

Brockholes Wetlands Visitor Centre, Lancashire
Reviewed 11th December 07 & 17th October 2008

Synopsis



Brockholes is a 106 hectare site made up of former gravel workings, with an additional 66 hectares of adjoining ancient woodlands. It is located to the NE of Junction 31 of the M6 at a strategic position in Central Lancashire within the City of Preston.



It is envisaged that Brockholes will grow over the next few years to become a nature conservation site of regional, national and international importance. Central to this vision is the design and provision of new visitor facilities that will inspire and encourage people to visit the site and engage with the natural world.

These new facilities will include a café/restaurant, shop, gallery, education room, conference space and associated facilities, designed to meet the needs of the projected 250,000 visitors a year to the

site.

The client was keen to ensure that the new visitor facilities and their siting would not compromise the primary aim of securing Brockholes as a site for nature conservation. Their wish was to commission and construct a suite of visitor facilities of architectural distinction and outstanding quality that inspire people to consider the natural world and create a desire to visit the site. These facilities would be an exemplar of sustainable design.

There were 65 submissions in the open design competition and when the scheme first came to Design Review in December 07, the client had short listed these down to five schemes and following the judging panel, had discounted a further two submissions. The client had already involved a judging panel and they had a favoured scheme, but were interested to see if the Design Review Panel would agree and to hear their comments on all three schemes. The “Floating World” scheme (illustrated above) was the preferred scheme of both the original judging panel and the Design Review Panel.

The Floating World scheme draws on the rich tradition of wetland dwellings, recalling the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq, neolithic settlements of Northern Europe and the towering constructions of storks and herons. It aimed to make the Visitor Centre a primarily a forward-looking building: off the grid and energy self-sufficient, leading the way as a demonstration of zero-carbon living.

Recommendations of the Places Matter Design Review report

- The panel originally endorsed the Floating World scheme in principle and as a starting point for further iteration. They agreed that the varied structures on the floating platform appeared to best meet the needs of the brief.
- The panel suggested the hierarchy of the buildings on site and the connections between them would need to be well considered.
- The possibility of using different materials to thatch for the roofs was raised and the use of shingles was suggested as the materials could be locally sourced, rather than having to be imported.
- There were some concerns around the desire of the commercial developer to remain open 24 hours a day and around the location of the parking provision.
- At the second iteration review in October 08, the panel welcomed the use of shingles as a viable alternative roofing material to the original thatch.
- There were also strong concerns around the form and location of the parking provision, which the panel felt was too close to the visitor centre and would impact negatively on the pedestrian and cycle provision.

Evaluation

Both the Client and NWDA representative have responded to our evaluation and described the services as valuable and both parties said they would use the service again.

The scheme was considered exceptional to start with, but it has evolved since it originally came to Design Review and the changes that were recommended by the panel were taken into consideration in this process. It has now been agreed with the commercial operator that the centre will have normal opening hours as opposed to 24 hours a day.

The main benefits of Design Review for this particular scheme seemed to be to reinforce the original judging panel views and the report was considered an important addition to the portfolio of supporting documentation for the project. It was used in the planning committee report and both the client and funding body are committed to a continued relationship with the Design Review process on this project. The Client responded that they would use the service again and considered Design Review “an integral part of the process”.

“We used the report as evidence of a rigorous approach to the design and due diligence of the professional processes involved.” *Client*

“I completely support the Design Review process and believe it is essential in improving projects” *Funding Body – NWDA*

Recommendations for improvement of the process

The client highlighted the importance of the Design Review process reflecting regional context and also suggested that the panel could offer an advice service prior to design competitions set for specific locations.

The NWDA representative suggested more time be allocated during the Design Review to the initial presentation. A more “open forum” aspect to it was also suggested, in order to allow observers to raise any points.

This scheme received outline planning permission in December 08.