

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales

Design Review Report:	13 May 2004
Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	6 May 2004
Scheme and location:	Multi storey car park refurbishment New build retail/residential, Ebbw Vale
Architects:	Holder Mathias Stephen Hill, Justin Williams
Local Authority:	Blaenau Gwent CBC Richard Crook, Julie Smith, Jacqueline Daniell
Owner/Developer:	Sterling Developers
Public body:	WDA, Hamish Munro
Planning Status:	Full planning application approved with conditions
Design Review Panel Members:	John Punter, Cindy Harris, Ed Colgan, Paul Vanner, Lyn Owen, Alan Francis, Nigel Hanson
Observing	Marcus Blayney, UWE Steve Trigg SW Police

Presentation

The Panel was reminded by Jacqueline Daniell that the design framework for Ebbw Vale was the subject of a DCFW Design Review in autumn 2003. This is the first major town centre scheme to come to fruition since then. It is a comprehensive proposal for the whole triangle between Market Square and the A4046 to the north, including the public realm and main access routes into the town. Previous schemes had not addressed the whole area in all its aspects. A design competition was won by Holder Mathias Architects in July 2003. The situation is slightly complicated by the fact that the Council do not own the car park, but are responsible for its upkeep for the next 66 years.

The architect also emphasised that this was intended as a holistic exercise in urban design, including refurbishment and new build. The intention for the new block was for a prominent building on the corner addressing Market Square, partly to help detract visually from the car park. A unifying architectural device is employed to link the separate elements of the scheme together, using the same material (stainless steel) for the car park cladding and the canopy roof.

The car park facility, which is currently unpleasantly dark, poorly maintained and underused, will have increased daylight levels introduced by removing a central section. The size of this section is not yet finalised, and there is pressure from the

owner to avoid loss of space. Increased daylight round the edges will be provided by replacing the current opaque cladding with a more transparent arrangement. The nature of the cladding is the subject of a planning condition, and the Planning Committee have chosen the fine, close-linked mesh option with protruding window surrounds.

The northern ground-floor frontage of the car park will be animated by the provision of a new glazed shop-front to the large retail unit.

An earlier plan to incorporate a wind turbine big enough to power lighting in the car park proved unrealistic. A new lift and staircase tower will replace the old one on the east side, helping to form a gateway to the town. Pedestrian links will be improved and there is a longer term aspiration for de-trunking the main access road to the north. The scheme has been developed in the context of the whole town and the proposed learning campus.

Panel's response

The panel was reassured that there would be ground floor parking for the disabled and level access to the main street. The link would be via the retail unit within the ground floor of the car park, or to Market Square via James Street. Access to the service yard was discussed.

Concern was expressed about the opaque nature of the canopy roof. Although there will be a glazed strip against the existing shop fronts, it was considered that the space created underneath the canopy would be dark and uninviting. The panel suggested that a wholly glazed roof be reconsidered, which could make the visual link with the car park cladding in its trim and edging materials. There was a need to ensure adequate protection of the supporting columns from careless impact.

The new building will maintain an east/west pedestrian link, and this route has now lost the 'kink' shown in earlier designs. The three storeys of residential units above the ground floor retail will be deck access. It was suggested that ideally the existing low-rise middle block should be rebuilt higher, helping to mask the problematic gable end of the car park. The new block could then be used as temporary decant accommodation.

The panel thought that there was scope for softening the cladding on the car park, to make it look less cage-like. A robust edge detail on the mesh panels was essential to prevent deterioration. Ideas for enlivening the facades were discussed, such as installing a 'big screen' in one of the window openings.

The retention of a smaller wind turbine, which would have no effective power generation, appears rather tokenistic and conveys the wrong message. The sustainability agenda is better addressed by achieving good daylight levels within the car park.

The police architectural liaison officer advised that if the Council wished to achieve secure car park status, the necessary design features would need to be included as early as possible. The ideal was to have a permeable site but with controlled access, possibly using a management scheme and staffing the car park.

Summary

The Panel was pleased to see this scheme for improving the urban fabric of Ebbw Vale. In terms of planning permission, the main outstanding detail was the nature of the car park cladding and the Panel endorsed the councillors' decision on that.

Ebbw Vale Town Centre has within its framework an integrated public art strategy previously presented to DCFW, within which were proposals for inventive treatments for the exterior of the car park. These include lighting proposals and a number of approaches to cladding. It was not made clear to the panel why this potential has not yet been fully explored.

Ideally, we would like to have seen a more intensive development on this site, to include the existing line of shops and offices, but we were pleased to see housing and retail included in the new block. Concern about the canopy roof, and the nature of the space beneath, remains.

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