



DESIGN
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Design Review Report

Aberafan House, Port Talbot

DCFW Ref: 96

Meeting of 14th January 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	CONFIDENTIAL 14 th January 2016
Issue date	25 th January 2016
Scheme location	Port Talbot
Scheme description	Residential refurbishment
Scheme reference number	96
Planning status	Pre-application

Declarations of Interest

None declared.

Consultations to Date

The Commission understands that a meeting with Natural Resources Wales (NRW) was held in December 2015 to discuss Flood Consequence Assessment requirements. This review has been afforded confidential status by DCFW at this stage.

The Proposals

The proposal is to convert existing vacant office accommodation above the Aberafan Shopping Centre into residential accommodation for general needs. Located at the heart of the town centre and next to the river, the existing five-storey, concrete-clad building is very prominent from within the town and from the nearby motorway. It is proposed to convert the upper floors to provide 41 flats which would benefit from town centre facilities and transport connections. There is no provision for car parking.

Due to part-funding through the Vibrant and Viable Places (VVP) grant, the project is on a tight time schedule. Design development has taken place with close collaboration with developer Hacer and housing association Gwalia.

Main Points in Detail

The following points summarise key issues from the review and should be considered to inform work ahead of a planning application being made:

Project Ambition

The Design Commission for Wales is supportive of the ambition to bring this unused building back into use and to improve the building's relationship with the rest of Port Talbot. There is potential for this project to act as a catalyst for other regeneration

projects in the town. However, developing a viable solution presents a difficult challenge and the focus of investment in the project needs careful consideration.

Public Realm and Ground Floor

In order to maximise the positive contribution this project could make to the town, design strategies should extend to the public realm around the building. Although some of these spaces are outside of the boundary of ownership, through discussion with the local authority, improvements could be made to the immediate public realm and relationship with the surrounding streets and pathways. This would need to be resolved to allow for servicing and access to the building.

There are currently some uninviting spaces around the building which invite anti-social behaviour but could be eliminated through careful design of changes to the ground floor and external spaces. In particular, the walkway alongside the river offers great potential for improvement.

Design of the public realm should consider relationships between different elements – the bridge, civic centre, public open spaces, building entrances, lighting, views and overlooking, walking routes, street furniture and materials.

It would also be useful to look at what is being done elsewhere in the town, through the VVP for example, to see how projects could be unified and related to each other in terms of the selection of materials and street furniture, for example.

It is extremely important that all external spaces are designed for a defined use. Spaces with a clear purpose and sense of ownership are less likely to be used antisocially, whereas left over, dark spaces may be abused. It is unlikely that planting trees alongside the river will be successful and would overshadow spaces behind them, reducing views and daylight in an already uninviting space.

The proposal will require alterations to the entrance and additional facilities for residents at ground floor. If well designed, these new spaces could contribute to the improvement of the public realm too. The possibilities for new structures at ground floor level to provide mezzanine floors or outside space for flats above should be considered, whilst keeping practical constraints such as fire exits from the shopping centre in mind.

It is important the both the ownership and responsibilities for the different parts of the building and external spaces are clearly set out so that they are properly maintained in the future.

Facade Design

The design/developer team presented a number of options for treating the building facade, including over-cladding and the attachment of pop-out bays. Cost, maintenance, durability, visual transformation and impact on living quality were all rightly given as important considerations in deciding on the best method. It will be useful to test different approaches against these criteria as the design develops. Finding the right solution for this element of the project is crucial, and there is a risk that it is expensive without adding the best value.

The generous floor to ceiling heights, especially at ground floor will be beneficial in dealing with acoustics, services and fenestration to provide good quality living conditions for residents.

Replacing the windows offers many opportunities for improving both the appearance and performance of the building. Precedent shows that concrete architecture can be successfully regenerated through a well-designed fenestration replacement strategy; Park Hill in Sheffield is an example. Adding colour and varying opening, mullion and glazing proportions can achieve different effects.

Work to the building envelope offers an opportunity to improve the environmental performance of the building, which could help tackle fuel-poverty by reducing heat losses. Environmental performance can be improved by increasing insulation levels and installing high-performance windows. An overall energy strategy, which includes heating, ventilation and facade design would be helpful. Because of potential impact on the elevations and to achieve an integrated solution, the energy strategy must be considered at an early stage, in advance of a planning application being made.

Cleaning up and/or painting the concrete facade and updating the windows could provide an affordable facade solution, allowing funds to be focussed on providing transformational impact elsewhere.

Mansard Roof

The schemes presented at the review and in the pre-review information focussed on transforming the concrete facade (1st-3rd floors). However, it may be more effective to carryout minimal work to the concrete section and focus on transforming the ground floor and mansard roof, where there is potential to make more impact for less cost. This option should be tested by the design/developer team alongside other options.

The mansard roof offers scope for new construction and adaptation without awkward and expensive work to concrete. The lightweight construction of the roof storey could be more easily removed or re-modelled.

The top of the building presents an opportunity to do something bold and elegant which would transform the appearance of the whole building. There would be flexibility to design extra special flats for the top floor or floors, which would benefit from the best views, and could be designed to have outside space.

If it helped with viability, the option of adding more flats through providing an extra floor at the top of the building could be considered.

There are many different forms which a replacement for the mansard roof could take. These would need to be explored by the architect in consultation with Gwalia and the developer to find a solution which works economically, practically, environmentally and visually.

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

Attendees

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Architect/Planning Consultant:	Joe Ayoubkhani, Geraint John Planning Kevin Matthews, Powell Dobson
Local Authority:	Ian Williams, NPTCBC (VVP) Steve Ball, NPTCBC (development control) Claire Jones, NPTCBC (housing)
Design Review Panel:	
Chair	Alan Francis
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