

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru

Design Commission for Wales

Design Review Report:

13 May 2004

Meeting Date / Material Submitted: 6 May 2004

Location:

**Site north of the M4, between
Junctions 34 and 35, near Llanilid**

Architects:

Holder Mathias, Nic Downs

Client/Developer:

**Dragon International
Hopkin Joseph**

Scheme Description:

**Film studios, with leisure park,
and business park**

Planning Status:

**Outline Planning exists.
Detailed permission applied for**

Design Review Panel Members:

**John Punter, Cindy Harris, Ed
Colgan, Paul Vanner, Lyn Owen,
Alan Francis, Nigel Hanson,**

Local Authority

**Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC
John Cunnane**

Observers

**Carole-Anne Davies, DCFW
Marcus Blayney, UWE
Nigel Crates (SW Police)**

DCFW specialist invitee

**Ceri Sherlock, independent film
television and theatre director**

Presentation

The architects have been involved with developing these proposals since mid 2000. As part of their remit, they were asked to look at the current state of film production facilities in the U.K. The best known, Pinewood Studios, has many buildings dating from the 1930's. In contrast, the new state-of-the-art studios in Cologne, Germany have good facilities, including a glazed street which can accommodate lorries, but is underused.

The site is a 760 acre open cast mine, located 5 miles from Bridgend and 10 miles from Cardiff. A ridge runs east/west along the length of the site, and from here the ground slopes down to the South and the M4, screening the northern part of the site. Site restoration work has taken place and the outline application was accompanied by a full Environmental Impact Assessment. The proposed Llanharan bypass runs along the northern boundary of the site and there is also a railway line to the north.

The site has been marketed for its accessibility and good transport links, as well as the existence of indigenous professional expertise, low staff costs (by UK standards) and the variety of the Welsh landscape. Apparently, the use of the English language was a crucial factor in the choice of this site over an otherwise excellent site in Bulgaria.

The design is still at masterplan stage. The original brief was to incorporate the film studios within a leisure zone, but this is likely to change to a greater separation between the two functions. There will be warehousing and storage to the north west, and business parks to the south: one a hi-tech business park, the other aimed at B1 office development for allied enterprises such as computer graphics, and to include a headquarters type building. Two hotels (one budget) and a hospital (private but funded by local NHS trusts) are provided to the south east. A golf course and (well screened) celebrity residences to the east are the most visible elements from the M4. The film studios and leisure development are located to the north and largely screened from view by the ridge and site restoration works. A car park to the north east will provide space for 1500 cars.

In addition, there is a plan for five 'silent stages' to be built at an early stage of the development, accessed from the north via existing roads and a new junction with the A473. The brief here is for low-cost accommodation for TV productions, not fitted out apart from self contained offices within each building. These are essentially 'tin sheds', acoustically insulated, with an eaves height of 15 metres and steel portal frames expressed externally.

Infrastructure works are due to start in September 2004, including the construction of a new motorway junction. These works will therefore take place before the final decision about the main development has been made. However, the film studios are essential to the development as a whole and it is hoped that construction work on these buildings will start around April 2005. The developers are hoping for an early decision on the silent stages, so that they too can proceed. They are confident of a ready market for these facilities, which are seen as an economic buffer given the cyclical nature of the film industry.

Panel's response

The Panel recognised that this was an exciting development, with major significance in terms of its size, location, and budget of £80m. As such, it is important that the proposals address sustainability issues. The environmental statement deals with the likely impact on roads and rail links of what is effectively a brownfield site in a green area. There is the possibility of a new railway station, and a Section 106 agreement covers the provision of coach links and the adoption of travel plans by future occupiers. The public right of way running east/west and previously disrupted by the mine workings, will be restored and made compatible with the need for security. Stone from the site will be reused in the construction. Energy demand from the grid is anticipated to be low, as the film makers bring their own generators.

The landscape architects, Davies Light Associates, have found greater crested newts and dormice on the site, along with water birds attracted to the newly formed lake, and measures are in place to protect and enhance the ecological environment in general, and species habitats in particular.

Questions were asked about the nature of the leisure development – would it be a theme park? The developer stressed that there would not be conventional rides on offer, but rather

electronic simulation experiences and audiovisual installations. It would be an under cover facility, open year round.

The need for a newly created junction on the M4 was accepted. It was acknowledged that once the motorway junction was built, a business park or similar development would be almost inevitable. Development across the motorway to the south (within the Vale of Glamorgan), which would be facilitated by the new junction, is not envisaged by the planning authority within the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the Panel is concerned about the inevitable strong pressures for development around motorway interchanges, and is disappointed that an alternative junction design (such as a 'trumpet' layout), which would physically deter connections to the south, has not been chosen. Main roads to the north and east, including the proposed new bypass, will be offered for adoption.

It was stated that the major buildings are to be of a high standard, but the Panel was disappointed to note that this intention had not been apparent in the designs illustrated for the initial phase. The main buildings will be purpose designed, but could be converted into offices at a future date. It was emphasised that the first buildings on the block would be critical in setting standards of quality and finish. Although these are envisaged as budget buildings (the silent stages), the developer accepted the point that they should set a precedent for a high quality of buildings and landscape. A landmark structure to signpost the development may be incorporated on or near the ridge.

The proposals, which are estimated to take 4-5 years to complete fully, include a film academy to train an indigenous workforce with the whole range of skills necessary to sustain this industry.

Summary

The Panel welcomed the opportunity of reviewing this scheme at such an early stage, and extended an invitation for the presenters to return to the Design Review process, as the scheme develops. It was suggested that a detailed design statement be part of a full planning application.

End