

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales

Design Review Report: 10 March 2004
Meeting Date / Material Submitted: 4 March 2004
Location: Site of former Corus works,
Ebbw Vale
Architects / Design Team: Building Design Partnership
Scheme Description: Learning Campus and other elements
of Masterplan
Public/Other Body: Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Welsh Development Agency

Present: Designers/Developers

Hamish Munro, WDA	Kevin Nield, BGCBC
Steve Smith, BGCBC	Chris Harding, BDP
Richard Crook, BGCBC	Viv Davies, UWCN

Present: Design Review Panel

John Punter	Rob Firth	Ed Colgan
Cindy Harris	Mike Biddulph	
Alan Francis	Lyn Owen	

Observing

Carole-Anne Davies, DCFW
Steve Trigg, South Wales Police
Professor Zhu, China Academy of Urban Planning and Design

Presentation

The presentation was opened by the Project Director, Kevin Nield, giving the background to the proposed development. There is a high level of deprivation in the Blaenau Gwent area, exacerbated by the closure of the Corus steel works. The area is a European Union designated Objective One area and a key aim of regeneration activity in the locality is to raise levels of educational attainment and increase skills. The development of a Lifelong Learning facility is a vital step towards achieving this. The potential regeneration effect of a development combining further/higher education with leisure and cultural opportunities is considerable. The Learning Campus will accommodate 3500 students, and provide a replacement leisure centre, three sports fields, a new theatre, business units, and some limited commercial outlets linked to the overall educational function. The project forms a key part of the Corus Recovery Package, and is supported by the National Assembly for Wales.

Chris Harding from BDP pointed out that his work so far has run parallel with the existing masterplan, of which the Learning Campus is a relatively small part. The site of 25,000 square metres is a long and thin, dead flat, sunken site on the edge of the town of Ebbw Vale. There is a level change of 25 metres between the site and the town and this presents major challenges. BDP have been exploring options on building footprints and layout, looking particularly at creating links across the valley towards landmarks in the town (such as Christ Church) and to the former general office of the steel works with its distinctive clock tower. Microclimatic studies including sun path diagrams and wind direction have also been

carried out. Existing basements on site could be filled with water and used as cooling reservoirs and water features.

The centre of the campus has been located as near as possible to the town, linking the town centre with the railway station – provisionally located to the south of the retained Steelworks offices.

The two favoured approaches to general layout have been characterised as

- a 'learning street' – with concentrated activity during daytime and evening, providing a strong link with the town and protecting more peripheral areas, and
- a 'suncatcher' arrangement with buildings wrapped around sunny sheltered outdoor spaces

The architect emphasised that the project is still in its very early stages, and they are working without the benefit of a clear brief. However, sustainability will be an integral part of this development and this had led the architect to explore some options of renewable, sustainable heating systems (eg biomass CHP) and on site water treatment (eg reed beds).

Representatives from Blaenau Gwent CBC stressed the rather fragile balance between this new development and a struggling town centre, and this concern was echoed later by members of the Panel. Hamish Munro from WDA emphasised the need for the scheme to be commercially viable. Concern was also expressed about the likely costs of the recreation space on expensively reclaimed land, and possible conflict with a tight urban form.

Response from the Panel

The Panel evaluated the scheme as an exploratory design given the imprecise brief and its vague relationship to the Master Plan brought before DCFW and reviewed late in 2003.

Panel members were pleased to see that key linkage and transport issues for the site and its surroundings were being addressed. The pros and cons of the current station location were explored, the general feeling being that it should be as near to the town centre as is practicable. In this scheme it has been moved further to the east away from the town. Limited parking will be provided at the station (Victoria station two miles to the south will have Park & Ride facilities and bus links). A bus route will run through the length of the site.

The architect had developed a central square for the campus, and created a strong route into the town centre using major buildings to ensure surveillance and shelter and to make the steep ascent to the town as pleasant as possible. The Panel considered that the Campus remained segregated from the town and this would undermine regeneration aims. DCFW recommended close consideration of potential development sites on the west side of the A4046 for associated development (residences and the like). Also critical was the de-trunking of this road so that it could become an urban street rather than the town by pass. Small scale, scattered interventions within the town would help to ensure the future integration of town and campus.

Because of the sunken nature of the site, the Panel considered that the roofscape would be particularly important, and should be diverse but work together as a whole unit. The Panel considered that the playing fields would be better located on the east side of the site, taking

full advantage of the afternoon sun. This would also bring the new residential development nearer to the town but also into the shadow of the steep western slopes of the valley.

Overall the Panel were concerned about the urbanity of the scheme which was particularly compromised by the placing of three playing fields on the north west side of the site; working against the integration of the new development with the southern part of the town, and depriving the northern part of the redevelopment of the critical mass necessary to sustain commercial use.

This aspect also undermines the new railway station, whose catchment is further impaired by moving it to the eastern margins of the site. There are other under-utilised playing fields in the vicinity and the key concern at the northern end of the Corus site must be to achieve a compact, mixed use development that reinforces the town centre and takes full advantage of public transport opportunities.

The Panel thought that more high density housing and workshop/studio complexes could add value to this scheme, and that greater consideration should be given to how the "campus" will integrate with other types of development. In this respect there is a curious lack of relationship between the masterplan, which carefully considered the development of the site as an extension to the town, and the campus proposals as they are emerging.

The importance of a commitment in the brief to sustainable solutions including energy provision and waste water treatment was emphasised. Viv Davies of UWCN was enthusiastic about the potential educational resource of the buildings, as a living example of sustainable development. The Panel welcomed the range of sustainability ideas which the architect had brought to his designs. However DCFW will need to be further convinced of the real will to achieve this in line with Welsh Assembly Government policy and WDA strategy.

The architectural liaison officer from South Wales Police noted that many young people would be drawn to the site, especially at evenings and weekends, and it was important that a certain degree of 'self-policing' was built in. He recommended involving the architectural liaison officer from Gwent police when appropriate in the design process.

Summary

The Design Review Panel was pleased to have an opportunity to comment on this exciting scheme at such a formative stage, and that the presentation was attended by all parties concerned with the development.

The Panel was somewhat mystified at the way that the campus plan ignored much of the rationale of the Corus site masterplan, and particularly the way that it moved the railway station and fundamentally shifted the road pattern. A general view was that the Learning Campus must become an integral part of the town rather than the town being built around the campus and its sports fields. The idea of the "learning street" is a powerful one for this project, and provides an ideal means of linking the town centre to this new community. Unlike the "suncatcher" design it does not require wholesale redesign of the masterplan.

The Learning Campus can provide a very effective 'bridge' between the town centre and the new community, and the architect has some excellent ideas about how this can be achieved. But it must work as a piece of town, backed by residential and employment areas that will feed its commercial and cultural facilities, and be effectively linked into the road

pattern to ensure easy servicing, public transport and movement. In effect the Learning Centre must take greater cognisance of the masterplan and use its opportunities and constraints more creatively. Then both the educational facility and the town will benefit from the synergies created by a large resident and student population, and the dual use of facilities will become a reality.

The Panel was of the view that a robust business case is now required to be developed for the Learning Centre establishing just what could be built and what mix of uses could be accommodated in the scheme. Care had to be taken not to undermine the economically fragile town centre, while also ensuring that the educational premises were fully integrated with residential, cultural, recreational and commercial uses and facilities of the new community.

The Panel was keen to see the commitment to sustainable built forms, energy efficiency and ecological site planning developed, both as educational and construction opportunities. There is an early opportunity to consult the Centre for Alternative Technology in mid Wales on possibilities for implementing this commitment.

As a footnote the Panel is dismayed to see the community hospital located in an inaccessible location at the southern end of the site instead of close to the town centre and the public transport hub, again contradicting the master plan.

Further Assistance

DCFW and its Design Review Panel are willing to meet again with the project/design team and the WDA/Council should this be considered useful. They are particularly keen to see an innovative project like this succeed not just because of its regeneration potential in Ebbw Vale but because of the lessons it might offer other Welsh towns with similar challenges.

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