

Martin Johnson
The Dragon School
Bardwell Road
Oxford
OX2 6SS

6 July 2017

Our reference: DCC/0653

Oxford City Council: Dragon School

Dear Martin Johnson

Thank you for the opportunity to engage in the proposal for Dragon School at a follow-up ODRP design review on 22 June 2017. This is the third review for this site, but the first review of the current scheme by the new design and planning team – BGA Architects and JPPC – and was thus treated as a new scheme in the review discussion. The previous review of the scheme by the previous team was dated 29 June 2015, letter dated 8 July 2015.

Summary

We continue to acknowledge the great and urgent need for a new music building to provide Dragon School students with improved and easily accessible facilities that meet the high demands of the school and curricula. The current proposal seeks to retain Lane House which is supported as it provides housing for staff and is a charming, historic feature within the site. The contents of this letter expand on the ambition to place music at the heart of the school and to achieve the short and long term needs of the site and its surroundings.

The fresh approach to the scheme by the new design team, including some alterations to the brief by the client, is promising and a good progression from the previous scheme for this site. The broad design principles of the new proposal, clearly presented on the review day, are acceptable in principle and we support the building form which provides a sound basis to develop the detailed design. We welcome the general location of the building on the site, and its height and massing, which do not appear to impose negatively on the surrounding views or existing neighbourhood. The layout of external and internal spaces across the site broadly are beginning to work well and provide opportunities for adaptability and future planning if needed, which are important factors in the sustainable life cycle of buildings and sites. We suggest investigating if the proposed building could be shifted eastwards to improve its visibility and alignment with other buildings and routes within the school. There is now a much stronger focus on the

landscape design which strengthens the relationship between the new and the existing buildings and spaces, and provides potentially attractive outdoor areas for teachers, students and visitors.

Despite our support for most of the strategic design moves, we are less convinced by elements of the elevational treatment of the building, specifically the main entrance façade to the east, which does not place the music school confidently within the heart of the site or give the impression of the special use of the building. Furthermore, the entrance to the building is not legible from the route from which most people will arrive. In terms of the site planning, we encourage the team to be braver and to take more strategic moves to secure the long term potential of this site, building on the importance of the Dragon School to this part of North Oxford. We encourage the team to ensure that the proposal is not overly constrained by the immediate needs of the brief for the music facility. There is considerable scope to further maximise the potential of the site in the positioning of the building, and improve legibility and accessibility across the site and the hierarchy of open spaces, routes and entrances.

Design engagement

To deliver a scheme that effectively meets the needs of staff and students and embraces the local area, we encourage the team to take into account a wide spectrum of users and stakeholders who will be crucial to the development of the brief and the proposal. There is an opportunity to engage with students about the design process to help fine-tune the function and character of the proposal. This form of engagement is particularly important as students will in their daily lives be affected by the construction process. Parents and children, some of whom may live in the area, can also help to showcase and share the benefits of the proposal to other interested parties.

In liaison with local residents, the construction process is likely to be a crucial topic but does not appear fully thought through at this stage. We encourage the design team to consider operational issues that are likely to occur and plan ahead to help reduce any potential issues at the earliest possible stage, including vehicular access to and through the site, types and sizes of vehicles, noise, materials and build time. Materials that can be pre-fabricated off-site, for example, could help to cut build time and reduce noise and excessive disturbance.

Site layout, height and massing

Overall, we welcome the design approach to the brief and encourage the client and design team to build upon this approach in a wider masterplan proposal to clarify and solidify the ambitions for the school for the long term, indicating a clear hierarchy of routes, spaces and parking now, and in the future, as well as areas where temporary landscape treatments may be needed. This work will inform the site planning and

architectural design of the music facility. We suggest that future improvements/phases are communicated somewhere in the planning submission (e.g. the Design and Access Statement) to give confidence to the planning officers and local community that the right steps are being taken in the design and delivery of this scheme.

The proposed height and massing appear to be suitable in this context and in relation to neighbouring buildings, such as Park Town. When viewed from afar, the chimneys help to break down the overall mass of the buildings and respond well to the residential character of the area.

The building footprint and layout create a series of successful open and built spaces and routes that are legible, feel connected and provide future flexibility. We recommend investigating slightly shifting the building eastwards which will help to make the main entrance more prominent, and retain some existing trees that add to the character of the site and enlarge the courtyard space providing more space between the music facility and Lane House. To achieve these long term benefits, the loss of one tennis court may be required.

The residential and institutional uses and building characters of Lane House and the proposed music facility respectively could be strengthened as this relationship currently appears a little uncomfortable. We think that while the buildings may have different characters, the hard and soft landscaping could be used to effectively balance these two characters, for example materials that provide a sense of scale, such as paving stones as opposed to resin bound gravel which can appear scaleless.

Access and connectivity

We acknowledge the significant efforts to manage the level differences across the site, and think that in this respect the landscape design has been more successful than the building design. However, at present, the level differences between the internal and external spaces make access across these spaces overly convoluted for users, potentially impossible for wheelchair users. We strongly encourage the team to improve accessibility for all users and build upon the relationship between the spaces across the site. Some more thought is needed in terms of the steep level changes to the east of Lane House as the hedge buffer may not be sufficient.

Level access between the proposed recital hall and Lynham Hall is needed to provide a clear physical relationship between these spaces as they will be used together on a day-to-day basis and during events. We strongly encourage the design team to continue exploring the layout of and access to the spaces in further detail to achieve these aims, and suggest also adjusting the positioning of the recital hall to achieve a better connection. Through this work, the internal layout and character of the main entrance lobby and access to the recital hall from within the building could be improved. We also

recommend that adjustments are made now for the important connection between it and the Forum.

The proposed series of linked spaces across the site help with wayfinding and provide an implicit understanding of the site. We suggest clarifying the hierarchy of spaces and routes in a diagram to inform the detailed design of the landscape and building design. We recommend that the east-west route between Lynham Hall and the new music building be designed as a strong feature of the scheme, and a major access route for staff and students. In the current proposal it is compromised by being thought of as being subsumed into a future development of Lynham Hall. The storage area for theatre seating which protrudes from the recital into this route undermines the quality of this route by reducing its width.

We suggest strengthening the physical and visual links between the outdoors and indoor spaces. Providing direct views to the courtyard from strategic areas within the building, such as the main entrance, could help to capitalise on the concept of the courtyard and create a stronger green character across the scheme.

Open space and courtyards

The new courtyard to the west of the site which integrates school activities and provides open space for students and staff is working well. To create this useful open space, the proposed loss of trees on the site is justifiable, and the Magnolia tree at the centre of the courtyard is a welcome retention. However, we note the loss of the existing Birch tree which adds to the natural character of the area and skyline and encourage the team to provide species that are resilient to climate change and disease.

While the circular form of the western courtyard provides a successful change from the rectilinear building forms, we suggest investigating the oval form to create a more informal feel. Materials used in the outdoors should be integrated in other outdoor areas to create a coherence between the open spaces. However, these materials, such as corten steel, should also be considered carefully in terms of maintenance and use by children.

We also welcome the approach to the open space and seating area to the east of the main entrance, and its relationship to the access routes across the wider site. To allow more space for gathering, the tree could be located to one side as opposed to in the centre of this space.

We strongly recommend integrating the open space to the west of Lane House in the landscape proposals to avoid it becoming an unsightly, car dominated zone. This space could provide a private 'secret garden' and outdoor amenity space for staff residing in Lane House.

To create a more unified feel and character in the local area and maximise on the opportunity to strengthen the relationship of the site with its surroundings, we strongly encourage the team to improve visibility along the western boundary of the site. At present the school feels segregated from Park Town and Dragon Lane due to the thick green planting along this edge.

Building design

With regard to the elevations, the proposed external appearance of the building is vague in terms of its use and does not express its musical function which sits at the heart of the brief. While we support the use of brick, we suggest its colour is carefully considered in relation to Lane House. The elegant concept of the colonnade could also be undermined by the execution of brick detailing. We encourage the team to investigate other tones and/or materials.

We think that the rationale for the elevations, specifically the composition of windows, is confused and needs a much more consistent and rigorous vocabulary. The windows across the building could have a stronger relationship to one another, which could help define why and where windows are flush, inset, ordered and/or floating in the façade. While the elevation facing onto the western courtyard is promising, the elevations to the east and north of the site facing Lynham Hall are unwelcoming. We recommend reassessing the treatment of the main entrance façade and better integrating the stair core which currently appears overly dominant. The solar fins on the eastern façade make the building appear even more solid and austere from an oblique view, which is the view experienced by pedestrians approaching from the site entrance to the north. We suggest a sunlight and daylight and solar heating analysis is needed to justify the extent of fins for solar shading being provided for the building.

We welcome the gabled roof which responds to the residential character of the area but suggest this approach is consistently applied in the overall roof design, for example the north-west corner. In addition, there are a series of built-in issues in the roof design which raise some key concerns in the construction quality and costs, and ongoing maintenance of the building. These issues need to be resolved at this relatively early stage in the design, as they will have a material impact on the external appearance of the building, such as the height and frequency of chimneys. The photovoltaic panels incorporated in the roof are welcome but we encourage the team to further consider their layout and location on the roofscape. The single panels, for example, could be replaced by a continuous panel. The design detail and construction of the chimney and glazed roof will require careful design and may require specialised equipment to allow access for cleaning and maintenance, fire and draft prevention, whilst allowing for drainage. Further information on natural ventilation should be illustrated in the drawings.

Next steps

We are confident that the design team can address the key areas above and continue to build on their successful approach to the buildings and spaces. We recommend a follow up review of this scheme in due course.

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,

Victoria Lee
Design Council Caba Senior Advisor
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Review process

Following a site visit and discussions with the design team and local authority, the scheme was reviewed on 22 June 2017 by Joanna van Heyningen (chair), Jessica Byrne-Daniel, Dan Jones, Colin Haylock, Paul Appleby and Martin Stockley. 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.

cc (by email only)

Panel

Joanna van Heyningen
Jessica Byrne-Daniel
Dan Jones
Colin Haylock
Paul Appleby
Martin Stockley

Attendees

Martin Johnson	Dragon School
James Roach	BGS Architects
David Bonta	BGS Architects
Ben Roberts	BGS Architects
Nik Lyzba	JPPS

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