



DESIGN
COMMISSION
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CYMRU

Design Review Report

Hillcrest, Merthyr Tydfil

DCFW Ref: 314

Meeting of 9th November 2023



Review Status

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

Public

9th November 2023
20th November 2023
Residential
Site of Hillcrest Park, CF47 9JF
N314
Pre-application

Key Points

- The idea of developing and testing housing and street typologies to address the specific context of sites in Merthyr is positive.
- The historical analysis undertaken needs to be complemented by urban design analysis of the neighbourhood.
- The local and wider connections to the surrounding area and hierarchy of spaces within the development need to be further developed.
- The design needs to be developed to achieve the objective of creating a neighbourhood characterised by intimacy, proximity and streets for people.
- Further design development is required for the 'piazza' communal area.
- How the houses define the public realm requires further development, particularly the corners and along the southern boundary.
- Further consideration is needed as to how the development will relate to the surrounding park.
- The design concept challenges standard requirements imposed on new development. Achieving the scheme's aspirations will require good design and negotiation with the Welsh Government, planning, highways and Secured by Design.
- The grain and form of the blocks should be explored further, with particular focus on the gables and existing street engagement.

Consultations to Date

Early consultation on the broad concept has taken place with the Welsh Government Social Housing Grant team and with Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council. This is the first consultation with the Design Commission. The team plans to be ready for PAC consultation in March 2024 with a view to full planning submission in April 2024 and start on site prior to March 2025.

The Proposal

The design team stated that their aim is to develop a design approach that delivers better homes for Merthyr's particular (and challenging) context. They seek feedback via DCFW's Design Review service, on design development of the project prior to submission of a planning application, with particular regard to their focus on placemaking. The team is concerned with distinctive identity, character and sense of place; good connections and rich public realm, which offers high quality landscape and amenity spaces that prioritise people and pedestrians over vehicles.

The scheme proposes 42 dwellings for Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association (MTHA), set within a range of shared outdoor spaces, to a total area just under 1Ha (9,950sqm). Cost parameters are currently indicative with a project budget for dwellings of £2,700/m² plus abnormals/site works, within an overall indicative budget of £10.8m-£11.4m, a proportion of which is sought via Welsh Government Social Housing Grant (SHG) and possibly from the Land and Buildings Development Fund Wales (LBDF).



Proposed Development

Context

The one hectare site, previously a quarry, sits one mile north of Merthyr Tydfil town centre, sloping steeply to the south and east, affording long views over the valley towards Cwm Bargoed. It is enclosed by Penybryn estate to the south and Galon Uchaf to the west. Penybryn is located at similar levels to the site, and is viewed by the team as that which offers the greatest potential for connection.

Small one and two-storey dwellings are arranged in rows. Because of the steep slope, cars are kept away from the dwellings separated by tarmac pavements and patches of grass. Galon Uchaf, overlooking the site, consists of semi-detached two storey family homes with front and rear gardens, reliant on streets for vehicle parking. Surrounding streets are currently dominated by cars, and dwellings are often disconnected from streets by a change in levels.



Site Location Plan

Main Points

The Design Commission welcomed an ambitious and exciting start to a challenging site and to a scheme which acts on policy and legislative ambition.

Neighbourhood Analysis

The team presented extensive historical research demonstrating richness and variety in the evolution of house types in the south Wales Valleys that reach far beyond the stereotypical terrace. Less evident was a necessary and more detailed neighbourhood urban design analysis. This is an essential next step in refining the design approach through understanding of connections, public transport routes, linkages, uses, needs and demographics.

Connections

The hierarchy of spaces is not yet clear – which are shared; how are they managed; which offer direct connections, and which might be encountered 'en route' to elsewhere. The steps from Mitchell Crescent to the park are an attractive feature, but do not seem to lead to a destination and are possibly unnecessarily elaborate. Further work on how the development connects to the surrounding streets and park is needed. The neighbourhood characteristics of intimacy and proximity identified by the team are not yet fully evident in the layout – street design in particular warrants attention. The street design and landscape strategy need to be designed to prevent uncontrolled car parking dominating.

Spaces, Structure and Treatment

The 'piazza' communal area is as yet unstructured and its character not yet established given the impact of the fall in the levels across the area. The definition of edges in particular at the southern boundary are as yet unclear. We would strongly encourage you to appoint a landscape architect to assist with the characterisation and hierarchy of space and work with the local community to determine the purpose of this space. The role of the surrounding green space needs to be considered as part of a wider landscape strategy. There is the potential to create an urban forest that could enhance biodiversity, provide shelter and enhance the micro-climate within the scheme itself.

Access for servicing, bins, deliveries, drop off etc should be carefully considered.

The grand steps running through the site should be reconsidered. Where are they going? Who do they serve? What do they connect with in the wider context? We would suggest, given your budget concerns, that unless you feel that this element is essential it maybe

something to remove, to take the pressure of the budget. We would encourage you to do one or two things really well, rather than explore too many ideas.

Use of retaining walls/battened ground and the spaces they create should be thoroughly tested. Careful consideration is needed of the boundary treatments and their robustness given how harsh the local environment could be. These works are carbon intensive and costly and should be minimised where possible.

Definition

Defining the public realm as a whole will be critical – the reliance on house types where the gable ends effectively define edges could be problematic in the long term and should be tested alongside other options. Space design should precede unit design and threshold treatment. Dwellings identified for wheelchair users need further thought in terms of their location, proximity to communal spaces and facilities and general access and egress.

Influence of Design 'Standards'

External spaces need further definition to establish which areas are householder responsibility and which MTHA. Concepts such as Secured by Design may have an impact on the proposals and the nature of the landscape treatment and spaces proposed. Close working with the local authority will be necessary to achieve streets for people and to protect the ambition of pedestrian prioritisation over car dominance.

Next Steps

The Commission recommends and would welcome a further review opportunity with the team, MTHA, colleagues from Welsh Government and the local authority attending, in advance of a full planning submission.

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

Attendees

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| Client/Developer: | Lee Roberts and Paul Berry, Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association (MTHA) |
| Design Team: | Wayne Forster and Edward Green, Welsh School of Architecture Chris Wilkins, Pentan |
| Consultants: | Guy Marks, Taylor Lewis Quantity Surveyors |
| Local Authority: | Merthyr Tydfil CBC – Not present at this meeting. |

DCFW Design Review Panel

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| Chair: | Craig Sheach |
| Panel: | Kedrick Davies Richard Woods Angela Williams Clare Wilding Max Hampton, Design Advisor, DCFW Jen Heal, Deputy Chief Executive, DCFW Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive, DCFW |
| Observer/s: | Tracy Kearns, Transport for Wales |

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.

Carole-Anne Davies declared her role as Chair of the Welsh School of Architecture External Advisory Group, which has no input/influence on these proposals. Panellists and members of the design team for this scheme are well known to one another professionally but there are no direct relationships of any kind relevant for this scheme.