

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales (DCFW)

Design Review Report

Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	2 July 2003
Location:	Snowdonia
Architects / Design Team:	Furneaux Stewart
Scheme Description:	Snowdon Summit Visitor Centre
Public/Other Body:	Snowdonia National Park Authority

Snowdon Summit Building

This is a unique project: a new building on a site of international importance that would be considered entirely inappropriate for any development if it were not for particular historical circumstances. There have been buildings and other structures on the summit of Snowdon for nearly 200 years and railway access for over 100 years. The existing café was built in the 1930s to a design by Clough Williams Ellis one of Wales best loved architects. However the building was not one of his most distinguished designs and its form and construction were inappropriate for the rigours of the climate at this altitude. It is clear that it cannot be economically restored to (and maintained in) its original condition. The design in any case is not appropriate to current needs or perceptions of environmental sensitivity.

The design approach

The Design Commission accepts the logic of the National Park Authority's approach to the future of the summit buildings. The existing structure, although of historic interest, is not of sufficient architectural quality to justify the high cost of restoration and maintenance. Demolition of the building and the restoration of the summit to its "natural " state is not possible given the existence and popularity of the railway. The only reasonable course is the replacement of the existing building with a new building that is well adapted to the exposed environment and meets the needs of all who visit the summit.

The overall design strategy is sound. Building on the footprint of the existing building and using part of its structure minimises disruption to the site. The proposed building accommodates the required functions in a compact and efficient building form.

At first sight the curved "floating" roof form appears to be a fashionable design feature that may quickly become dated. However it is clear on more detailed investigation that the form has a sound functional rationale and responds clearly and directly to environmental conditions.

The limited palette of materials is appropriate to the site. The extensive use of natural stone from nearby sources ensures that the building blends well with the stone that forms the major part of the visual context. The large areas of glass that allow visitors to enjoy the unparalleled views are cleverly handled to minimise reflections that could be very disruptive in this sensitive environment. The use of a woven steel for the shutters (an essential feature given the exposed and isolated setting) is a sensible response to a difficult design problem.

In general terms we find the proposal well considered in relation the unique context and historical background, the extreme nature of the climate at this altitude and the special functional problems that arise from the building's location and pattern of use.

We do however have some concerns about the detailed resolution of the design.

We believe that in reality the floating roof would be visually heavier and less elegant than the photomontage (on the cover of the *Non-technical Summary*) suggests. The supporting columns and glazing bars appear to be very much more slender in those images than in the technical drawings. In the photomontage the underside of the roof appears concave whereas in the technical drawings it is convex -- this would mean that in reality little or no daylight would be visible from the chosen viewpoint.

The two irregularly shaped stone-clad elements (especially the one containing the entrance from the station) that flank the main café space detract from the simplicity of the conception. We recognise the need to provide a draught lobby at the entrance from the station and an office with a good view of the lines and platforms, but we are not convinced that the only way to accommodate these needs is a solid, stone clad element.

We note that lines radiating from the highest point on the summit generate the skewed geometry of the main space and that this is contrasted with the rectilinear geometry that derives from the existing building and the line of the railway. However we suggest that this idea loses its force when so much of the detailed design (for example the counters) of the interior is forced to conform to the radial discipline. A simpler more direct approach would more effectively mark the juxtaposition of the two geometries.

Conclusion

We consider that this proposal, on a culturally controversial and environmentally highly sensitive site, to be a thoughtful response to a demanding brief. The overall conception responds boldly but respectfully to the extraordinary context. Our reservations are essentially matters of detail. We believe the building can be improved through simplification.

END