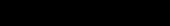


LONDON
REVIEW PANEL


The Africa Centre,
Arch 28, Old Union Yard Arches,
229 Union Street,
London,
SE1 0LR

November 2019

Dear 

London Review Panel: The Africa Centre

Please find enclosed the London Review Panel report following the review of the Africa Centre proposals on 14th November 2019. On behalf of the Panel, I would like to thank you for your participation in the review and offer the Panel's ongoing support as the scheme's design develops.

Yours sincerely,



Mayor's Design Advocate

cc.

All meeting attendees

Jules Pipe, Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills

Debbie Jackson, Executive Director of Development, Enterprise and Environment, GLA

, Head of Regeneration, GLA

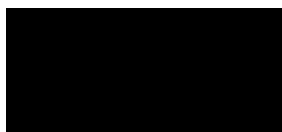


**Report of London Review Panel meeting
The Africa Centre**

Thursday 14th November 2019

Review held at: The Africa Centre, Arch 28, Old Union Yard Arches, 229 Union Street, London, SE1 0LR

London Review Panel



Chair
MDA
MDA

Attendees



GLA Regeneration
GLA Regeneration
GLA Regeneration
The Africa Centre
The Africa Centre
The Africa Centre
Freehaus
Freehaus
CCM

Apologies / report copied to



GLA Regeneration
GLA Regeneration

Report copied to

Jules Pipe
Debbie Jackson

Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills
GLA
GLA

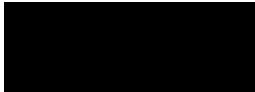
Confidentiality

Please note that while schemes not yet in the public domain, for example at a pre-application stage, will be treated as confidential, as a public organisation the GLA is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and in the case of an FOI request may be obliged to release project information submitted for review.

Project name and site address

The Africa Centre, Arch 28, Old Union Yard Arches, 229 Union Street, London, SE1 0LR

Presenting team



The Africa Centre
Freehaus

The Africa Centre introduction

Representatives from The Africa Centre set out the context for the project and the rich history of the organisation. The Africa Centre's previous address, at 38 Kings Street in Covent Garden holds a huge resonance with London's African communities and was an important intellectual and social hub. The five key pillars of The Africa Centre which underpin the work of the organisation were described as; intellectual, social, culture, education, entrepreneurship and innovation. The opportunities and challenges The Africa Centre faces were also outlined, which include building a sense of community, representing the many communities and cultures of the continent, reflecting a contemporary Africa and championing a vibrant, global institute.

Design Review Panel's views

Summary

The London Review Panel are hugely supportive of the project and expressed their excitement in both the ambitions and aspirations of the organisation and in the richness of the design brief. The Panel commend the hard work done by the design team to date and encourage a reflection on, and greater testing of, decisions made so far with particular regard to programming and placement of the food and beverage offer. The Panel view a real opportunity in the connection of lateral spaces and the public realm and advocate an exploration of the whole of the ground plane including Gunpowder House, the external spaces in front of Gunpowder House and between Gunpowder House and the arches.

In general, the Panel are impressed by the work undertaken and view the further work required as a process of refining key decisions.

The Panel acknowledge the GLA as active funders offering further guidance and advocate the use of both the Special Assistance Team and MDAs as design work progresses.

Public welcome and arrival experience

- The Panel noted the prominent position of the café bar and questioned whether this formed a barrier to entry, creating a conflict between the intended welcome experience, that could be further compounded by the positioning of the servery.
- Some concerns were raised by the Panel regarding the sale of alcohol at the threshold to a cultural centre. The Panel encourage the design team to consider the first experience of a visitor to the centre, and ways in which to make this as welcoming as possible for all.
- The Panel suggest the scheme would benefit from an entrance experience which acknowledges the decisions people make when they enter a building or come into a space, offering a number of options rather than one. The Panel thinks this would go some way to create a welcoming atmosphere; the opportunity to decide to stand and wait for a friend, sit and read a book, explore artwork on your own or to spend money on food or drinks.

Programme flexibility and spatial arrangement

- The Panel challenged the design and client team to fully test whether the proposed spaces allow the ambitions for the centre to be fulfilled.
- Whilst offering a well-considered, regulation-compliant scheme, the Panel queried whether the proposed programming makes the most out of the spaces available.
- The restricted footprint of Gunpowder House creates a vertical set of spaces. The Panel queried if the richness of the institution could be communicated effectively if the display of art and archive materials only begins at the 3rd floor. The Panel questioned how the essence of The Africa Centre could be more strongly signalled upon entry, beyond art integrated into the restaurant space.
- The spatial arrangement and relationship of the railway arches and Gunpowder House should be considered holistically, as an interconnected, coherent set of spaces, joined with a piece of public realm.
- The Panel observe that improved connectivity could be better achieved without the need for a footbridge, as previously proposed.
- As design work continues, the Panel would encourage a range of options and activities for the visitor to explore freely and laterally, where the design of scheme presents numerous events happening concurrently and creates an interesting and active ground floor plane.
- This could include an expression of archival elements or other artwork on the street, where the heart or core of the centre becomes the space in between other activities.
- The Panel acknowledged that overall, including the railway arches, the scheme has a lot of floorspace and urged the team to consider how the programme best fits with the space. For example, the proposed (existing) workspace area could be better suited to one of the smaller, upper floors of Gunpowder House.
- The Panel recognise the performance space as being key to the programming of the centre and suggest performances might be accommodated beyond one single space, catering for multiple demographics, experiences and atmospheres. The creation of a series of spaces offers a flexibility of programming and maximises the opportunity to host multiple events at once, from the large scale to the intimate.
- The Panel advise the design team to focus on the creation of different atmospheres, building upon the character of the existing spaces, and to prioritise getting the fundamental infrastructure right.
- The Panel suggest Second Home, the coworking space on Hanbury Street, London, as an interesting project precedent due to the successful mix of programmes, sense of welcome and the way in which the space connects across the road; the bookshop is sited opposite the workspace.

Food and beverage offer and provision

- The Panel view the F&B offer as an area of the design which needs to proceed with caution. In order to connect the vision and ambition of The Africa Centre as an intellectual hub as well as a welcoming space and a space of food, the commerciality of the restaurant/ café/ bar should be carefully considered.
- The Panel had some concerns that a high proportion of floorspace has been allocated for restaurant or café/ bar provision. To ensure the brief is not missing other programmatic considerations, such as a bookshop or education room, the Panel suggest a review of the ambitions of The Africa Centre against the proposed spaces.
- The Panel noted a tension between the optimal commercial position of the café in terms of maximising footfall and visibility, and the opportunity to draw people through the spaces by repositioning the café elsewhere, offering an unmediated encounter with art and culture.
- The Panel referenced the Rebuild Foundation's Stony Island Arts Bank in Chicago; a hybrid gallery, media archive, library and community centre where the permanent collections and other installations are hugely impactful upon entry. Other programme elements fit around the archival materials.

- The Panel queried if the F&B offer could be reconceived as an art project or have a more social focus.
- The Delphina Foundation's low-cost lunch scheme was referenced by the Panel, as an example of a low-barrier food-focused social event.

Public realm

- The Panel consider the public realm as a key element to the project and a valuable opportunity to stitch together the various spaces of the scheme.
- The proposed outdoor seating offers the potential to expand the threshold of The Africa Centre, signalling its presence on the street and beginning the visitor experience.
- The Panel referenced the visible narrative from previous exhibitions in the existing stairwell of Gunpowder House and queried how the circulation spaces in the proposed scheme could communicate the activities and event calendar of The Africa Centre.

Visual arts and space to evolve

- The Panel noted the emphasis on the visual arts and advocated collaboration with artists from an early stage. The panel were concerned that the material presented focused on potential outputs rather than the process of engaging with artists. Inclusion of The Africa Centre's archive in the artist's brief and how this and the proposed spaces might be used would be interesting. Involving an artist(s) in how the community could be engaged in this process would be critical to a successful integration.
- If the shell of the building, including connections through and between spaces, is right then flexibility should remain for artists to be engaged creatively to instil different spaces with different atmospheres.
- Referencing The Africa Centre, New York, the Panel noted that the space was much larger than Gunpowder House but welcomed the ambition to achieve a sense of space in the entrance area and encouraged a more generous arrival zone in order to achieve that in the London project.
- The architecture of the space creates opportunities for unplanned encounters and connections, which would be beneficial for The Africa Centre's aspirations, particularly the entrepreneurship and innovation aspect of the centre.
- The idea of entrepreneurship could be integrated throughout the scheme, giving a sense of collaboration and connections rather than singular workspace. The Panel referenced co-working spaces such as We Work and Second Home, where there are multiple options and opportunities to meet and work; places to sit, places to perch with a laptop, public and private meeting space reflecting current ways of working.
- Allowing room for spontaneity or adaption for future use would be beneficial to the scheme. The Panel urge the design team to have the confidence to deliver a series of high-quality, functional spaces that The Africa Centre can then embody and evolve.