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11 July 2016

Huw Mellor  
 Kemp and Kemp  
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 Abingdon on Thames  
 OX14 5AL

Our reference: DCC/0770

### **Oxford City Council: Somerville College**

Dear Huw Mellor,

Thank you for providing the opportunity for the Oxford Design Review Panel to advise on the proposals for the Catherine Hughes building (Phase 1) by Somerville College and Shaw Lefeyre building (Phase 2) by Shirehall at the Design Review on 23 July 2016. The collaboration between the clients to develop and deliver these schemes through a joint planning application is to be commended.

### **Summary (Catherine Hughes and Shaw Lefeyre proposals)**

New student accommodation on the sites at Walton Street and Little Clarendon Street provides the opportunity to enhance the built character and vibrancy of this part of Oxford. The demolition of existing buildings to enable the College and Shirehall to achieve this ambition is potentially justified by the quality of the proposals, as evidenced by the street views of both buildings that demonstrate a sound approach to the height and massing.

The Catherine Hughes building mediates the transition between the civic and residential characters along Walton Street. However, the north-facing rooms and the buildings overshadowing of the adjacent open spaces are issues that need addressing through detailed daylight analysis, which could lead to the conclusion that the site needs to be developed less intensively.

The design of the Shaw Lefeyre building as a background building is on the right path, however the thinking and detail of this building are not yet fully developed, particularly in terms of its elevational treatment. The input of a landscape architect is urgently needed, to help ensure the shared courtyard between the proposed Catherine Hughes and Shaw Lefeyre buildings is safe and welcoming for students.

We recognise the community value of Bedford House, and the council's ambition to retain the building on this basis. However, to improve the character of Walton Street and provide more

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facilities for the College or the local community, redeveloping this site could prove more beneficial in the long term.

### **Relationship to the wider context**

Somerville College, with its exceptional historic and contemporary buildings, and its plans for further growth, makes a significant contribution to the city of Oxford. The proposals are in keeping with the College's ambition to create buildings and spaces that contribute positively to the evolving character of the local area.

Good pedestrian connections into the city from both schemes have been achieved in these proposals. To strengthen way-finding, we suggest looking for opportunities to further strengthen the character of the edges of the campus, and enhance views and pedestrian routes into and across it. In the current proposal, the layout of pedestrian routes creates some key views to buildings, but a clearer indication or view of the buildings and open spaces that lie beyond would also be helpful for way-finding. For instance, there is no indication that the Fellows Garden can be accessed from Walton Street. We encourage the creation of a varied and informal character to the College in this part of Oxford, in contrast to its Woodstock Road character. This could be achieved not only in the architecture of the new buildings, but also in hard and soft landscaping and boundary treatments on Walton Street, for example with a shared surface and new trees. Green walls on the buildings could be a modern interpretation of the existing hedges along the street, which could also help in the transition from civic to residential buildings. Given the increasing vehicular and pedestrian traffic in this area, due to the developments within the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter and Jericho Conservation Area, we recommend that the city council develops a strategy to manage movement on Walton Street.

### **Landscape**

The external spaces alongside the proposed buildings are concerning as currently they have no defined character or purpose, and appear to be leftover spaces from the buildings. We strongly recommend using the expertise of a landscape designer to work with the architects to give definition to these spaces, and to ensure pleasant and safe outdoor environments for students and staff, incorporating strategies for lighting, use of external spaces, and careful choice of tree species.

Removing the existing Sycamore tree on the site appears appropriate given its age and location. To help strengthen identity of the site, new trees which are smaller in size and distinctive in appearance could be incorporated in key locations. We would also suggest incorporating more vegetation across the sites, using green roofs for example, particularly over lower roofscapes to avoid unpleasant views from rooms onto roofs.

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### **Shared courtyard between the Catherine Hughes and Shaw Lefeyre buildings**

The small size of the courtyard, its use for cycle storage and the access and service requirements of the buildings surrounding it make the space feel overcharged and present challenges to creating an attractive and pleasant entrance space. We urge the design team to look for ways to make this space feel larger and less cluttered, by relocating some of the cycle parking for instance. Cycle parking could be provided elsewhere on the masterplan or in the basement of the blocks, for example. We understand that covered bike storage helps make cycling comfortable, but are concerned that roofs over the bike racks would make the courtyard look and feel more cramped.

### **Catherine Hughes Building (Phase 1)**

#### **Site layout, height and massing**

The Catherine Hughes building makes the most of the available space on the site. However, there seems to be poor levels of daylight to some external and internal spaces, specifically the external spaces to the north of the Catherine Hughes building, and rooms looking onto this space from both the existing and proposed buildings. To address these issues, a detailed daylight analysis is required and the possibility of developing the site less intensely should be explored. The efforts to allow light into the internal spaces, through the stepped roofline and dormer-like windows and the glazed stair cores help to create more pleasant sun-lit spaces are welcome. In townscape terms, we are convinced by the placement of the building's west façade at back-of-pavement line, to line with the Co-op building on the corner of Walton Street and Little Clarendon Street.

#### **Bedford House**

We acknowledge the ambition of the council to retain Bedford House given the townscape value of the building and open space that is currently used by local people. In our view, there are greater benefits in removing the building given its unlisted status, and because a new building in this location would enable a more efficient use of this part of the site for the college and/or community, and a better street frontage.

If Bedford House is retained, we would recommend community or college uses that directly relate to Somerville College and its students, such as a gym. We question the suitability of a nursery in this building, particularly given the access and vehicular drop off at this point will be awkward and the overshadowing of the open space in front of the building. It would be worth engaging further with the local community on the character and use of Bedford House to help ensure the proposals for the building and open space also respond to their needs and concerns.

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### **Ground floor**

In our view, a more active internal use is needed for what is planned to be a ground floor seminar room, in order to better activate Walton Street. Views into and out of the seminar room are likely to be periodic, depending on the usage of the meeting room, whereas a porters lodge or a community room would be more outward facing in terms of its operation. To provide views along Walton Street and to the pedestrian entrance into the site, glazing at the corners of the building at ground floor level could be explored. We suggest looking for ways to improve privacy for bedrooms at ground floor in the building design.

### **Elevations**

The elevational design of the Catherine Hughes buildings responds well to the street and neighbouring buildings. The details of the fenestration and brickwork, along with other features, give the appearance of an attractive, characterful and robust building. The use of metals and other materials with golden tones work well in creating a coherent look and feel in relation to other Somerville College buildings. To strengthen the character and integrity of Catherine Hughes building, we suggest enhancing the distinction from the existing Penrose building, for example in the choice of brick.

### **Internal environment**

Within the building, strong visual connections with the outdoors have been created by views from the internal corridors and glazed stair cores. To ensure appropriate internal living conditions for students, testing of the levels of daylighting for rooms facing north and overheating to glazed cores is strongly recommended. The team should consider how changes to the internal layout could help address these issues, for example, relocating the internal corridor to the north and moving the rooms to the south to increase daylighting to rooms. We suggest reconsidering the use of floor-to-ceiling height windows, which exposes clutter in the rooms and would not provide significantly more daylight, for example those facing the Fellows Garden.

### **Shaw Lefeyre Building (Phase 2)**

#### **Site layout, height and massing**

The overall design approach to the Shaw Lefeyre building has promise but needs developing. The retention of the retail spaces on the ground floor provides active frontages along Little Clarendon Street and the part demolition of the existing building creates new student accommodation in this location. The proposed height and massing of the Shaw Lefeyre building works well in its context and the views of the building from Little Clarendon Street appear appropriate. We strongly recommend using the internal building uses and treatment of the

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external landing to further strengthen the connection that has been created with the proposed external staircase between the Shaw Lefeyre and Vaughn buildings. Currently, the Shaw Lefeyre building does not appear to relate well to the Fellows Garden, in terms of access and the entrance lobby on the ground floor. Continued development of the design in relation to the courtyard is recommended.

### **Elevations**

The proposed approach taken to create an architectural 'backdrop' to the existing buildings appears suitable for this site and building. The design team have started to achieve this look and feel in the treatment and materiality of the proposed building. We suggest continuing to draw cues from the existing context, to ensure the building responds well to its surroundings and recommend a stronger rationale for the fenestration, as the proposed window placement currently appears somewhat incidental and sizes could be more generous. To satisfy the local planning authority requirement for a high quality building, more detailed drawings and all building elevations are needed.

### **Internal layout**

To help simplify the room layout and provide more equally sized rooms, some of which seem small, we suggest continuing to develop the internal layout.

### **Servicing**

Across both the Catherine Hughes and Shaw Lefeyre buildings, we welcome the ambition to hide the external servicing to reduce excess clutter and storage. To provide a more efficient use of space across both sites and for a more sustainable approach to servicing, it is recommended that efforts are made to overcome the barriers to providing a single shared CHP to serve both blocks.

Yours sincerely,



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cc (by email only)

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Sue Ilman	Ilman Young
Richard Todd	Bidwells
Felicity Byrne	Oxford City Council
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### Review process

Following a site visit, and discussions with the design team and local authority, the scheme was reviewed on 23 July 2016 by Joanna van Heyningen (chair), Jessica Byrne-Daniel, Paul Appleby, Sophia de Sousa, Dan Jones and Clare Wright. 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](mailto:cabe@designcouncil.org.uk).