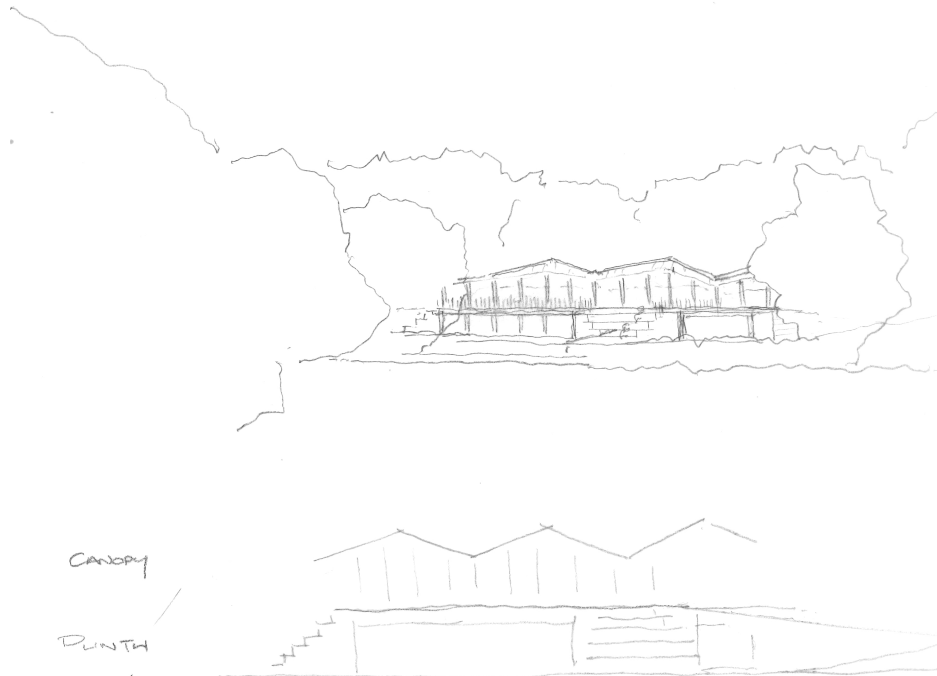


Key reasons for the decision to demolish and construct new

- Deficiencies of the existing visitor centre as outlined in the analysis, were providing constraints which would result in a compromised finished product
- The option to retain and reuse existing fabric in any new proposals is limited, and therefore in terms of construction may appear to not be a sustainable approach
- An updated brief identified that the current scheme limited a number of opportunities, not least the desirability for a ground floor café offering that could accommodate muddy boots, dogs, children etc, and a separate first floor offering that could be potentially quieter, offering elevated views over the fishpond. A new building would afford expansive views over the fishpond at first floor level, whilst the refurbished approach struggles to integrate this with the arts and crafts style, as openings to many key spaces must be made within the roof space / structure.
- A new building could be built to modern standards of construction and isn't compromised by having to retain or upgrade existing built fabric. In doing so, the design can maximise opportunities of the site such as positive solar gain, and significantly reduce ongoing running costs. This is an inherently more sustainable approach across the lifetime of the building
- A 'clean slate' allows the opportunities of the site to be maximised in terms of design and responding to the context, including positively engaging with the existing natural environment.
- There was a consensus from informal conversations with heritage bodies in support of demolishing the existing building in order to 'start again'.
- The deep plan of the refurbishment proposal can be addressed in a new build without being constrained by the existing footprint or the existing foundations.
- Biodiversity measures can be incorporated in a more integrated and coherent manner
- There is scope to design a building that can reasonably be adapted (expanded or reordered) in the future without significant change to the built fabric as is necessary with the existing visitor centre design
- The opportunity exists for more explicit and tangible change to be seen at the site through a new building that enhances the appearance of the park and the design standard



Existing visitor centre viewed from across the fishpond.



Early stage concept sketch

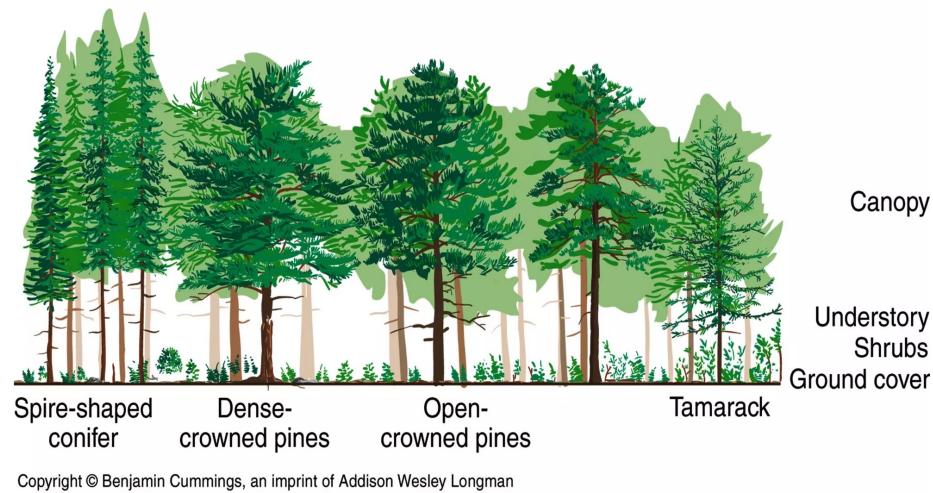
Development of a concept for the New Build Visitor Centre

The resultant decision to demolish the existing visitor centre and undertake a new development within the immediate site of the existing represented a critical turning point in the design development. A developed understanding of brief, site and context enabled a sound base for initial conceptual studies which quickly evolved to form a robust and resolved scheme. Key steps in this development are summarised below.

A critical failing of the existing building and any reworking of the existing is the relationship it achieves with the landscape and key views, and the ability for the building's function to spill positively into external spaces around the visitor centre. A new building critically could meet this aspiration, and initial concepts focused on the opportunity to form inhabited external space over several levels and locations governed by physical and visual links and axes.

The building was established as needing to be a minimum of 2 storeys in height, a scale that was considered to remain comfortably subservient to its wooded fore and back drop. An initial concept was therefore developed which envisaged the building comprised of 2 parts: a ground floor plinth and a first floor pavilion. This established an approach to massing, form, scale and materiality.

The building subsequently explores a simple layered strategy. The ground floor storey is envisaged as 'of the ground' adopting a heavy 'stereotomic' materiality which pulls ground up to form a plinth, with public internal and external spaces carved out of the massiveness of the new structure. This included consideration of gabion walls, green roofs and potential seating integrated into the built fabric, to provide a stratified approach which helped to embed the building in the site.

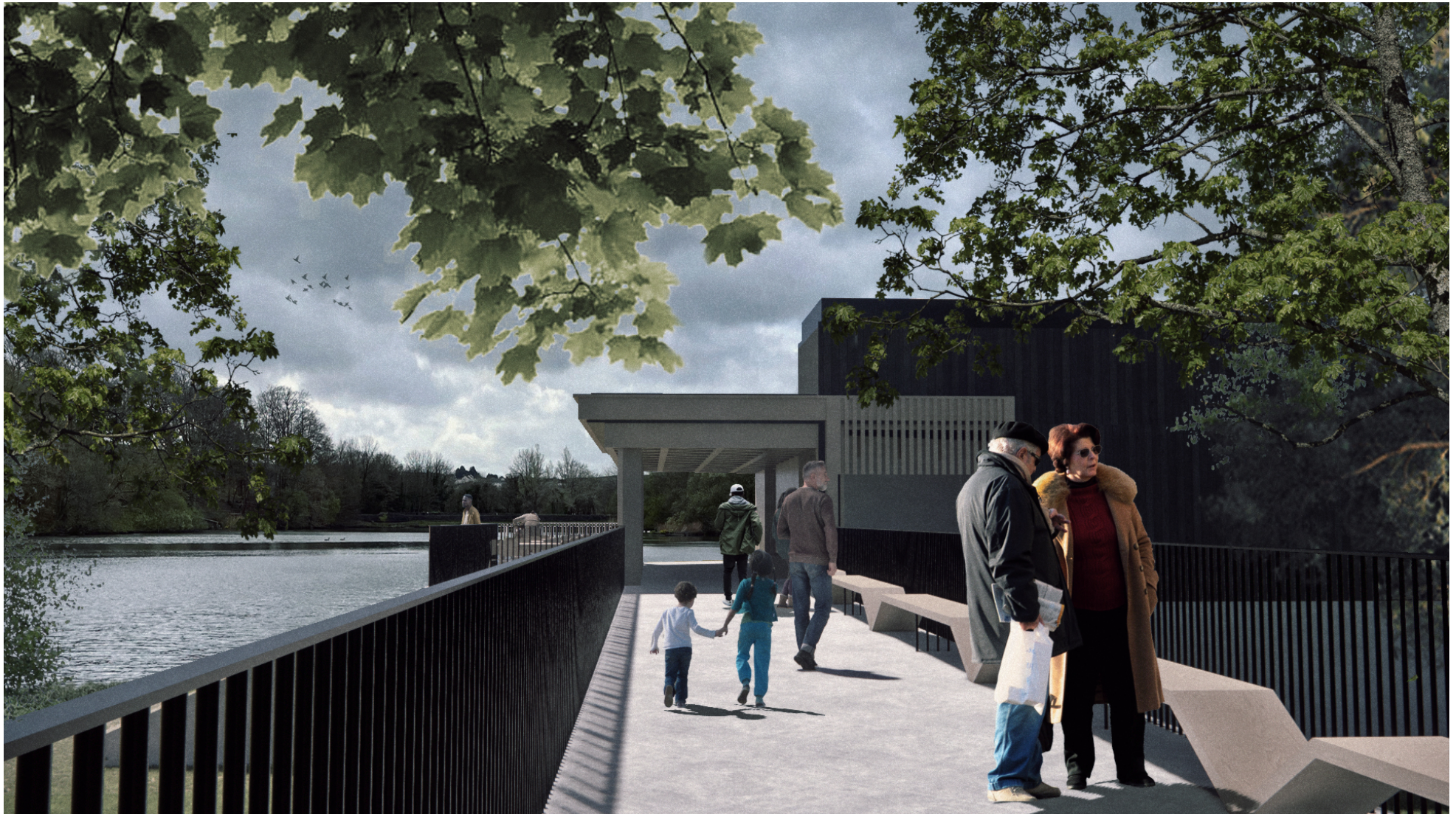


The woodland structure informed an initial strategy to the materials and formal arrangement of the proposed visitor centre

Raising this 'plinth' to first floor level realises a positive opportunity - meeting the higher levels of the car park to the north with a direct access point, enabling a dynamic relationship with route, access and views. These routes and important axes are articulated in the formation of stepped seating and stairs, reminiscent of the cascades which form such unique and defining element in the park's character.

Upon this plinth sits a lightweight timber based pavilion. In contrast to the massiveness of the ground floor with its cave like spaces, the first floor offers a framed, glazed structure - a continuation of the structure of the woodland behind, vertical boughs of trees expressed in the ordered structure of the exposed timber frame structure. Early studies subsequently explored the stratification of the wood land structure, the building adopting this layering in the formation of a ground line, with ground cover rewilding the building envelope. An understory of framed regular structure, predominantly glazed and transparent sits under an increasingly dense canopy of timber detailing - layers of timber louvres give way to cladding, roof line and parapet beyond, all clearly referencing the tree lined backdrop and setting up a principle by which the building could be subservient to the setting.

Initial studies explored the rationale of this conceptual approach and its subsequent formal arrangement, manifesting initially as organic, angled and irregular forms in both plan and section. The roof becoming a dominant and striking element embracing the irregularity of the canopy behind. Further analysis, plotting of route and key views has systematically regularised and rationalised the proposal in both plan and section to arrive at a much simpler form which sits quietly and comfortably against the natural background.



Development image, created during the design process to explore the idea of a tree-lined walkway from the car park. This idea has been refined in the final design.

OVERVIEW OF PROPOSALS

Programme of Accommodation

The existing Visitor Centre has been shown to provide a limited number of spaces for everyday visitors, namely WCs and a café/ ice cream parlour.

The new building will provide a more varied range of functions that would better serve the community and those that work/volunteer at the park. The proposed scheme therefore incorporates the following spaces:

- **Flexible Space including space for the Friends of Gnoll** (with potential to be used for interpretation/ exhibition/ community hire). Whilst there were originally some information boards displayed within the centre, these are no longer present and, rather, the centre does not reference or link with the origins of the park. The new centre will provide integrated interpretation, alongside flexible space that can host permanent or temporary exhibitions to celebrate both the history of the park and current local artists/makers/entrepreneurs. This space can also be hired by local interest groups and societies and will equip the Friends of Gnoll Park with a space to facilitate the work they do within the park, helping them to expand their operation/ membership and, in turn, have a positive impact on the park
- **Café.** The new cafés - 'for muddy boots and wet dogs' at ground floor level and for more relaxed dining at first floor level - will enable the promotion of sustainable seasonal food and showcase local producers. Spatially the cafés will be more efficiently designed and relate to a variety of external sitting and dining spaces offering views and connections to experience the wide context of the estate.

- **Rangers' Office.** The centre will still provide private workspace for the rangers, so that they are able to effectively operate on site.
- **Education and Conferencing Facilities.** Whilst the current Centre includes a meeting room, there is scope for a wider range of facilities to be incorporated into the centre to allow for flexible space that could be used for educational purposes or hired by the local community for various events/classes, providing a perfect location for learning or meeting within a natural environment.
- **Indoor Play.** As an outdoor resource the park will expand on its already notable play opportunities. However, during inclement weather, the park lacks an indoor child-friendly play space. Proposals therefore include for a new dedicated indoor play facility. This will be specific to the park and will be inspired by the natural and historic environment. Envisaged as an indoor forest, with treehouses and walkways which reference the wooded topography of the site, this space will become an additional destination and community resource.
- **Changing Places WC.** Currently the nearest Changing Places facility is in Victoria Gardens in the centre of Neath. Providing this facility in the park will increase the accessibility of the park and allow this valuable natural and heritage asset to be enjoyed by more people.
- **General WC provision.** Internally and externally accessible toilets are designed to welcome park users and those coming to the centre as their destination.

RESPONSE TO OBJECTIVES OF GOOD DESIGN

Changes to the historic and traditional environment (whether designated or not) are inevitable in order to maintain and secure our heritage for future generations. Such development is often born in response to social, cultural and economic changes within society generally, and in this case the renewal of facilities for visitors at the Gnoll Estate Country Park is a critical element of the council's strategy to promote the Park and wider Vale of Neath region as a highly-desirable place to live, work and visit with tangible economic benefits. This will ultimately facilitate the management of the wider landscape so it can be retained and enhanced as a large scale designed landscape that celebrates its associations with the town of Neath, its pioneering development of industrial processes, and as a valuable asset to its surrounding community.

The proposal therefore seeks to enhance the offer of Gnoll Estate Country Park, in terms of its evidential, historic, aesthetic and communal value whilst improving the economic sustainability of the commercial offer in line with similar destinations across the region. It looks to build on existing successful commercial offers and broaden the demographic and seasonality whilst representing the unique values of its location.

Proposed Access and Car Parking

The building will retain its close proximity to the existing car park, which will be extended in response to existing and projected need. The extension to the car park is the basis of a different application (refer to Project Context document, which sets out all the proposals). The new building has been sited and orientated to create an exceptionally permeable building at both ground and first floors. The building sits at a convergence of existing and new routes and views, with the existing reservoir circular walk separating the building from the Fishpond bank at its northernmost point. The intention is for the building to open up to this route at ground floor allowing a natural flow around and through the building at ground floor level, with all openings being accessible. A new access route is provided from the north car park to the first floor of the visitor centre snaking through the existing treeline. This supplements proposed internal vertical circulation including a lift to ensure all accommodation is accessible to all.

Character

The building has been designed to provide a sense of arrival at the park. Through a well-thought through palette of materials, which focus on texture, nature and history, a sense of unique character is created which helps to define an identity for the park. In addition, consideration has been given to the depth of views, which are emphasised and framed through the layout, siting and form of the building.