



Design Review Report	15 July 2004
Meeting Date / Material Submitted:	8 July 2004
Location:	Victoria Dock, Caernarfon
Scheme Description:	Residential, retail and office accommodation
Architects / Design Team:	Willacy Horsewood Partnership (Mark Willacy) Brock Carmichael
Developer:	WJ Developments (Rob Willis)
Public/Other Body:	Gwynedd County Council (Iwan Evans) WDA, (Jeff St Paul) Cadw (John Pavitt)
Planning Status:	Previous application called in by WAG
Design Review Panel Members Present:	
John Punter (chair)	Mike Biddulph
Cindy Harris (officer)	Ed Colgan
Lyn Owen	Jonathan Adams
Nick Davies	Nigel Hanson

Presentation

On behalf of the WDA, Jeff St Paul emphasised the huge importance of this mixed use development to the regeneration of Caernarfon. It is vital to have a private sector catalyst which will increase visitor numbers, length of stay and repeat visits. Victoria Dock is the only remaining sizeable development site close to the town centre. Formerly heavily polluted with hydrocarbons, it has now been fully remediated.

The architect referred to the proximity of the walled town and adjacent topography as key factors in determining the design development. The new Arts Centre currently nearing completion is a welcome neighbour to the south of the site. There are significant constraints imposed by conflicting pedestrian desire lines and traffic movement to the south east of the site.

Residential uses are proposed to the northern and western edges of the site to take full advantage of the views across Menai Strait. Retail use is restricted to the

southern corner to link with the town and the Arts Centre. Earlier schemes have been amended to increase permeability and urban grain, but still maintain a sense of enclosure and protection. The current proposal shows a bold use of massing and materials (many locally sourced), with lighter, colourful, rendered surfaces on the interior streets. Height and scale are generally appropriate. Public spaces are proposed to the south east outside the Arts Centre, and to the north west next to the jetty.

An urban design analysis has now been undertaken which sets out the historical and architectural context of this development. Climatic factors such as prevailing wind direction are being used to inform the design and a sun mapping exercise is underway. There is a possibility that the drawbridge to the dock may be reinstated, allowing a continuous waterside promenade from the castle to this site and the ferry terminal and improving the potential pedestrian draw through the site. An appropriate scale of development and use of local materials ensures that this scheme sits well in the context of a world heritage site in broad terms. A retail impact study has demonstrated no adverse affect on existing retail outlets. The nature of the eventual commercial and retail use will inform the extent of car parking required.

Developer Perspective

The developer described the loss of confidence and credibility with potential tenants, due to the call-in of the previous application. This has compounded the difficulty of predicting the likely nature of retail and commercial uses on the site. The exact mix of development could still change, although earlier consideration of a hotel development proved to be not commercially viable.

Planning and Local Authority Perspective

Iwan Evans from Gwynedd CC praised the inclusive nature of the design process so far and hoped that the scheme could proceed with maximum agreement from all sides. There is still an Article 14 Direction on this site, which it is hoped will be removed, but this would require the support of previous objectors. The Countryside Council for Wales has expressed an interest in relocating on this site, which would make them a major end user, and Gwynedd CC support this idea. In spite of the environmental assessment which remains outstanding, Gwynedd CC think that the scheme is now ready to go forward with a new planning application.

Cadw Perspective

For Cadw, John Pavitt re-stated their prime concern of protecting existing monuments and historic fabric. They intend to declare a buffer zone around the world heritage site, to provide additional protection for ancient monuments, and this zone includes the whole of Victoria Dock. He considered that the scale of the development does not prejudice views of the town walls or the setting of the heritage site, and should enhance the visitor experience of the town. The use of local traditional materials is welcome, as is the hard landscaping and planting on adjacent slopes and building roofs. More work is needed to develop the details of the scheme which will be crucial to its success, but Cadw are happy for the current revised proposal to be the subject of a new planning application.

Panel's Response

The panel is very aware that this development has been through a difficult process, with a lack of identified users leading to a poorly defined brief. It is also conscious of the fact that design review can add to these complications and threaten the

whole viability of the scheme. It is only too aware that repeated discussions can lead to discarded ideas being recommended and that this is no help to the development team. The panel is seeking not just to make this a fine built addition to the town of Caernarfon, but to give the project much greater commercial viability and longevity as an anchor for the regeneration of the town.

There remains a lack of necessary detail in the material as presented. The urban design analysis does not appear to inform the scheme having been prepared recently and still being incomplete. Residential elements in particular are not adequately developed and the lack of section drawings means that the massing is unclear. This is a case where a model - even a very simple one - would have been invaluable.

The proposed scheme is similar to many other standard developments, and is not distinctive or inspiring.

Layout

The panel is concerned at the lack of clarity relating to intended pedestrian flow through the site and the lack of clear visual goals or desirable destinations. It appears that every route into the scheme is closed off visually. It is important that each street has vistas right through to the water, or views into more open and inviting spaces, while still protecting them from prevailing winds. Details should seek opportunities for co protection from the weather on this exposed shoreline site, so as to encourage year round use of the commercial facilities. The panel would be keen to see a new lifting bridge at the dock entrance to encourage more people to walk to and from the town to the northern edge of the scheme.

The proposed layout does not reflect the grid or the urban grain of Caernarfon, and the enclosed public spaces need to be made more generous, more comfortable climatically and more convincing as places where the public might linger. These spaces need to have a clear purpose and character and to be supported by appropriate uses and entrances. If the intention is to reproduce the grain of the old town street pattern then the routes through the development should not be of uniform width. The streets are currently too narrow to be comfortable and need to be at least five metres wide.

The interface between the residential and commercial premises remains unresolved and the streets between the two are not convincing as attractive routes or places to live or work. There needs to be more clarity on how the access, parking and service areas between the housing and the commercial would be detailed and function, as they are extensive areas of potentially barren aspect.

Architectural Design

The residential blocks are reminiscent of social housing, and lack any architectural distinction or imagination. The obvious difference in floor-to-floor heights between the residential and commercial buildings needs to be better resolved architecturally where they are juxtaposed.

The articulated facades of the commercial buildings on the waterfront are repetitive and appear to have no obvious function. It is suggested that some of the recesses could be amalgamated to provide impromptu shelter. Shop windows need to be seen more clearly and office accommodation needs more light to ensure lettability and good working conditions. The facades of the basement and ground

floor car parking areas should be carefully handled so that they do not deter pedestrian activity.

Landscaping

The landscaping should follow the successful resolution of the site planning not precede it. The panel welcomes the intention to landscape and green the roofs but is concerned at how this will relate to the office accommodation and how it will be accessed and maintained

Summary

The general view of the panel is that, despite significant progress, this scheme is not yet ready to form the basis of a planning application for a successful development.

Recent work such as the urban design analysis has not been fully digested, and now needs to be fully incorporated into the site planning and design.

In this respect we would suggest the following matters of principle be addressed:

- Reconsideration of the internal street configuration & building footprint to create a simpler street pattern and form whilst maintaining permeability within the overall scheme
- Further thought being given to the nature, quality and treatment of the space between the residential development and the commercial blocks
- Reconsideration of the public squares with a view to creating meaningful, active and safe spaces
- Revisions to the design and elevational treatment of the residential blocks to reflect the quality and character of the site context. The panel have no objections to a more modern approach closer to that adopted for the internal streets of the commercial block design. (NB there is no objection to the scale /height of the development)
- The current scheme lacks any consideration of sustainable development, and there is concern that the deep plan office spaces will not achieve good day lighting or be capable of natural ventilation.
- The reinstatement of the drawbridge would help provide a natural flow of pedestrian traffic throughout the site and would be an important boost to the scheme.

The main potential occupier, CCW, should be encouraged to persist with their interest in the site and perhaps their needs could help to shape the nature of the office development which remains very vague.

The panel fully appreciates the difficulties and delays which have dogged this scheme and we appreciate the huge efforts that have been made to meet the objections raised by DCFW and others. We want the scheme to succeed and to see a vibrant, high quality development which enhances the attraction of this historic town and brings increased retail and commercial activity to the area. We believe that our comments will strengthen the commercial viability of the scheme as well as improving the way it relates to the World Heritage Site.

End

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