

## INTRODUCTION

The entrance to Swale House in Sittingbourne, where most of Swale Borough Council's services are based, did not accord with current accessibility standards. A national pilot project to combine the reception services of both Swale Borough Council and Swale Police was underway. The trend towards the 'one-stop shop' style of local service provision throughout the country was being actively promoted by the Government.

Swale Borough Council approached Kent Institute of Art & Design (KIAD) with a proposal to hold a student competition to redesign the Entrance Area at Swale House. The Kent Architecture Centre were asked to provide assistance with the project, particularly in relation to developing the Brief, and providing input with the assessment of the students' schemes.

The project formed the first short assignment for 1st year Diploma students in the School of Architecture. An initial briefing for the students was held at Swale House on 25th September, and a further site visit to both the Police and Swale House was made on 5th October. The students then had three weeks in which to prepare their proposals. These were put on display to the public and press for a week from 26th October. The final presentations of the schemes to the assessment panel were made on 2nd November. It can be seen that the timescale for this project was quite short, and the comments made in response to the schemes took account of this. The students worked in 6 teams for the purposes of the project.

## OVERVIEW OF PRESENTATIONS

All the teams had prepared both drawings and models. The use of models to present the ideas was particularly welcomed by the non-Architects on the assessment panel. The assessment panel was very impressed by the quality of the drawings and models, and the depth of understanding of the complex issues raised by the project.

The following extracts from the assessment panel's report gives a flavour of the students' schemes

### Scheme 1

The overall vision behind this scheme was that of addressing the issue of 'One-stop-shop' as a nationwide design problem- the installation of this kind of facility into a wide variety of existing buildings. They proposed a kit of 'pods' or 'kiosks' which could be pre-fabricated and installed into a wide range of settings. The panel commended the visionary thinking behind this approach.



The panel liked the way the scheme sought to integrate the internal ground floor spaces into the streetscene- creating an internal 'piazza', and responded well to the issues of flexibility and adaptability. It was considered that the scheme could successfully accommodate the integration required between SBC and Police functions.

Critical points were that the idea would only be feasible if adopted on a wide scale, which would be beyond the remit of this project. It was felt that the idea hadn't been worked through thoroughly enough in relation to the functioning of this particular building. The panel were not convinced about accessing the 'pods' out of hours, and the issue of security with regard to the lift lobby had not been addressed.

### Scheme 2

This scheme addressed the issue of the impact that major alterations to the ground floor entrance area might have on the on-going provision of a service to the public by proposing to make use of the



existing courtyard area between the buildings, but having addressed the issue of phasing, the scheme made little attempt to deal with the brief which had been presented for the project.

### Scheme 3

The scheme sought to open the ground floor space out and make it more friendly and approachable through the use of materials such as clear and milky glass, and timber, which was welcomed by the panel. They very much liked the 'totem pole' feature- more as a streetscape/ landmark element, rather than a place for someone to work in, felt that the access was well resolved, that the scheme

made good use of the basement display area, which would be visible from both inside and outside, that the entrance corner area made a positive contribution to the streetscape, and they liked the constructive use made of the courtyard space.

Critical points were that the layout of the various service counters would not be clear as you entered through the entrance doors, supervision of the entrance to the lift lobby would not be easy, the general layout of counters adjacent to the 'one stop shop' conflicts with the existing columns and the use of pebbles was felt to pose both maintenance and vandalism problems.

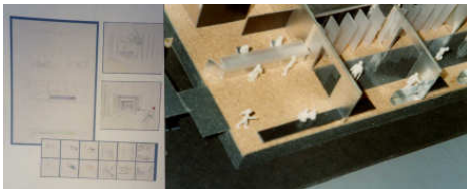


service counters would not be clear as you entered through the entrance doors, supervision of the entrance to the lift lobby would not be easy, the general layout of counters adjacent to the 'one stop shop' conflicts

#### Scheme 4

The underlying vision for this scheme aimed to make the space easier to use, with clearly defined public and private spaces. The panel felt that the scheme made good use of the existing structure and would be an economical scheme. The opening up of the facade with glazing and glazed louvres was welcomed as a way of making the space lighter and more pleasant to both visit and work in.

Critical points were that the separating out of the various counter functions was felt to work against the concept of 'one stop shop' provision. The panel were not convinced that the ramp and step arrangement would work satisfactorily- the steps effectively provided a short cut, missing out the



Tourist Information point, and if there were several people waiting to speak to someone at the TI, they would block the ramped access. The Tourist Information point was rather isolated from the rest of the accommodation- they need back up office space very close to the counter to work effectively, the access to the lift lobby was felt to be very tight, and not easy to supervise and the separate service counters would be man-power intensive to man.

#### Scheme 5

The underlying vision for this scheme was to create a light, airy, user-friendly environment with a clear,

simple design. The panel liked the way the scheme introduced light into the spaces. The model showed the scheme very clearly, and the internal space planning was easily understood, with clearly defined public and private space.

Critical points were that the panel felt that the steps and ramp arrangement was contrived, and would cause practical problems where the ramp and stepped routes crossed, that there was not a



clear visual link between the counter areas and the waiting areas, and that there was

poor access to some of the meeting rooms.

#### Scheme 6

The panel felt that this was a well worked out scheme which demonstrated a very good understanding of the complex requirements of the brief. Placing the entrance at the centre of the East



street elevation would bring visitors right into the heart of the

space and from this point the layout of counters etc, is easy to understand. The access to the lift lobby, and the alterations to the access to the toilets were well thought through, and could be easily supervised. The design brings light into the ground floor space on all sides. The exhibition space makes a positive contribution to the streetscape. The drawings and model explained the scheme with great clarity.

Critical points were that there should be a stepped alternative to the entrance ramp, and that there was no back-up office space to the Tourist Information point- but scope to make minor alterations to allow for this.

### CONCLUSIONS

The panel was unanimous in its decision about the winning scheme- Scheme 6 had not only resolved many of the practical issues, but their scheme showed elegance and clarity, and so they were duly declared winners by the panel. Apart from scheme

2 which did not address the brief, the panel felt that all the other four schemes had much to commend them.

In response to a request for feedback from KIAD, both tutors and students, the following student comments were received:

*"Interesting to be involved with a live project and to deal with real issues and real problems for a change."*

*"A good opportunity to work with different parties concerned with helping to enrich the design."*

The following comment was received from Sally Schafer, Course Leader of B.Arch course at KIAD.

*"Only too often the experience of project work for students of Architecture is an 'academic' and remote from the experience of real life situations. It is difficult for them to imagine what their professional interaction with people from all walks of life will be. In recent years, Canterbury School of Architecture has actively embraced a policy of student involvement in 'real' or 'live' projects. These projects give the students the opportunity to broaden their understanding that different people from other occupations (e.g. fire brigade, town planning) or with vested interests (e.g. client, local residents) may bring different perspectives to community based issues concerning urban and architectural design. A further benefit is that this participatory interaction allows them to see a process whereby community consultation is part of responsible and sustainable design, and that when they do build in the future, their work will impact on the community in which it is situated. To acquire this understanding of sustainable building at this stage is a very valuable lesson indeed."*

The assessment panel for the students' presentations comprised representatives from a range of organisations who would be directly involved with the remodelling of the Swale House entrance area. There were two representatives from Swale Borough Council, one officer and one councillor, an officer from Swale Police, and representatives from each of the Swale Access Group, Swale Volunteering and Community Day Centre and Swale Chamber of Commerce.

The Assessment Panel listened to presentations from each of the six teams, and had the opportunity to ask questions. The Panel then

convened in private to discuss their reactions to the six schemes. After each scheme had been discussed, Panel members were asked if they had any clear favourites, or any clear 'non-starters'. It became apparent that there was indeed one clear winner, that there was one scheme which had not attempted to really address the issues, and that the other four schemes each had their merits.

The views expressed during the assessment process were summarised in a draft report, which was forwarded to Swale BC, the Panel members and KIAD within a week of the students' presentations. The Panel members were also sent an Evaluation Form, a blank copy of which is attached in the Appendix, and a summary of their responses to this form is given below:

Evaluation forms were sent to the 6 Panel members, and 3 were returned completed together with additional comments. The responses to the questions posed are tabulated below

At first sight, a project to redesign the entrance area of a spec built HQ for a Local Authority would not appear to be either particularly interesting or challenging. This project, however, proves that creative design thinking can transform our perceptions. It provided the opportunity for students to engage with real people, both on a one to one basis, and in terms of how 'the general public' behaves in certain situations. The students had to interpret a brief, which contained a mix of ingredients, some very closely defined, others quite open-ended, and some which were in conflict with each other! Their response in a creative sense was impressive. The students' presentations had to be geared to a 'lay audience'- this requires a different approach, and their good use of models showed that they had taken this into account. The opportunity for the students' work to be displayed, both to the staff at Swale BC and to the public, can only help raise the profile of Architecture and Design. The written comments made in response to the schemes shows that they were taken seriously. That process of looking at a proposal and analysing whether it works or not is a particularly valuable exercise for those who work in the building, and will undoubtedly help them to engage fully as client/users in the final design.