

## **Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales**

### **Design Review Report**

<b>Meeting Date / Material Submitted:</b>	<b>21 July 2003</b>
<b>Location:</b>	<b>Victoria Dock, Caernarfon</b>
<b>Architects / Design Team:</b>	<b>Willacy Horswood</b>
<b>Scheme Description:</b>	<b>Retail &amp; residential</b>
<b>Public/Other Body:</b>	<b>Gwynedd Council; WJ Developments</b>

The site is adjacent to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victoria Dock Basin on the northern edge of the historic centre of Caernarfon and forms part of the setting of a World Heritage Site. The development site also commands spectacular views of the Menai Straits and Snowdonia.

The proposed building includes ground floor retail units, leisure facilities and upper floor residential units grouped around an open court, which accommodates 64 parking spaces. Vehicular access is via a bridge approximately 4 metres above ground floor level from higher ground to the east.

The provision of significant floor space to attract retail occupants is a key element of the scheme. There are no listed buildings on the site but several nearby structures including the town walls, the dock walls and slipway are listed.

### **Planning status**

The planning committee of Gwynedd County Council has approved the application for full planning consent subject to agreement being reached between officers and the applicant on alterations to the design to meet concerns that have been raised by Cadw and others.

A meeting was held on 11 June 2003 the offices of Gwynedd County Council attended by representatives of GCC, WDA the WJ Developments, Cadw, the architect and DCFW. At the meeting the council officers, architect, the developer and the WDA explained the history of the project and described the design proposals. Following these presentations the representatives of Cadw and DCFW gave their initial responses to the proposals. The DCFW while welcoming in principle a mixed-use development on the site expressed serious reservations about the bulk, form and detail of the building proposed in the sensitive historic setting adjacent to the World Heritage Site. It was agreed at the end of the meeting that the applicant's agent would submit a revised design taking account of the reservations expressed. It was agreed that the architects should be asked to reconsider the proposals and submit a revised design within a month although some issues although some felt that this was an optimistic target.

Following the meeting DCFW prepared a note of the proceedings that included a summary of comments on the proposals by Cadw and DCFW. This report is DCFW's second appraisal of the proposal.

## The Revised Proposal

The applicant's agent submitted amended drawings very soon after the meeting (received by GCC on 18 June). These were forwarded to DCFW on 25 June (see list of drawings below). The amended drawings show minimal changes to the design. They have a positive but limited effect on the scheme by allowing some pedestrian movement through the site at ground level and introducing some natural light into the centre of the plan through a glazed atrium.

## Comments by DCFW

DCFW is unable to support the proposals as presented on 11 June or in their revised form. In coming to our conclusion we have considered a number of issues, which in our view lie at the core of good architectural and urban design practice. These were summarised in our notes on the meeting of 11 July. The key points are repeated below with additional comments in italics that respond to the amended proposals.

**Permeability** – The provision of a variety of public routes (preferably open 24 hours) through a large project at ground level (the related concept of urban “grain” is often referred to). A comparison of the footprint of the proposed building with that of the town centre streets a few hundred metres away reveals the proposals to be quite monolithic.

*The revised proposal includes a second covered public route from the eastern edge of the site to the centre of the proposed building meeting the existing proposed route from the south in a glazed atrium. This is an improvement but does not address the essential problem of the monolithic, impermeable character of the scheme as a whole.*

**Relationship to context**– Successful urban design and architectural proposals usually have “...a considered relationship with the character of the context.” (CABE, *Design Review* p10). It is surprising that in this case, given the strong variation character of the context on each side of this essentially rectangular site, the appearance of all elevations is similar. We were not shown any work that suggested that a rigorous contextual analysis had been carried out – and if it had, it clearly had no effect on the design proposals.

*No amendments have been made to the design to address this central concern. A considered response to context is fundamental to current planning policy guidance and literature on best practice urban design and is exceptionally important on a site as prominent and important as this one. This proposal shows no evidence of understanding of the importance of these issues and we have seen no evidence of any attempt to explain how the proposals relate to the setting.*

**Fitness for purpose**– It is fundamental to good design that the needs of the users are met. It is hard to imagine from the limited information available that this project would provide spaces that would fully meet the needs of residents and other users. While it may be the case that adequate floor space is provided for the various activities it appears that in some cases it would be difficult to provide for even the most basic functional needs (for example in the tourist cinema and the office workshop buried deep in the plan).

*The introduction of natural light into the centre of the plan goes some way to improving the quality of the spaces in the centre of the lower floors of the building. We note that the tourist cinema has been removed from the proposal, which reduces the variety of activities offered in the development.*

**Sustainable development** – DCFW is specifically charged with promoting sustainable design as a key component of design quality. It is surprising that there is no evidence of a response to the idea of sustainable design in this proposal. The lower two floors would have to rely almost wholly on artificial lighting and ventilation. (The TACP *Design Brief* includes naturally lit internal courts as a fundamental “design principle”). A design based on one or more through routes at ground level would facilitate natural lighting and ventilation and create more active frontage.

*The introduction of the additional public route and atrium goes some way to address this concern -- allowing some natural light and the possibility of natural ventilation into the centre of the plan on the lower levels. It also allows for the possibility of more active frontage although there is no evidence that the designers have taken advantage of this possibility in planning the ground and first floors.*

**Architectural coherence** – Successful architecture generally has a definable order or internal logic that relates the parts to the whole. Designs that are successful in terms of urban design make connections between the organising themes of the building and those of the setting. In this case there is perhaps a simply described architecture – a two story rectangular base with a perimeter block of housing above – but it is quite inappropriate to the functional elements of the brief and the character of the context.

*In this respect the scheme remains entirely unchanged. In our view the proposal is a monolithic design which bears no relationship to the setting. The planning is diagrammatic, lacking the considered design development appropriate to a detailed planning application for a project of this significance. For example there is no indication of structure which, when it is considered, will have a decisive effect on the quality of the spaces provided, particularly on the ground & first floors. Equally no distinction is made on the plans between solid and transparent elements – walls and windows – which is fundamental to the understanding of architectural character.*

*The elevational “treatment” indicates an attempt to create a coherent architectural composition but in our view the result is both architecturally unsatisfying and entirely inappropriate to the setting. We note above the fact that the appearance of the building is surprisingly similar on all four external elevations, given the dramatic variation in the nature of the aspect in each direction. The general symmetry of the elevations and their division into two clearly defined horizontal layers serves to emphasise the monolithic nature of the design. A design strategy that considered the project as series of separate but related buildings would, in our view, have been more likely to succeed.*

*The elevations, although the element of the proposals to which most attention has apparently been given, remain diagrammatic and in several respects are impossible to reconcile with the plans (particularly because no windows or balconies are shown on plans). While it is impossible to determine from the plans which walls are glazed and which are solid the elevations show the majority of the ground level wall area in solid black, a common drawing convention used to indicate glazing, including shop fronts and windows. It seems likely that this convention is being used on the ground floor to indicate*

*floor-to-ceiling glazing, perhaps with some element of opaque cladding. But large areas of the first floor elevations are indicated in the same manner – is this glazing or opaque cladding?*

The level of detail provided in the documents presented at the meeting was inadequate to form a view of many aspects of the proposal. For example no detail was provided on the nature of the open space at second floor level that forms the shared space for the housing or the practical detail of servicing, refuse removal, public circulation space.

*No additional detail has been provided in the amended application. This is a detailed application for a very large project on an exceptionally sensitive site (which forms an important element of the setting of a World Heritage Site). It is hard to understand how a local planning authority can come to a balanced view on the eventual architectural quality of a proposal building on the basis of the quantity and quality of information provided in this case. Equally it would not appropriate to grant planning approval and reserve matters of detailed design – given the inappropriate form of the scheme as a whole.*

DCFW fully understands of the importance of economic drivers in achieving viable development and believe that it is possible to achieve a project that meets essential economic and financial criteria, but also achieves an excellent design outcome that will enhance the historic context of Caernarfon. DCFW continues to support the principle of mixed use development on this site but is not convinced that the scheme, taking into account the proposed amendments, meets the standard of architectural and urban design quality that this important site demands.

## **Conclusion**

The Commission is unable to give its support to the proposals for the development of land at Victoria Dock Caernarfon. The overriding consideration in coming to this view is the lack of a considered relationship with the context of the development. We regret that there is no evidence – in the form of drawings, explanatory text or in the design proposals themselves – that the designers have carried out any analysis of the formal structure or visual character of the historic fabric of the castle and town and its landscape setting. The proposals involve the construction of a building of very substantial volume. We are prepared to be convinced that this volume of building can be accommodated on the site but a much more creative and subtle design approach will be required to achieve this. The approach selected by the architect serves to emphasise the scheme's bulk rather than mask it.

The architect explained during the meeting of 11 June that the external appearance is intended to have a maritime or dockside character to reflect its location and the form is intended to respond in size and scale to the nearby Edwardian castle. The drawings suggest a very uncomfortable juxtaposition of a repetitive and undistinguished glazed retail facade at the lower levels with a generic neo-vernacular domestic styling applied to the upper levels. We see no connection with dockside architecture – or local vernacular tradition. The suggestion that the proposal should be perceived as similar in size and scale to the castle is completely inappropriate. The castle is the centrepiece of the World Heritage Site and we would expect any proposal for development in close proximity to it to respect its special character.

## **Appendix A**

### Document Log – Schedule of Revised Drawings

Willacy Horeswood

WH 755 PE01 Rev B

WH 755 PE02 Rev B

WH 755 GF01 Rev D

WH 755 FF01 Rev B

**End of Report**