

Design Review Report

Merchant Place

DCFW Ref: N273

Meeting of 17th February 2022



Review Status

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Issue date
Scheme location
Scheme description
Scheme reference number
Planning status

PUBLIC

17th February 2022
1st March 2022
Cardiff
6th Form education & accommodation
N273
Pre-application

Declarations of Interest

Panel members, observers and other relevant parties are required to declare ***in advance*** any interests they may have in relation to the Design Review and meeting Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

Ian Carter of Expedite declared that he is also a DCFW Commissioner. He attended on behalf of Expedite at this meeting. All were content to proceed following this declaration.

Consultations to Date

This is the first design review of proposals for these two sites. Pre-application discussion have taken place with the local planning authority.

The Proposals

The proposed development seeks to provide a new campus for Cardiff Sixth Form College (CSFC) in the heart of Cardiff Bay which will allow their relocation from leased, outdated and unsuitable (in the long term) accommodation in Cardiff Centre. The proposals include restoring, converting and extending the Grade II listed buildings at Merchant Place and Cory's Building to provide accommodation that meets the teaching needs of the collage and deliver a permanent new base for CSFC within Cardiff. A second site will provide new build residential accommodation for pupils.

Main Points

The Design Commission fully supports the principle of the re-use of the existing Merchant Place and Cory's Building for the proposed use and supports the retention of Cardiff Sixth Form College within Cardiff through the proposed new bespoke teaching and accommodation facilities. The passion and ambition of the client is evident and commendable, however timescales are constrained so a very focused but thorough design process is needed to meet the necessary deadlines and match the stated ambition.

Several concerns were raised by the Commission regarding the proposals and the thinking that has informed them. We recognise that the proposals were presented as early ideas, but the programme requires rapid acceleration. Therefore, it is essential that these are addressed before the proposals move forward as they will be very difficult to address at a later date. The following key points highlight the main areas of focus. DCFW would

welcome the opportunity to spend more time working with the client, developer and design team to explore these themes in more detail and an early booking of an additional meeting slot was recommended.

Analysis and Concept

The proposals for the Merchant Place and Cory's Building courtyard site leap to a solution that is disconnected from a thorough analysis process and exploration of ideas to successfully resolve the challenges and meet the ambition. The result is a form and mass that does not sit comfortably in relation to the existing buildings. There has been a focus on options for the 'jewel' element at the top of the building but a lack of testing of an overall solution to accommodating the required floor space. The overall massing of the new element in relation to the existing buildings is more important than one element at the top. For example, a taller building may be appropriate if it results in a more elegant and appropriate form.

A more robust process of learning from the existing buildings and responding to them needs to be undertaken. Diagrammatic exploration of the principle of how the new will relate to the existing would be helpful. There was a disconnect between the useful heritage assessment of the buildings and the proposals presented and it seems that more can be learnt and applied from this analysis. For example, the analysis of the heritage frontage as three layers and the translation of this into three blocks of mass within the new building is not convincing. The flat frontage of the existing buildings as part of an urban block is a much stronger design cue.

The ensemble of the restored buildings and the new insertion needs to work together to present a unified whole. More consideration and time are needed on this before moving on with the design.

The second site is different in context, but the design process has some of the same issues. The analysis is disconnected and there is a lack of a thorough testing of layout and massing.

All aspects of analysis and expertise within the team need to feed in meaningfully to the development of proposals. The environmental strategy, heritage assessment and precedent analysis can all help to shape a robust approach to the design that will help to justify the final proposals.

Environmental Strategy

We encourage the team to set more specific environmental performance targets that will help inform the design approach. This will inform energy, acoustics, daylight and ventilation and will need to work in the context of the restoration of the heritage buildings.

If 'Passive House principles' are being applied, the highly articulated façade of the accommodation building could present significant challenges with thermal bridging.

Other practical issues relating to the use of existing, listed building fabric will need to be considered, for example the use of potentially heavy sliding sash windows to provide ventilation and cooling, and the height and loading capacity of cast iron balustrades on existing staircases. The retention and re-use of such elements is welcomed but will require strategic approaches to ensure that there are no issues in use.

The integration of meaningful and accessible green space should be explored in addition to a realistic integration of any green wall proposals.

The proposals will adapt and reuse buildings that are over 100 years old. This ability to adapt and change over time should also be considered in relation to the new additions. A new piece of townscape is being created that should have longevity, potentially for the next 100 years.

Movement, Arrival, Circulation and Dwelling

Analysis of movement within and between the two proposed developments could help to inform treatment of the public realm and the location of entrances. All arrival points should be clear and welcoming but the proposed main entrance to the accommodation block for pupils currently presents as a narrow alleyway with little natural surveillance.

Consideration of what spaces within the existing buildings will be used by pupils will help to inform the circulation strategy as well as the 'feel' of the place and their connection with the history of the buildings. There is opportunity to create a very special atmosphere of pride and history in this unique setting that will also be a selling point, particularly for international students.

Within the residential accommodation block further exploration of 'home' and 'connection' would help to inform the configuration of rooms and spaces, particularly given the relatively young age of residents. Places to meet and connect are important within each six-bed cluster, but also between clusters. A feeling of domesticity within the flats and communal areas would help to create a more settling environment. Considerable work is still needed regarding orientation, form and massing and further detail will be needed on the layout and quality of living spaces as well as proposed external spaces in order for them to be successful.

Next Steps

It is important that time is spent at this stage to get the approach right and address the design challenges to provide successful solutions. The gaps identified in the points above need to be addressed before moving on to avoid the need to address them later when there is much less opportunity to do so positively and meaningfully. The design can move forward quickly once the key principles and response to analysis have been established.

The Design Commission welcomes further engagement to support this important project and we encourage the team to establish an additional date with more time to explore these aspects more fully.

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

Attendees

Client/Developer: Gareth Collier, Cardiff Sixth Form College

Architect/Design Team: Andrew Aust, Expedite
Mike Lister, Expedite
Ashley Davies, Ashley Davies Architects
Mike Hallam, Expedite
Ian Carter, Expedite

Planning Consultant: Emma Penson, DWD

Local Authority: Amanda Sutcliffe, Cardiff Council
Ross Cannon, Cardiff Council
Steve Ball, Cardiff Council

DCFW Design Review Panel

Chair: Jen Heal, Design Advisor, DCFW

Lead Panellist: Chris Jefford

Panel: Richard Woods

Angela Williams

John Lloyd

Efa Lois, Place Advisor DCFW

Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive DCFW

Observers: Barny Evans

Sian Baker