

21 December 2009

Adam Madge
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Planning Department	
Rec.	22 DEC 2009
Acknowledged	---
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Action	---

Our ref: 18833



Dear Adam Madge

**WILTSHIRE COUNCIL: STONEHENGE VISITORS CENTRE
YOUR REF: S/2009/1527/FUL**

Thank you for consulting the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) about this proposal and attending the meeting of CABE's design review panel, chaired by CABE vice-chair Keith Bradley, on 2 December 2009 in connection with this scheme. Following a site visit and a meeting with the design team, we were pleased to comment on the scheme in light of the presentation and the discussion which followed it. It is regrettable that CABE was not consulted on this proposal of national significance at an earlier stage in the design process and before a planning application was submitted, when our advice is most helpful. We respect and broadly support the views of the local panel. CABE's views, which supersede all views which may have been expressed previously, are set out below. This is our formal response to the planning application.

Summary

We welcome the renewed efforts to improve visitor facilities for Stonehenge. While we recognise the challenge faced by the design team in responding to the sensitivities and constraints of this World Heritage Site, we have concerns about both the strategic and detailed approach to both landscape and architecture which we feel need to be addressed before planning permission is granted.

Landscape strategy

There is an opportunity to secure a comprehensive solution for the Stonehenge site that, at last, will improve the setting of the monument and provide visitor facilities worthy of this internationally significant monument. We support the key strategic moves to cut short the A344, de-clutter the site, locate the visitor centre and car park south of the A344, and to separate the

coach park and support building from the visitor facilities. However, as yet, we have not seen evidence of a clear landscape approach to integrate buildings, parking and visitor access at both the strategic and detailed. In our view, the arrival sequence should be considered as part of the whole visitor experience of the landscape, eventually leading to the Stones. For example, we were not sure that the approach sequence would seem clear to visitors from the roundabout onwards, which would then necessitate signage to explain it.

The visitor centre is essentially a pavilion and car parks sitting in a very open rolling landscape. A feeling for this landscape is critical to the success of the scheme but seemed to be lacking in this presentation and accompanying images. We would have expected the scheme to demonstrate a logical and meaningful approach to placing each element in these open fields and establishing straightforward and intuitive links between them. Instead, the pedestrian routes around the car park seem rather tortuous and meet the visitor centre paving in an oddly incidental fashion. The surfaces used for car parks and paths are highly critical in maintaining the feel of the landscape context, but they are shown as hard line routes on current drawings. All these aspects need to work together to define the quality of the arrival experience and to build up the anticipation of visitors. We would have expected a more integrated approach to landscape in the design development of the project and more detailed information on the landscape proposals in the design and access statement at planning stage.



Visitor centre

We support the basic proposition of arranging the visitor centre accommodation into two simple boxes united by a single canopy roof. However, the analogy of a forest does not seem to be conceptually strong and has generated an architectural aesthetic that has not been convincingly resolved technically. We question whether the building will be perceived in this way either from the landscape or the orientation space and we think the random arrangement of so many columns and the way these meet the thin edge of the roof canopy will fall short of the robust integrity that we would expect of a building on this site.

One appealing aspect of the proposal is the delicacy of the canopy roof structure. We are concerned that the demands of supporting a paper thin canopy on slender columns in this exposed environment will require a highly engineered solution that may compromise the visually delicate structure shown. While we accept that the intention is to create an open air experience, we question whether the roof will tend to channel wind and rain under it rather than offer the level of protection visitors will expect. Without further

information on the micro-climate it is difficult to judge this, but we suggest the actual amount of shelter offered by the roof canopy in all weathers should be further tested.

Conclusion

The need for new visitor facilities at Stonehenge is undisputed and we are glad to see such a thorough proposal for the whole site. Our questions are about the extent to which the scheme fulfils its potential to support and intensify the visitor experience of a visit to the Stones. We feel that more work is needed before this critical potential is achieved.



Please keep CABE in touch with the progress of this scheme. If there is any point that requires clarification, please telephone me.

Yours sincerely

Director of architecture and design review

cc Stephen Quinlan Denton Corker Marshall
 Amanda Chadburn English Heritage

Panel members

The CABE design review panel members who attended the meeting were as follows:
Keith Bradley (chair), Neil Deely, Tony Edwards, Jim Eyre, Joanna van Heyningen, Simon Hudspith

Declaration of Interest

Liz Peace is a CABE commissioner and is also chief executive of the British Property Federation. In this role, she does not have direct involvement in development schemes proposed by federation members.

Joyce Bridges is a CABE commissioner and English Heritage commissioner. She did not attend the review, nor took any part in forming CABE's views or the review process as a whole.

Public scheme

As this scheme is the subject of a planning application, we will publish our views on our website, www.cabe.org.uk

Regional affiliation

CABE is affiliated with independent regional design review panels which commits them all to shared values of service, the foundation of which are the 10 key principles for design review. Further information on affiliation can be found by visiting our website: www.cabe.org.uk/design-review/regional.

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