

Design Review Report

Scheme: Flow House, Ullingswick, Hereford
Date: 20th March, 2019

Client: Phil Perry
Architect: Helen Seymour-Smith
Landscape Architect: Carly Tinkler
Local Authority: Herefordshire Council
Site Survey: On day of review
Panel: Geoff Wright (chair), Carl Holloway, Charles Potterton
MADE Rep: Meredith Evans

1. Background

The site of the proposed dwelling adjoins the house where the client currently lives which lies in relative isolation in open countryside in rural Herefordshire. The existing house sits on lower, relatively flat, ground with the site of the proposed dwelling rising steeply behind it towards a wooded ridge to the north.

The brief is for a large contemporary house that sits in the landscape and which takes advantage of the superb views over the surrounding countryside.

The local planning authority are prepared to consider an application for a new dwelling in this location under the provisions of Paragraph 79 of the NPPF which given the isolated location. The client does currently not own the site but he has secured an option to buy subject to planning consent

Alternative locations for the dwelling were considered on the adjoining low lying land in the client's ownership. However these did not provide the superb long views the site now proposed offers.

2. The Proposal

The site, currently a large arable field, rises steeply to the north from the rear of the existing house with the proposed dwelling located on the highest part of the site.

There is a small fold in the field half way up the slope. A public footpath/bridleway/cycleway runs along the bottom of the field before passing through the grounds of the existing house.

While siting the dwelling on any part of the slope would offer excellent views of the surrounding countryside to the south-east and the distant Malvern Hills, the chosen location offers an additional and even more impressive view towards the Brecon Beacons to the south-west.

In response to its prominent and rural location a landscape led design approach has been adopted that responds to the local topography, ancient woodlands and landscape of this part of Herefordshire.

The intention is that the roof line of the proposed dwelling would sit just below the the ridge at the top of the site which is contained by a tall hedge. The land continues to rise to the north-east and is heavily wooded. The hillside setting with its gentle folds has been the main driver for the plan form which proposes a series of interlocking curves that ‘flow’ down the hillside.

Access to the site would take the form of a new road linking, at the lower end, to the existing tarmac drive serving the existing house and curving around the side of the house before winding up the hill in an ‘S’ shape before arriving at the proposed dwelling. The road would be low key in design – essentially a track with grass growing down the centre. The route up to the dwelling would have three different landscape characters. The lowest section curving around the existing house would be open with native trees planted in the field on either side typical of those serving historic houses in the countryside. The lower half of the sloping field up to the fold would be planted out as an orchard on a grid layout. The road would wind itself through the fruit trees and then open out on to an open meadow up to the dwelling at the top of the site. This is intended to give the impression of a house rising out of the landscape.

A small lake would be created at the bottom of the field adjacent to the public footpath. The orchard would be fenced off from this path with traditional low key stock fencing. The hedge that ran across the site half way up the slope would be reinstated and this would mark the transition from the orchard to the open grassland above.

The proposed dwelling has a fluid, curved plan form that is intended to reflect the local topography. The main accommodation would be on two levels with a flat roof to reduce its visual impact on the landscape setting. Bedrooms are located on the lower level with the main living accommodation at first floor to take advantage of the views. There is an additional glazed viewing room that sits on the flat roof with outdoor terraces facing the main views. There would be some retaining walls at the rear of the dwelling to create space for garaging and external parking at the rear of the dwelling. Construction would be rendered rammed earth walls at ground floor with a timber clad lightweight structure at first floor where there would be extensive glazing. The render would be coloured a reddish-brown to reflect the local stone and brick widely used on traditional buildings in the area.

3. Discussion

The discussion was structured around three key elements – the siting of the proposed dwelling, the landscape strategy and the design of the dwelling.

a) Siting of the dwelling

The reasons for locating the dwelling at the top of the hill were understood given the superb additional views it opened up. However, the Panel wondered whether the additional prominence and impact this could give the dwelling as seen in long distance views from the south was justified given there were already fine outward views toward the Malvern Hills from lower down the hillside. Accepting that this was the proposal the Panel was being asked to consider, it felt that designing a dwelling that met the requirements of Paragraph 79 in this location would be more challenging as more careful consideration needs to be given to issues of minimising unnecessary light pollution given the location in a ‘dark sky’ area and ensuring that the most evident of the upper elements (notably the rooftop room and balcony glazing) present

themselves as positive 'jewels' rather than potentially confusing intrusions from a longer distance. The extensive glazing on the first floor in particular could have a visual impact from some distance, especially at night.

The Panel noted the long history of country houses introducing positively designed skyline features. They were partly reassured that the proposed roof edge screens may preclude that main living accommodation windows from being prominent in long views or at night but did not feel convinced that enough positive attention had been given to nor resolution found regarding the long distance appearance such that the building could as yet be confirmed to be a truly positively designed enhancement of longer distance views.

b) Landscape strategy

The Panel welcomed the 'landscape led' approach being developed for this highly sensitive and prominent site in open countryside. The restoration of historic landscape elements was supported and would lead to an enhancement of the local landscape. The concept of a 'journey' from the lower level to the top of the site with its changing character reflecting the changing landscape and topography was acknowledged, although some of the Panel did have concerns at the long distance the access road traveled to get to the dwelling and its consequent potential intrusion on the existing landscape. The design of the starting point was crucial and the current proposal for this to be a junction off the existing tarmac drive serving the existing house seemed inappropriately low key. Given its proposed role as the serving the more dominant and grander house, it should have greater status with access to the existing house downgraded to a subsidiary element.

The Panel felt too that some interventions were needed to the appearance and boundary treatment of the existing house which is visually prominent as one approaches the site entrance. The extensive alterations and extensions to the original farm house are not well coordinated with its immediate landscape setting. As this house is expected to remain within the client's family carrying out some remedial work or additional screening was potentially deliverable and should, in the Panel's view, be an integral component of the landscape strategy.

Notwithstanding these comments, the overall landscape strategy for the site and its access route was considered appropriate and based on a thorough analysis and understanding of the local topography and landscape. The perry orchard was particularly welcomed as a positive feature of local relevance with a well considered role of screening but occasionally revealing local views of the dwelling.

c) Architectural design

The reasons for adopting of a curved and free flowing floor plan were acknowledged despite the additional challenges this would create in terms of internal space planning and construction. There were, however, a number of aspects of the proposed design that the Panel felt were unresolved.

The rationale for adopting a strongly contrasting form of construction method and aesthetic between the ground floor and the first floor in this location was unclear. Given the desire to create a building that emerged from the landscape, a more unified and simpler design approach might, in the Panel's view, appear more appropriate. The space given around the dwelling to car parking and ancillary paved areas was extensive and extended to the west side of the building. Whilst not opposing the basic arrangement of a courtyard screened behind the dwelling, the Panel wondered if some of this area could be more discreetly accommodated on the east side of the dwelling.

The roof top terraces and glass balconies would need to accommodate the usual furniture associated with these areas and the Panel suggested the impact of these needed further consideration. Similarly, consideration needs to be given to the location of garden sheds, sports and play equipment etc. which could otherwise detract from the purity of the aesthetic proposed for the immediate setting of the dwelling

In overall terms the Panel thought the architectural design expressed a distinctive plan form and many positive sustainable design features. It has potential to achieve exceptional architectural quality within a convincing landscape strategy. It did not however regard the external appearance of the dwelling as fully resolved or convincing in terms of detailing and would expect to see further attention to arrive at a solution which is more than the sum of distinctive but separate parts.

4. Summary

The Panel welcomed the landscape led approach being adopted for this site and considered it essential to delivering a proposal that would meet the requirements of Paragraph 79. The landscape strategy overall was well considered and appropriate, notwithstanding the specific areas for further consideration raised in this report. The plan form of the dwelling was a rational response to the site but its architectural treatment was thought to be not yet fully resolved. The contrasting treatment of the two floor levels was questioned and a simpler more coherent architectural design approach was suggested. In taking this aspect forward the Panel suggested that more analysis of the local topography was required to enable a greater exploration of the views into and out of the site.

The proposed dwelling if built in this location would be a prominent addition to the local and wider landscape. This should be acknowledged with the aim of creating a positive addition in the landscape. Having said that, the Panel considered the scheme to be strong and had real potential to meet the requirements of Paragraph 79.



Meredith Evans
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