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Design Review Report

UWTSD: FACE & Library Buildings

DCFW Ref: N56

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

PUBLIC

Meeting date	14 th January 2016
Issue date	26th January 2016
Scheme location	SA1 Swansea
Scheme description	Phase 1 buildings – Faculty of Architecture, Computing and Engineering (FACE) and the Library
Scheme reference number	N56
Planning status	Pre-application (reserved matters)

Declarations of Interest

DCFW's Design Review panel member Richard Parnaby is part of the UWTSD client team. Steve Smith, representing the Local Authority, is also a serving Panel Member but attended in his local authority capacity.

All present were content to proceed in light of these declarations.

Consultations to Date

The design team have met with the Commission several times during the development of the masterplan and design code for the site, which are now approved as a variation of condition on the original outline planning consent for the whole SA1 site.

This was the first review of particular buildings within the demise of the master plan and which are to be delivered in accordance with the design code.

The Proposals

The first phase of proposed development comprises two buildings that will contain the Faculty of Architecture, Computing and Engineering (FACE) and the Library. These can be identified as plots PL and PN on the masterplan in the zone identified as the 'peninsular'.

The design proposals are being developed jointly by Stride Treglown and Esha who have been appointed to design the elevations.

Summary and key points

The Design Commission for Wales welcomed the opportunity to review the proposals for the first phase of this important development. We support the principles of this project which is of great significance for the UWTSD and also the wider city of Swansea.

DCFW's high expectations for the proposed development are driven by the stated ambition of the overall project, the aims established in the Design Code, the importance of these first buildings in setting the design quality for future development (including commercial development to be delivered through the private sector where there will be less control of the design by the University) and the role of the building in accommodating the school of architecture. All of these aspects dictate that these buildings should be of exemplary architectural merit.

In the Commission's view, based on the material presented and made available beforehand, this exemplary architectural merit was still some way off being achieved. We explore why we have come to this conclusion below and how the design team might now respond.

Design Review Information

Whilst these buildings are responding to the context set out in the masterplan and design code (of which DCFW has a good understanding) there must also be robust site analysis, a clear design concept and specified sustainability ambitions together with evidence of how the design has developed in response to these. We don't doubt that this work has been considered, but evidence of it having been undertaken was lacking in the presentation material, as was the more detailed information that we would expect to find at this key design stage, illustrating the structure of the building and the three dimensional form. This absence of information resulted in difficulties understanding the rationale for the design decisions that have been taken, particularly where there may appear to be a departure from the Design Code. In future reviews it is important that this information is provided.

FACE Building

There are some fundamental aspects which do not appear to have been given sufficient consideration and which have potential implications for the quality of the building, its performance and lifetime costs. These include:

- Orientation – it is unclear how the design has responded to the orientation of the building and whether the treatment of different facades has taken into account the amount of sunlight and potential for solar gain, overheating and glare. There may be alternative approaches that eliminate or minimise the need for solar glass.
- Sustainability – the requirement is to achieve BREEAM 'Excellent' but it was unclear how sustainability has been embraced in the design of the building, particularly in response to the requirements set out in the design code.
- Natural daylighting – it is anticipated that some spaces within the building would benefit from natural daylight more than others, but it was not clear how the plans

and elevations have responded to this variety in need. As part of this, the architects mentioned north light windows in the top floors, but there were no drawings or models to illustrate this.

- Ventilation – mechanical ventilation appeared to be the predominant approach, but unusually using small scale MVHR units bespoke designed to suit the fenestration pattern. Whilst this is practically achievable, we question the efficiency of such an approach and importantly the maintenance regime that would accompany such an installation. Mention was made of the need for localised cooling of denser meeting room areas, but no illustrations were provided. We were surprised that a more passive, low energy, low cost-in-use approach has not been considered and suspect the lack of external solar shading may be expensively contributing to the mechanical ventilation strategy.
- Circulation – the approach to circulation within the building should respond to the University's philosophy for user interaction. How people will move in the building has an impact on possibilities for collaboration and interdisciplinary working. There are limitations of the atrium stair only going to first floor, and the lifts and other staircases being somewhat tucked away. A circulation route for the upper floors that avoids 'dead legs' may also reduce the need for an additional staircase and provide easier navigation for students. This may also have a positive effect on the cost envelope.
- Appearance – A clear, compelling concept for the appearance of the building both externally and internally was not presented. The design proposals do not, as yet, appear to satisfy the aspiration set out in the design code to create an 'elegant industrial building which also expresses a sympathetic modern style'. The approach to the form and massing was not clearly articulated and there was no sense of what the internal spaces would feel like and how a sense of identity will be developed for the different schools, whilst maintaining long term flexibility and adaptability.

More generally, the approach to the window design provides an example of the challenges of the currently adopted design approach.

A review of precedent dockland buildings in London identified three types of window arrangement which have been applied to the proposed building elevations. Without a clear design concept and site analysis it appears that the different treatments have been applied to different elevations, without clear rationale. It is unclear as to whether this is in response to the orientation of the building and the varied daylight requirements or to what is appropriate for the uses within the building. It was not clear whether they respond to different views or if there is an intention to make the building appear to be three different buildings. The material did not show what alternative approaches have been explored, this remained unexplained in the review meeting and raises concerns regarding the approach to the elevation design being isolated from the development of a more coherent and integrated concept and plan for the building.

The separation of the elevation design from the rest of the building could present difficulties in effective coordination of the internal spaces with the external facades. The elevations are designed to a three metre grid but the internal space planning grid was

not immediately apparent. Some clashes of partitions and windows currently result, though we accept that the presented drawings are work in progress.

There has been some deviation from the design code which needs to be acknowledged and the impact understood, to ensure there is not a negative knock-on impact.

- Colonnade – this was a strong and valuable design element of the masterplan and design code, indicating a continuous colonnade on the eastern edge of this plot. In the current proposals the colonnade has been diminished and continues only for a short length of this edge of the building and is terminated with emergency exit doors. We believe this site should present a holistic proposal for the western side of the Tidal Basin, a further review of the colonnade is required.
- Route through the plot – the masterplan shows two separate buildings in this location with University Mews continuing through to the Tidal Basin Waterfront. The presented scheme shows a loss of east-west connectivity through the plot. It is unclear whether there will be internal routes through to the waterside, which would be preferable, as acknowledged by the client and design team.
- Location of service area – the masterplan identified a main service access into the block from the west, which maintained a building line along the eastern edge. The relocation of the service area to the east has weakened the eastern edge and particularly the north-east corner. We accept that a new service access position may be needed, and to achieve this from the north may be preferable, but if so, the north-east corner of the scheme needs further consideration.
- Contemporary interpretation – the design code states that the design should 'draw inspiration from' the industrial traditions of the area rather than taking 'straight copies'. Insufficient evidence was presented of the exploration of traditional cues (particularly those specifically related to the Swansea legacy) combined with contemporary design approaches which may successfully reinterpret tradition in a manner appropriate to the present day and the future legacy of the project.

Further exploration of these points:

The eastern edge of the plot is an important part of the dockside public realm and the pedestrian and cycle route around the site. The blank wall, although temporary, needs a design approach to prevent it becoming problematic. This may benefit from a creative intervention or alternative materials potentially taking inspiration from the examples shown on page 38 of the design code. We question though whether a blank wall is the best option, or whether the service yard might be a point of interest to the public given its use - the team talked about it being used for vehicle work and design - and so the approach may include some perforation or other solution.

The north-east corner of the plot is important as it addresses the bridge link across the basin and provides enclosure to the space. The proposed access junction and single storey wall weaken the impact of this corner, which is not solved by the later phase of building on the eastern side. Further analysis of this corner is required using three dimensional views and incorporating plans for the public realm.

A pinch point is created between the south-west corner of the building and the dock edge. There needs to be a natural movement flow around this corner to lead to the cafe which may require the building line to be adjusted.

No sections or roof plans were available in the pre-review material but long views (from the public spaces to the west, and from the north-east junction) need to be tested to ensure the roof plant is properly incorporated, as well as the interaction between plant and rooftop glazing (in views from the top floor).

Library

The Design Commission is more comfortable with the integrity of the design for this building. Brick is an appropriate material and the fenestration has a dignified repetition, though the detailing will be important. There could be potential to make the shorter east and west elevations more special and distinct from the longer elevations, and better address the public spaces they face.

Notwithstanding that, the design concept for the building remains a little confused at this stage. It is unclear as to whether it is a small 'jewel' within the masterplan (as indicated in the design code) or if it is similar in scale and related more closely to the surrounding buildings. It is described in the design code as a 'central feature building' which suggests that there is an opportunity to take a more bold and contemporary architectural approach, particularly for its roof form. Whichever approach is taken the building must relate well to the external spaces it bounds on both of its short sides.

The sense of arrival into the building is important and further consideration should be given to how people will transition from the often wet and windy elements outside to the inside; one revolving door may not be the most appropriate response to this.

One of the requirements of Trinity Gardens as set out in the design code is that it has active frontages. It is unclear from the material provided whether the library will have an active frontage onto this space.

The scale of the building is greater than that indicated in the design code (a storey higher). The impact of the additional storey on the quality of the surrounding spaces needs to be analysed and understood. In particular the impact on sunlight in Trinity Gardens and the spaces that will be created between the library and the future buildings to the north and south.

Again information was lacking as the plans for the building were not provided and the concept and alternative approaches considered were only briefly touched upon in the review.

Landscape and Public Realm

A site plan is required to show how the buildings, in the context of the public realm, will be delivered with this first phase of development.

The balance of permanent and interim measures will be important to help ground the buildings and provide a safe and attractive environment for users. We are unable to comment further on the public realm proposals at this stage.

Quality Control

Early contractor involvement is positive and welcomed. However, we would urge that the Employers Requirements must be carefully considered and must clearly identify important design elements to be retained and those areas where there is flexibility.

Next Steps

The Design Commission supports the principles and aspirations of this project and is committed to promoting good design for the benefit of the UWTSD and the city, in order to realise the stated ambition. However, the programme through planning is exceptionally challenging and appears to suggest very little available time for design review and change for the betterment of the project as a whole. This concept stage is especially important and for future phases we would like to see emerging proposals at an earlier stage, supported by comprehensive material appropriate to the design stage, to allow for constructive discussion.

NB: Design Code – the draft copy DCFW reviewed had Section 8 Building Specific Coding largely missing. We were anticipating that this section would provide some more detail on the parameters for the buildings. This may prove to be a gap that needs filling in order for the design code to be effective.

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

Attendees

Presentation Team:	Ray Selby, UWTSD Richard Parnaby, UWTSD Geraint Flowers, UWTSD Pierre Wassenaar, Stride Treglown Neil Emleton, Esha Architects Kim Hitch, Princes Foundation
Local Authority:	Stephen Smith
Design Review Panel:	
Chair	Alan Francis
Lead Panellist	Mike Gwyther Jones
Panel	Ewan Jones Andrew Linfoot Jen Heal, Design Advisor, DCFW Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive, DCFW, Observing