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Design Review Report

Jockey Street, Swansea

DCFW Ref: 115

Meeting of 20th October 2016



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 Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

Review Status

Meeting date	20 th October 2016
Issue date	7 th November 2016
Scheme location	Swansea
Scheme description	Student Accommodation
Scheme reference number	115
Planning status	Pre-application

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Declarations of Interest

None declared.

Consultations to Date

Pre-application consultation with the local authority is ongoing. This scheme was previously reviewed by the Design Commission in July 2016. This report should be read in conjunction with the report from the July review.

The Proposals

The site is located to the north of Swansea city centre and in close proximity to Swansea Railway Station. The site does not occupy a prominent position due to being located at a lower level to most of the surrounding buildings which screen it from the busy High Street. The site is adjacent to the main railway line and is occupied by a low-rise building and associated car park. The site is opposite Swansea Business School, the University's Main Building, and shares a roughly square block of land with two other buildings (Friendship House and Demarco's Dance Studio) of little architectural merit that will remain in situ.

The proposal is for a block of private student accommodation, consisting of mainly studio flats with a landscaped courtyard. The number of rooms and overall height has been reduced since the previous review. The proposal presented at this review was up to 14 storeys at its highest point.

Main Points in Detail

The following points summarise key issues from the review and should be considered to inform work ahead of making a planning application or engaging in further review:

Progress since previous review

The models and perspective sketches used to present the scheme at the review were particularly useful.

Progress has been made since the previous review and the input of the quantity surveyor and engineers to the design process has led to improvements. However, there are still many significant issues which are not yet resolved and need further work. There are also some ideas and strategies from previous iterations of the proposal which remain but are no longer appropriate and are compromising other aspects of the scheme.

Operational brief and design value

As with the previous review, the scheme is lacking a strong operational brief which is based on tested commercial viability. If a commercial student residence operator takes on the property, they will look for consideration of long term operational efficiency and realistic viability. If the design does not meet these requirements it will not be successful.

Whilst it is important that the scheme provides a quality of environment or service that makes it stand out from other student accommodation in the city, ambitions must be realistic and commercially viable. It may be sensible to focus on one unique selling point rather than many to achieve best overall value. For example, if it is established that the courtyard garden is the most important aspect, the scheme should be designed to get the best value from it. Locating all the building entrances off of the courtyard would assist in making it a lively, active space.

In reality, it is unlikely that residents will spend much time in connecting corridors, so unnecessary investment in views from the corridors into the courtyard will add little value overall.

A highly rational and efficient design can provide excellent quality. The double entrances and reception areas and single sided corridors in the scheme presented at the review will divert investment from good quality materials and finishes, for example. There are many inefficiencies which have been inherited from previous iterations of the scheme, such as the multiple main entrances. Now, it would be timely to review the scheme to make sure that each element is adding as much value as possible. This will enable the team to protect those elements which will deliver the best value and quality.

Setting out a strategic approach to value, quality and efficiency would help to guide the design process.

Public realm design, access and movement

As identified by the design team and the local authority, this scheme provides an opportunity to significantly improve the surrounding public realm and to create safe and

desirable walking and cycling connections in this part of the city. Public realm improvements can also be used to discourage anti-social behaviour in the area.

As with the previous options, vehicle access to the courtyard is shown. However, other aspects of the scheme have moved on and the team should assess whether or not it is still required. Removing the vehicle access could have advantages in terms of pedestrian priority, safety and security and may have an impact on the overall layout and site strategy.

The Commission strongly encourages the development of a public realm strategy through collaboration with the local authority planning and highways departments and consultation with those who occupy and manage adjacent buildings. As Jockey Street and John Street only provide access to this site and the adjacent buildings, there is potential for a pedestrian priority street to be created. This could dramatically improve the experience for pedestrians and cyclists using the street and tunnel under the railway, as well as creating a good entrance experience for residents. There would be minimal vehicle traffic, for which an on-street turning point could be provided. Good collaboration between the design team, planning authority and highways department from the pre-application stage through to delivery will be essential for this to happen successfully.

Landscape design

The landscape design has the potential to help stitch the scheme into the surrounding public realm and to provide a unique selling point for the scheme. However, there are many aspects of the landscape design which need to be carefully considered for these to be successful.

Overall, a good landscape design strategy is required. This should ensure that every bit of outside space has a purpose and is not left over or wasted. It is important that the detail of the landscape design then matches the purposes intended.

Environmental conditions need to be considered as part of the landscape strategy and realistic uses proposed in line with this. For example, the courtyard space will be largely overshadowed by the buildings, making it difficult to use as a social space for much of the year. Both the hard landscape and planting will need to be designed in response to analysis of environmental conditions and testing of proposals.

The proposal presented at the review showed large areas of steps in publically accessible areas. Whilst these could provide places for students to gather and add vibrancy to the streetscape, there is a risk that they could attract anti-social behaviour which the area is currently prone to. This scheme has the potential to reduce levels of anti-social behaviour in the area, but this is unlikely to happen immediately and the detail of the scheme is important in this respect. The scheme should appear welcoming but safe.

Large areas of steps and ramps are also likely to need many handrails which could lead to a cluttered appearance. It is important that handrails are shown on drawings where they are required so that a true representation of the scheme is given.

Inclusive design should be considered in all aspects but the level changes on site present a particular challenge. Ramps with a gradient greater than 1:20 will require handrails.

Landscape will play an important role in defining the permeability and security of the site. It should be made clear which parts of the landscape are accessible only to residents and their guests and which can be accessed by the public so that the landscape can be designed to reflect and reinforce the security/permeability strategy.

Materials, form, massing and articulation

There are a number of ways in which the circulation of the buildings could be organised and these will have a direct impact on the form, massing and proportion of circulation space required (and therefore the overall efficiency). There could be multiple vertical cores with minimal corridors or few cores with longer corridors. In the current proposal the two strategies appear to be competing with each other resulting in inefficiencies. The circulation strategy also needs to resolve the complicated level changes. It would be a useful exercise for the design team to quickly test and analyse a number of different options.

The simplification of the scheme since the previous review, driven by the quantity surveyor's input, is improving the scheme. However, the form, articulation and material palette are still relatively complex. Many ideas about student housing have been incorporated and are diluting each other. Further simplification and prioritisation would be beneficial - doing a few things really well would improve the proposal and help protect essential elements throughout delivery phases.

There is much value to be gained from repetition in a scheme of this nature which will contain many identical units. There is no reason to avoid uniformity where it is appropriate, as it can reduce unnecessary costs so that value can be added elsewhere.

Simplification of the form, articulation and material palette will allow more to be invested in good quality materials and fit out. Frequent changes of façade plane and junctions between materials will add cost to construction.

The 'tower' element has been reduced in scale since the previous review. However, any 'tall' building proposed will need to be fully justified in light of Swansea's tall building planning guidance. There would now be scope to remove the tower and spread the equivalent massing out over the footprint of the building to further simplify the proposal. Again, a quick testing of different options would be useful.

All massing and form options should be tested for their impact on key views from the surrounding streets and the wider city. Key views to be tested and illustrated should be agreed with the local planning authority.

The Design Commission would like to see the elevations designed in response to environment and internal room layouts. The report from the previous review, relating to environmental design, comfort and wellbeing, should be referred to as the design process progresses.

Further Review

The Design Commission would welcome the opportunity to review this scheme again, once designs have progressed, but well before a planning application is made. The team is urged to make early enquiries about future meeting dates due to high service demand.

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A Welsh language copy of this report is available upon request

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer:	(Not present)
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Design Review Panel:	
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