



Design Review Report

Custom House Street, Cardiff

DCFW Ref: 78

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	16 th July 2015
Issue date	21 st July 2015
Scheme location	Cardiff Centre
Scheme description	Student Accommodation
Scheme reference number	78
Planning status	Pre-application

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Declarations of Interest

None declared.

Consultations to Date

The design team is in pre-application discussion with the local planning authority.

The Proposals

The proposed development site is situated on the southern side of the city centre in a location with easy access to the whole city centre, Cardiff Bay and public transport links. It is close to other tall buildings, such as the adjacent 21 storey Radisson Blu Hotel; sits alongside the main rail connection into Cardiff from London and has the potential to make a significant contribution to this long neglected site. The proposal is for a 30–35 storey building circa 95m to 110m high. This will exceed the height of the tallest building in the vicinity and in Cardiff by 20-30m and will be the tallest in Wales. The building will be student accommodation, with a small retail unit at ground floor level.

Main Points in Detail

This review was well timed to take place at an early stage in the project where there is scope for design review to contribute to the scheme as the design process progresses. The following points summarise key issues from the review, and should be considered to inform work on this important scheme ahead of further review and the eventual planning application:

Site and Context

This is a difficult site which has been left undeveloped for some time. There are constraints which the scheme must address, and these have been identified by the design team who are working to resolve them. The Design Commission is supportive of development on this important city centre site, and understands that the scheme must

be commercially viable for this to happen. This will mean maximising the amount of development on the site, resulting in a tall building.

In considering an appropriate height for this scheme, the wider local context is important. Careful consideration of how the proposed building will work within the existing city fabric and potential future development, particularly other tall buildings, will be crucial. The design team have already begun this assessment. It is positive that early pre-application consultation with the local planning authority is in progress, and this will include establishing key viewpoints to be tested. A scale model which includes the wider context would be a useful tool for developing the scheme, as well as communicating and justifying the design approach to stakeholders.

Tall Buildings

Tall buildings have significant impact on their immediate surroundings and the wider city. They therefore demand high standards of design, excellent quality and elegance. This scheme is to be the tallest building in Wales and it follows that it should also be the best designed building in Wales. This will require rigorous design investigations, more testing and more scrutiny of design quality than other projects. Such a tall building will need to be clearly justified and tested on this site. There is potential for this ambitious scheme to be an excellent addition to the Cardiff skyline and the quality of public realm at ground level: it should be an outstanding example of design quality in Wales.

For these reasons, it is good that the first Design Review is taking place at an early stage, where there is room for development. The Design Commission's aim is to improve the quality of the built environment in Wales, and consideration of scheme proposals at Design Review is one of the key ways in which we do this. All those present at this review agreed that the architecture and urban design qualities of this scheme must be exemplary. DCFW aims to provide comment and input which helps to achieve this through the development of the scheme. Design Review can also help those involved in delivering the scheme to take a momentary step back to review decisions, assumptions and consultation to date.

Building Form and Massing

The prominence of tall buildings makes their form and massing especially important considerations. An iterative process of testing and refining different options is necessary to achieve a refined concept which also works in terms of other aspects of the design.

Precedent shows that different approaches to the form and massing of tall buildings can be successful, and that there is not one single 'right' way to approach it. The scheme submitted to the Design Commission in the pre-review material submission, in certain drawings, demonstrated encouraging potential for elegant simplicity of form, which could be a successful approach for this scheme.

The scheme in the pre-review material did have some aspects that were not yet successfully resolved: these had already been identified by the design team and are to be expected at this early stage in the project. However, the Design Commission understands that, following consultation with the local planning authority, a number of potential form options are being explored. At the review meeting the option presented differed from that shown in the pre-review material and whilst this option resolved some issues, it had lost some of the simplicity of the pre-review scheme.

The useful working model and the 3D views highlighted the particular significance of the top of the building. It will be important to get this aspect of the design right by testing options from key viewpoints. Existing taller buildings in Cardiff and elsewhere, demonstrate that unnecessarily flamboyant roof forms do not always add value or contribute to overall design quality.

If there is ambition for elegant simplicity in this scheme, care should be taken that bolt on equipment, such as plant, is avoided. The design team described the measures that they have already taken in relation to these considerations.

Student Accommodation

The Design Commission is comfortable with the principle of this scheme being student accommodation in the context of Cardiff as a university city. However, there is a need to ensure absolute commitment to the build quality of development and great care is needed to differentiate this proposal, through its good quality, from previously developed poor quality student accommodation in the city. The Commission also recognises the budget constraints that student housing schemes must work within and that these have to work alongside the significant costs incurred in building a very tall structure. The developer and architects both stated their commitment to good quality on this scheme, and this quality will need to be clearly evidenced as the scheme progresses.

Public Realm

The project should strive to make a positive contribution to the wider public realm surrounding the site in this neglected part of the city. The Commission encourages the design team to help shape and make suggestions for approaches which fully integrate the building design with the streetscape. We strongly encourage the team to look at works outside the site boundary that might benefit the local public realm and the new building and add value for all parties and for the long term.

There are many steps which could be taken to improve the environment at street level around the building. The conditions, challenges and opportunities on each side of the buildings should be considered.

A building of this height is likely to cause significant changes to local wind conditions at ground level. The local authority should set pedestrian comfort standards with which the project must demonstrate compliance, through thorough testing. The public realm design can be used to help deal with any problematic wind issues.

The nature of ground floor accommodation and its relationship to the public realm are important. Active uses, entrances, services and blank facades all make different contributions to the streetscape and will be appropriate in different locations. Hope Street, in particular, would benefit from a positive contribution through this scheme. Design at the base of the building on this side might extend to improving the underpass. The experience for people using the road underpass could be significantly improved. There are many examples of recent, creative and successful underpass improvements in other UK cities, including London which could be referred to.

The scheme presented at review suggested public access to the top of the building. This could be a positive addition to the city. The extent of space available to the public, its

use (viewing only, events, restaurant?), access to it and its management alongside the needs of residents, all have great potential but require further careful consideration in consultation with the local authority. A dedicated lift may be required.

Environmental Design

The aspiration for excellent design quality should be extended to environmental performance. Regardless of the standards required by national and local planning policy, this scheme should be aiming to achieve BREEAM Excellent or Outstanding (or equivalent).

It is encouraging that a sustainability consultant is part of the design team at this stage. This should help ensure that sustainable principles and their implications are integrated and tested through the design process. If sustainability and energy strategies are not well integrated, there is a risk that the elegance of the scheme will be compromised.

Facade Design

The facade design for tall buildings is especially complex, with many issues to be considered, tested and resolved. The quality of the building skin will be especially important and will require more financial and design investment than more typical student accommodation projects.

Durability of the facade and life-span of the component materials is an important consideration. If materials degrade or fade, the appearance of the building would be compromised, and access for maintenance will be more complicated for a taller building.

The modelling of the facade will also have an impact on wind downdraught.

Early conversations with cladding contractor will be important to ensure buildability.

Further Review

The Design Commission would welcome the opportunity for further review of this important scheme for Cardiff and Wales.

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

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer:	Jim Davies, Watkins Jones Mark Sutton, Knight Frank
Architect/Planning Consultant:	Andrew Baker, Rio Architects Huw Jones, Rio Architects David Whitter, Rio Architects Marietta Gontikaki, Icen
Local Authority:	Lawrence Dowdall, Cardiff Council Ross Cannon, Cardiff Council
Design Review Panel:	
Chair	Ewan Jones
Lead Panellist	Mike Gwyther-Jones John Punter Amanda Spence, Design Advisor, DCFW
Observing:	Cora Kwiatkowski, DCFW Design Panellist