

Plymouth Design Panel

24th November 2008

Sports Facilities, Plymouth University College of St Mark and St John

The panel was disappointed that it had not been given the opportunity to review this at pre-application stage. The following is a summary of an informal review by a delegation of the Plymouth Design Panel.

Masterplan

The panel was concerned that although the design and access statement refers to a wider development framework or masterplan for the whole campus it is not clear what the scope of this study is and whether it is sufficient to inform the design of this element. Clearly a robust document ought to exist in order to wisely guide investment decisions and establish a more coherent and efficient spatial framework for the campus. We would be interested to help you review this document when it is revisited.

The panel identified apparent tensions between the current proposals and the adjacent "Cromwell" residential block to the south east and the need for a wider vehicular and pedestrian movement strategy as evidence that a coherent masterplan is essential.

There is a sense that the proposal does not anticipate any pedestrian access other than from the bus stop and from the college campus. Access from the latter appears incidental rather than designed. In particular the ramp from the south east appears to start at the kerb edge.

Site configuration

The road to the north of the sports complex is the main approach to the rest of the campus – it is therefore unfortunate that it is the servicing area and rear of the sporting facilities that are presented in this direction. Whilst this may be an inevitable conclusion arising from the internal planning of the sports complex, there could have been some mitigating ideas dealing with the treatment of this northern edge to the building.

A more deliberate formal articulation through the creation of a re-entrant space for the service area combined with a strong landscape idea, rather than the linear arrangement along this route might have been less obtrusive visually and could be more easily secured.

Architectural Expression

The panel felt that significance of the north west elevation had been underplayed and that designing a façade which responded to way in which it would be experienced i.e. sequentially, might have helped to relieve this long frontage. We thought the route could be almost playful and enjoyable. The creative use of lighting along it will be an important element to integrate. We do not agree that the strategy of attempting to achieve a consistent visual appearance or uniformity of language for all elements of the complex is necessarily desirable. There may have been some merit in treating the new 3 court element (and possibly also the gymnasium) as more distinct elements within this composition.

We recognise that the building accommodates types of functions where there are few opportunities to create a positive relationship between inside and outside and that many facades are inevitably inactive. However, there does seem to be an opportunity to increase the visual transparency between the corridor passing along the south side of the pool and the important external space which it helps to enclose. Both the external space and the experience of the corridors would benefit from at least some sections of full height glazing along this wall as replacement for the arrangement of windows currently shown.

Elsewhere within the building it is difficult to assess whether all opportunities to use natural light and/or ventilation have been fully explored – particularly within the numerous internal office spaces and also the internal corridor spaces, where there are apparently no ‘incidents’ of any sort that might help with way-finding and internal legibility. For example, allowing glimpses of the pool from the entrance area and along corridors allowing for some sky views rather than only obscured daylighting. There might also have been a clear hierarchy in the handling of light within the large volumes as distinct from the linking spaces.

Materials

The panel considered the materials palette to be rather unimaginative. The notion of introducing a uniformity to new and old elements has possibly gone too far. There was insufficient justification or design rationale provided for the use of untreated timber cladding, tinted glass and the overhang of the rather overbearing grey cornice element. The overall impression is that of a dated industrial park not a publicly accessible education/sports facility.

Landscape

In general the panel thought that the existing trees have an intrinsic value on the site beyond that of screening the low quality existing buildings and that a strong landscape proposal will help integrate the buildings within the site greatly enhance the perception of the building as a gateway.

The new space that is created by the development adjacent to the café and to the south east of the complex is an important asset for the campus and we think has good potential – we would have expected that a more developed landscape proposal for this space should have formed part of this application.

Sustainability

We commend the notion of investigating small scale wind turbines as a means of generating renewable energy, however, the design and location of these should to be positively integrated with the current proposals.

Summary

The proposals may well be an improvement upon the buildings that currently exist, but this gateway experience of arriving at the College will still be disappointing. Whilst there is perhaps little that is of truly public interest in the concerns that we raise, we are surprised that an educational establishment is not using good design as part of its wider marketing strategy for attracting new students.