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22 September 2016

James Taylor
Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners
Generator Studios
Trafalgar St
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 2LA

Our reference: DCC/0696

Oxford City Council: Student Castle, Oxford

Dear Mr Taylor,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on this proposal at the Design Review on 8 September 2016.

Summary

The current proposal for the former Oxford Business Centre site has the potential to create a sense of arrival to Oxford and act as a catalyst for the delivery of the Oxpens Masterplan. A substantial amount of work to address the panel's previous concerns has been undertaken since the last review in July 2015, including consideration of strategic city views and the quality of the new environment.

The reduction in the quantum and scale of development results in a building that sits more comfortably on the site and a layout that feels less cramped, but we have concerns that some open spaces within the site may be overshadowed. We advise that overshadowing studies are carried out to further refine the configuration of the site and building.

The proposed elevations are overly-fussy in terms of their articulation, the detailing and palette of materials should be simplified to ensure that the building will relate well to the other buildings that will be delivered within the masterplan area. The northern entrance to the building will form a 'gateway' to the site and should create a greater sense of arrival. Permeability across the site, particularly from the central pedestrian spine, should be provided.

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We acknowledge that there are challenges in developing the first site within the Oxpens Masterplan area and support the applicant's proactive approach in taking responsibility for initiating the delivery of this strategy through a separate outline application. Further consideration needs to be given to the delivery of the Beckett Street extension which is key in achieving a successful scheme.

Masterplanning

The new development would kick start the delivery of the Oxpens Masterplan and should promote Oxford as a green, inspiring city and generate a feeling of inclusivity. Sustainability and ecology could feature more strongly in the vision for this site and building design, for example, in the use of green walls, roofs, climbing plants, to better differentiate Oxpens from other neighbourhoods in Oxford.

There is a narrow range of users of this site who may feel isolated from the local community and vice-versa. The proposal should seek to widen the range of users and attract visitors of different ages in order to create a destination and make this site a hub of activity. The proposed amenities, such as the café/juice bar, are beginning to provide street front activation and a reason for a variety of people to visit the site but this should be further explored and expanded. The building should be also adaptable to alternative land uses and occupiers in the long term and flexible to changing demands, needs and economic conditions.

The creation of a high quality, pedestrian friendly Beckett Street extension route would greatly contribute to the success of the redevelopment of the area. Accepting the challenges of delivering this route which will need to be delivered in conjunction with the adjacent landowner and may not come forward for some time, it is important to set down the key principles and markers of quality of space, such as the width of pavement and paving materials, at this early stage, via discussions with the adjacent site owner and Oxfordshire County Council. To create wider pavements and accommodate sufficient space for planting and street furniture, the proposed building should be set back from Beckett Street. It should also be activated at ground floor level with lively uses and a bold and eye catching entrance to include passive surveillance of this route. Whilst a separate outline planning application for Beckett Street is a positive move, we would recommend that these works are accommodated within the planning application for the Student Castle site to ensure the vision for this street is delivered.

Access and movement

Enhancing movement routes within and beyond the site will be key in creating a development that is successful. We recommend progressing and refining links with the wider area and in particular that more thought is given to the following:

- Pedestrian and cycle access to/from and within the site and connectivity and links with nearby transport links. In particular how different members of the community (including wheelchair users and people with disabilities) will move around and beyond the site.

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- Options to make the route to the site from the railway station more coherent and welcoming. This can include more space and wider movement routes from the pedestrian footbridge. It would also be beneficial to engage in discussions with the Council and Network Rail to ascertain whether disabled access to the Oxford train station via this footbridge could be improved.
- Nodes of activity, the location of the reception area and how the associated vehicle drop-off point could be accommodated. For example, the reception area may generate a high volume of visitors at the start and finish of term times and people may choose to stop near the entrance rather than utilising the car park at the rear resulting in congestion. We advise considering where and how these vehicles might be accommodated and strategies for drop-offs and deliveries. A traffic management plan would identify how best to manage the impacts on the wider transport network.
- Consideration should be given to boundary treatments to ensure the site connects well with the wider area, particularly the boundary facing Beckett Street, which will be a main hub of activity and key to create a successful new street.

Heights and massing

The site layout and height and massing of blocks result in a development that sits more comfortably on the site in visual terms, compared to the previous scheme. However, the gaps between blocks are very narrow and will be flanked by buildings considerable in mass. This will potentially create poor quality amenity spaces that are likely to be heavily over-shadowed, particularly between the middle and northern blocks. We would therefore recommend carrying out over-shadowing studies to further inform the configuration of the blocks and open spaces, and if required explore alternative building massings and layouts to introduce more light and open space within the site.

Further street level investigation and analyses of ground floor level integration is required throughout the site to progress this proposal. Particular consideration should be given as to how the proposed building would be viewed and experienced on foot, by train, vehicle and bike from different movement routes around the site and an analysis of long and close up and street level views carried out to inform the design, form and massing of the building at a human scale.

Open spaces and landscape design

The landscaping strategy should continue to be developed in conjunction with the block design to ensure attractive, usable amenity spaces for residents and visitors. We recommend producing a site wide masterplan to inform the landscape design, to cover in particular the following:

- Explore and investigate locations for green infrastructure, taking into account their cost and maintenance requirements. Include food growing opportunities which could provide an educational and agronomic resource for students and local residents.

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- A greater degree of hierarchy and distinction between the spaces is needed to highlight different character areas and uses.
- The current site configuration creates a redundant pocket of land in the south of the site adjacent to the new building which could become neglected and under-utilised. It would be beneficial to explore options that better utilise this space.

Building Design

In terms of its appearance the block has an overly varied palette of materials and fenestration detailing. The elevational treatment could lead to the proposed building competing with other buildings that may come forward for development within the masterplan area. We would strongly recommend that a more refined and elegant design is adopted for the new block with a consistent theme and a more harmonious approach for each façade, including the fenestration pattern and detailing.

In terms of overarching architectural design, we would recommend the following:

- Explore alternative roof forms that add interest whilst forming part of a more refined building design, and adopt a consistent theme for the roofscape. The red roof is over-complicated and does not relate well to the site or context.
- Simplify the vertical windows to create a calmer elevation. The elevation with staggered/scattered windows is overly complicated.
- Use a simpler palette of materials – concentrate detailing in specific parts of the building such as the 'book ends'.

With regard to the detailed design of the building's facades:

- Differentiate the east and west facades which will front different routes and have different functions. Once the Beckett Street extension has been delivered, the eastern elevation will be a key focal point and should create a stronger sense of arrival. To take advantage of this key elevation, this part of the site could be more distinct by creating an attractive entry point, providing an open space, or introducing a vibrant and lively community use.
- The southern elevation appears to have been an afterthought in the formulation of the scheme and requires more detailed design work. It could be a good location for additional green infrastructure such as a green wall.
- The curved feature wall at the northern elevation where the entrance is located should create a gateway to the site and masterplan area. Make this wall a key façade in design terms and include greenery such as climbing plants to add interest.

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Review process

Following a site visit, and discussions with the design team and local authority and a pre-application review, the scheme was reviewed on 8 September 2016 by Mike Hayes – Chair, Alan Berman, Dan Jones, Deborah Nagan and Jon Rowland. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

Confidentiality

Since the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application, the advice contained in this letter is offered in confidence, on condition that we are kept informed of the progress of the project, including when it becomes the subject of a planning application. We reserve the right to make our views known should the views contained in this letter be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). If you do not require our views to be kept confidential, please write to cabe@designcouncil.org.uk.

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Central pedestrian spine

The central pedestrian spine between the buildings is a sound design concept as it facilitates circulation within the block. We think more permeability in terms of access and views from this route into the open spaces are needed to facilitate movement around the site and include long views. As it is a space for people to meet and interact, we suggest widening this route and including more communal meeting points. Examples of buildings with attractive internal landscaped amenity spaces which link long corridors are St George's Hospital in Tooting, London and Guy's Hospital in London Bridge.

Internal Layouts

The initial concept of room clusters with a shared kitchen and dining space in the corridor and separate studio flats appears to work well in principle.

It will be important to consider the benefits offered by the design of each room, as some rooms appear to be more appealing and pleasant than others based on their location and aspect. The rooms with faceted windows create unusual shaped spaces that may be difficult to furnish and we recommend simplifying their configuration. Explore alternative internal layouts and room sizes to rationalise the positioning of the internal furniture such as the bed which may be better located away from the window. Locating the desks adjacent to windows would allow students to enjoy and appreciate the surrounding views and benefit from natural light whilst they are studying.

Sustainability

The sustainability drivers for the site should be identified at this stage and the environmental strategy should be developed in conjunction with the building design. For example the location of any required plant, ventilation and service runs and how water will be managed should be established and assessed. This will affect the building form and elevational treatment, in particular the location and positions of the combined heat and power plant.

Thank you for consulting us and please keep us informed of the progress of the scheme. If there is any point that requires clarification, please telephone us.

Yours sincerely,

Annabel Osborne

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Oxford Business Centre, Oxford

Design Workshop

Notes from 2 July 2015

Thank you for attending the ODRP's Design Workshop on 2 July 2015. We welcome the opportunity to offer our advice and look forward to engaging in future dialogue as the proposal develops. The redevelopment of the Oxford Business Centre will set the precedent for design quality of the Oxpens masterplan as it is the first phase of this highly anticipated new quarter of Oxford. We commend the client and design team on beginning to tackle the complex masterplanning and design issues for new student accommodation on this site. However, the strategic city views and quality of the new environment for all users of this site are negatively impacted upon by the proposed quantum of student housing. We urge the client and design team to respond more creatively to the brief and more sensitively to the site, ensuring that the commercial risk in the scheme is not overly compensated by the proposed density. In order to address the shortcomings of the Oxpens masterplan, Oxford City Council should lead the discussions with key landholders, particularly on the extension of Beckett Street, and take the necessary steps detailed below to help achieve a coherent, high quality masterplan development. We offer the following suggestions in taking the design forward.

Masterplanning

- The success of the Oxpens masterplan is dependent on the strategic discussions with the landholders and Oxford City Council, particularly in terms of clarifying the street infrastructure across the masterplan. We strongly urge Oxford City Council to lead these discussions at the earliest possible stage. Confirmation on the proposed extension to Beckett Street as identified in the Oxpens masterplan is especially crucial as it will help lever the first development phase and consequently support latter phases of the masterplan. The extension of Beckett Street will wield significant urban design and social benefits for the masterplan as a whole. If needed, the city council should consider the possibility of adopting the extension to Beckett Street, providing that it is built to adoptable standards, at a later stage if it were to be implemented by Student Castle to help kickstart the first phase and masterplan.
- We encourage the city council to provide more analysis, diagrams and detail to help guide the design of the Oxpens masterplan and allow design decisions to be made early in the process by the relevant client and design teams of each scheme. In continuing to develop the masterplan, knowledge and experience from these clients and design teams could prove beneficial given their design analysis and studies.
- Placemaking in the Oxpens masterplan should be stronger to ensure a strong community spirit is instilled at each future phase of the masterplan. We encourage Oxford City Council to lead on this aspect of the masterplan. Defining the quantum, location and quality of green spaces and squares will help support and underpin a strong community feel. For example, an open space or square at the junction of Beckett Street and Osney Lane could be an attractive local hub for the new and existing community and visitors to meet and interact.

- Some urban design analysis and exploration by the Oxford Business Centre design team on the Oxpens masterplan is needed to create a successful scheme on this site. The ideal scheme should be imagined and sketched beyond the redline boundary of the Oxford Business Centre site without the existing masterplanning constraints and requirements of the brief, for example, where users would like to enter and leave the scheme, places to meet etc. Identify the key design aspects that make the ideal proposal successful and identify the benefits of these aspects to the city council and landholders.
- Consider how phasing the Oxford Business Centre development could help address and overcome the current masterplanning issues, particularly the Beckett Street extension.

Access and connections

- Strengthen the relationship between the site and the Oxpens masterplan in the proposed street layout for the site. The eastern side of the scheme presents a great opportunity to connect with the other sites in the Oxpens masterplan, the Westgate Centre and city centre. At present the eastern side is a rigid barrier that separates the site from the masterplan. Investigate how access could be improved from the east by extending the proposed masterplan street network into the site. Consider also the site boundary treatment and if the eastern fence is needed.
- The ambition to provide a car free scheme is highly commendable. Take more advantage of the great connections for cyclists and pedestrians across the site and to the wider area to make the scheme feel fully connected with the city. Consider how the existing footbridge to the north of the site could be integrated with the proposed access routes to connect neighbourhoods across the railway to the west.
- Where car access needs to be provided for servicing and Unit 16, explore more creatively if/how one or more vehicular routes could be provided, such as from the north and the east if the new extension to Beckett Street is built.

Height and massing

- The large quantum of student accommodation on the narrow site of the Oxford Business Centre results in an uncomfortable arrangement of tall buildings that is likely to impede the quality of the internal and external environment for its users. We recommend reducing the height and massing, and providing more height variation across the site to create more interesting buildings and spaces.
- Reducing the width of these blocks and/or providing strategic breaks in the blocks will help the scheme relate better to the conservation area and strategic views. The wide blocks that run parallel to the railway line have a negative impact on the key long range views across the site, particularly from Raleigh Park. Explore in more detail how the balance between perforations in the blocks and noise from the railway.
- Learn and take design cues from the redevelopment of Westgate Centre to help create a scheme that maximises the great potential of this site and achieves high quality design. For example, consider commissioning more than one architect to design a varied scheme.

Building layout

- Envisage and develop this scheme as a new neighbourhood for students, visitors and staff. Consider the needs of mature students in more detail who may spend more time studying in their apartments and/or may require larger apartments, if they are married for example. International students may also spend more time throughout the year in their student accommodation if they do not return regularly to their home country. A broader mix of amenities and services are needed to sustain these students, and visitors and staff throughout the year and at different times of the day. Providing some shared amenities will foster a sense of connectedness with the other schemes in the masterplan and Oxford city.
- A single point entry to a student housing scheme on this site is not sufficient for the large number of residents, visitors and staff moving through the site on a daily basis. It is helpful to reference and incorporate the design approach to other Oxford colleges that have primary and secondary entrances of varying sizes. The current entrance to the north is too far away for the residents at the far south of the site for example.
- “Loosen up” the site layout as at present it feels too rigid and constrained on this narrow site. We support the concept of building closer to the railway line to help provide more open space and connectivity to the eastern side of the site.
- Create more “episodes” in the site layout to create a stronger sense of delight and charm across the scheme, using the landscape design or changes in the topography for example. A series of repeated blocks and spaces could appear mundane on this long site.
- Experiment with the horizontality and verticality of the blocks more to help alleviate the impact of a long building. The layered plains of the elevations are beginning to achieve this.
- Think more carefully about the site layout in terms of its orientation. At present the courtyard spaces are likely to be overshadowed for long periods of the day resulting in unpleasant outdoor spaces for a large number of users.
- The concept of a central pedestrian spine from north to south connecting to a series of outdoor courtyard spaces on the ground floor is appealing. A double height space over this spine would give this route more prominence. The clusters of student accommodation around these courtyard spaces have the potential to be pleasant and inspiring. Some courtyard spaces could be open to the public to create a livelier, communal atmosphere with the rest of the masterplan and wider area.
- In keeping with the concept of the central pedestrian spine, continue to develop the concept of connectivity within the site to help the scheme feel more active and lively. We suggest integrating two or three streets that transect the central pedestrian street from east to west and that also link to the proposed streets in the masterplan.
- Think more creatively about the buildings and spaces around the substation so that it does not appear obscure, and if possible, relocate the substation elsewhere on/off the site.



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Attendees

Design Workshop Panel

John Lyall (chair)
Eddie Booth
Dan Jones
Deborah Nagan

Scheme presenters

Edward Cade	Student Castle
Dominic Smith	Nathaniel Lichfield + Partners
James Taylor	Nathaniel Lichfield + Partners
Bruce Cockburn	FJMT Architects
Christine Kwong	FJMT Architects

Local Authority

Murray Hancock Oxford City Council

Cabe at Design Council staff

Thomas Bender
Victoria Lee

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