may not be physical.
- Relationship between noisy, busy and quiet sides of the site
- Access to daylight
- Smaller service spaces (WCs, kitchen, storage) vs. larger habitable spaces
- Future changes (such as incorporating a cafe)

The scheme presented at the review currently lacks any obvious organisational strategy, and the layout of spaces would benefit from more careful consideration. The design team should test layout options against the brief, and the client team must be confident that the layout will work for them in terms of staffing and the various use patterns which will be required of the building.

The client and design teams together may find it useful to consider likely daily use patterns and how these will change from day to day or over the course of a year. One way to do this is to make fictional journals for various people who might use the building, including staff. The journals can then help inform the design and can be used to test how well different layouts would work in reality.

Scale plans which show different furniture/use options would also be a useful way to test layout designs. This testing must then feed back into the building design.

The scheme presented at the review showed two entrances. The practicalities of this should be seriously considered, as more staff may be required to monitor and manage multiple entrances. At a time when resources are limited, this is an important matter.

The reviewed scheme also included external reading courts and a roof terrace which would be accessible to public. It is unlikely that these features would be feasible for security reasons, as it would make it easy for books or other items to be removed from site or stolen. The value of an accessible roof garden should be weighed up against the extra costs of structure, safety and lifts, maintenance etc. which would be necessary. There are different types of green roof which have different requirements. A roof garden would not be at a high enough level to look over the city walls, as currently proposed, whilst it would be possible to get views into the park from ground floor level, so it is difficult to see the value that would be added.

Libraries, community rooms and youth clubs should be places which are attractive, flexible, comfortable and delightful – they should be places which people want to spend time in. Lighting, ventilation, scale, proportions, views, materials and fittings will all have an impact on people’s experience of the building and should be carefully considered.

Structure, Construction and Services Strategies

Working alongside structural and services engineers, the architectural team should develop strategies for the building structure, construction methods and services. These strategies should be designed in line with the overarching concept for the project and

with the vision of the client team in mind. Appointment of engineers at this early stage of the design process will help to achieve this.

Sustainability and Energy Strategy

An integrated and holistic sustainability and energy strategy should be developed alongside other design strategies. If passive energy strategies are not built into the design from the start, expensive and complicated equipment will be required to meet energy targets, storage conditions and comfort conditions for occupants. Technology added to a scheme at a late stage can compromise other design strategies, spoil the appearance of a building and create unnecessary operation and maintenance burdens. The Welsh Government's *Practice Guidance: Planning for Sustainable Buildings*, provides useful information and guidance on these issues:

<http://gov.wales/docs/desh/publications/150311practice-guidance-planning-for-sustainable-buildings-en.pdf>

As a prominent community building, this scheme should aim to achieve a high standard of sustainability and demonstrate exemplary low-energy design.

The energy and sustainability strategy should reflect the likely use patterns and functions of the building whilst taking into account the environmental conditions on the site, including noise, sunlight, daylight and views. A good energy strategy will result in comfortable environments within the building, which is especially important for libraries and community facilities, and lower running costs.

With a library facility, security requirements can often prevent the use of opening windows for ventilation, as books can be passed out through them. There are other ways to achieve natural ventilation, such as meshed or grilled opening panels, but these must be considered at an early stage, prior to a planning application being made as they will affect the facade design.

An important consideration for the energy strategy in this project is the nature of the conditions required for the archive storage. It is likely that a standard and consistent temperature and humidity levels will need to be met to protect and preserve the items being stored. Typically, such facilities employ energy-intensive technology to provide such conditions. However, the recently completed new Passivhaus archive building in Hereford demonstrates that passive design can achieve the required conditions with low energy demand.

Locating any external plant will be important. Plant on the roof should be avoided due to the views down onto the building from the old town walls.

Further Review

The Design Commission would welcome the opportunity to review this scheme again, once designs have progressed, but well before a planning application is made.

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

Attendees

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