



DESIGN  
COMMISSION  
FOR WALES  
COMISIWN  
DYLUNIO  
CYMRU

# Design Review Report

Howells, Cardiff (Phases 2 & 3)

**DCFW Ref: 280**

Meeting of 13<sup>th</sup> July 2023



**Review Status**

Meeting date  
Issue date  
Scheme description  
Scheme location  
Scheme reference number  
Planning status

**CONFIDENTIAL**

13<sup>th</sup> July 2023  
27<sup>th</sup> July 2023  
Mixed-use redevelopment  
Howells, St Mary Street, Cardiff  
N280  
Pre-planning

## Key Points

---

- Based on the information available to us at the time of the review it appears that the masterplan has been agreed with the local authority in an unusual process which would benefit from greater transparency. This raises concerns about the status of the masterplan and the missed opportunity to use it to inform and guide the design and development approach. The masterplan should be openly shared, informed by public engagement and external scrutiny.
- The design team should focus on what it will be like for the people living in the proposed flats.
- The client should review the housing mix and consider alternatives to studio flats.
- The design should avoid single aspect, north facing flats.
- The design should not introduce windows in the parapet of the Wharton Street building.
- The design team should review the design of the Wharton Street roof extension and interventions in the north facade.
- The design team should analyse the relationship of the courtyard with the surrounding streets, public spaces and buildings.
- The design team should develop the character and activity of the courtyard alongside proposals for the adjacent buildings.

## Consultations to Date

---

There has been a previous Design Review in July 2022 for a masterplan for the site. The Design Commission has not been further involved in the masterplan prior to it being agreed with the local authority.

There has been no public engagement yet.

## The Proposal

---

The overall proposal is to redevelop the former Howells buildings to create a mixed-use development with retail and food & beverage on the ground floor, with residential, offices and a hotel on upper floors. The plans also include the creation of a publicly accessible courtyard in the centre of the site. The development is being developed in phases, with this Design Review focused on Phases 2 and 3.

Planning permission has already been granted for Phase 1, which is for a roof terrace on the building on the corner of St Mary Street and Wharton Street.

Phase 2 is for the redevelopment and upward extension of the building facing Wharton Street. The material presented focused on a four-storey upward extension to create new studio flats.

Phase 3 is for demolition works, which will require listed building consent. The proposal includes the full demolition of buildings within the centre of the site, which will be where a courtyard will be created in future, and demolition to the ground floor of a building to allow connection to the courtyard from Trinity Street. The proposals also include internal demolitions to the Bethany Baptist Chapel and Sunday School Hall building.

## Context

---

The site is located within the heart of Cardiff City Centre and was most recently occupied by House of Fraser. The site was developed by the Howells department store over time, resulting in an amalgamation of interconnected buildings.

The building along Wharton Street was designed by Percy Thomas and built in the 1930s. Although not as elaborate as the earlier buildings facing onto St Mary Street, the Wharton Street building has an attractive and uniform character. There is a chapel within the centre of the site, which was gradually subsumed by development for Howells.

The site is located within St Mary Street Conservation Area and all the buildings are Grade II\* listed.

# Main Points

---

## **Masterplan**

The Design Commission reviewed the masterplan in July 2022. The material presented has leapt from the early masterplan to façade detail for Phase 2. We would like to better understand the intermediate update to the masterplan. Clarity is needed about what is now considered fixed within the masterplan and what may change in the future.

There have clearly been extensive discussions between the design team and the local authority. Such early involvement with the local authority is encouraged, but there has been no engagement with the public. The masterplan appears to have been agreed in a closed process with the local authority, with no public input and little external scrutiny. The process raises concerns about the status of the masterplan and could be a missed opportunity to use it to inform and guide the design and development approach.

The client should initiate public engagement as early as possible and, in doing so, to go beyond the basic statutory requirements as a site of this importance deserves exemplary public engagement. The design team should show proposals in context to help the public understand how different phases fit with the overall development.

It is extremely concerning to see a public authority proceeding with this unusual private closed process, and even more so for such an important site.

## **Phase 2**

The Design Commission supports the principle of adding more homes in the city centre and the development of a roof extension along Wharton Street.

There should be a greater focus on what the proposed flats will be like as homes for the people living there. This can be thought of as starting with the 'why' and 'who', and then the 'what' and 'how' you respond physically.

We encourage the client to review the housing mix and assess whether all the new homes should be studio flats. The scheme may benefit from the inclusion of larger flats, duplex flats and homes for families.

The design should avoid single aspect, north facing flats. Balconies or other forms of outdoor amenity space would improve the well-being of people living there. The design

needs to demonstrate that it can prevent overheating (Building Regulations Approved Document O) and ensure the homes are comfortable to live in, without requiring further changes post-planning consent. Consideration should also be given to the relationship between the people who will be living there and the facilities they need.

Although the options for extending the front elevation are broadly sympathetic to the existing building, the existing façade is visually robust enough to support a bolder proposal, for example greater horizontal emphasis in response to the dominant 'brow' of the corner building. The design should avoid the introduction of windows in the existing stone parapet.

The Design Commission has concerns about the proposed design for the north face of the building. The drawings did not show how the proposals relate to the chapel. The extension projects beyond the rear elevation, resulting in an overhang over the north facing flats, further affecting the light to the flats. The new works, as a whole, are neither an upward extension of the current facades or an identifiable new object or roof – but combine elements of all three approaches. There is an uncomfortably awkward relationship with the existing building. The use of materials and insertion of different window types on the northern facades appear too 'busy' – there may be too many different façade 'types' at the rear and some rationalisation would be beneficial. A restored and adapted existing base, with a new 'top', could be a consistent diagram for the building form and all elevations.

### **Phase 3**

Little information was presented regarding the proposed public space within the centre of the site. Phase 3 seeks to demolish buildings in the centre to enable the creation of the courtyard, but the detail of the public realm will be established in a later phase.

At this stage, it is important to understand what the chapel and rear of the buildings would look like following the demolition works. Clarity is needed about what is certain and what is still in discussion. The plans for the courtyard would benefit from being more conceptual to reflect the uncertainty.

The design of the courtyard should be informed by the relationship with the surrounding streets, public spaces and buildings. Further analysis and information are needed on how people will move through the site, the nature of the surrounding public spaces, and what the uses and facades of the surrounding buildings will be.

The character, activity and meaning of this public space needs further work. The courtyard has great potential, with scope to add something different to the existing public spaces in the city centre. Involvement of the public could help inform the character of the courtyard. As Phase 3 is defined as demolition works, there should be sufficient time to develop the courtyard design alongside, and in response to, the individual building and façade proposals for future phases.

## Other

The design should consider the practicalities of the proposed development, including the location of loading bays, bin collections, deliveries and entrances to homes.

## Next Steps

---

The Design Commission would welcome further Design Reviews on this scheme.

**Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales is the trading name of DCFW LIMITED, a Private Limited Company established under the Companies Act 1985 and 2006, Company No: 04391072 incorporated in England and Wales as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Welsh Government. Registered office: 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Cambrian Buildings, Mount Stuart Square, Cardiff CF10 5FL T: 029 2045 1964 E [connect@dcfw.org](mailto:connect@dcfw.org). The comment recorded in this report, arising from formal Design Review through our Design Review Service, is provided in the public interest for the consideration of local planning authorities as a material consideration, and other users of the Design Review Service. It is not and should not be considered 'advice' and no third party is bound or required to act upon it. The Design Review Service is delivered in line with DCFW's published protocols, code of conduct and complaints procedure, which should be read and considered by users of the service.**

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

## Attendees

---

Client:	David Owens, Thackeray Estates
Design Team:	Cem Kosaner, Lichfields Andrew Clark, Purcell Tom Goodwin, Purcell Ignacio Tirado, Peter Taylor Andrew Taylor, Peter Taylor
Local Authority:	Ross Cannon, Cardiff Council Guy Arnall, Cardiff Council Rhian Jones, Cardiff Council

## DCFW Design Review Panel

Chair: Ewan Jones

Panel: Toby Adam  
Wendy Maden  
Simon Power  
Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive, DCFW  
Jen Heal, Deputy Chief Executive, DCFW  
Max Hampton, Design Advisor, DCFW

Observer/s: Aisha Ali

## 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.

Toby Adam is working with Lichfields on another project. Toby's practice, Gaunt Francis Architects, is also undertaking work around the former Howells site, including studies on Cardiff Market and how cross links can be created, but he is not directly involved in this project.