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Stephen Withers-Green
St Edward's School,
Woodstock Road
Oxford,
OX2 7NN

Our reference: DCC/0942

Oxford City Council: Corfe Field Site, St Edward's Avenue, OX2 7NN

19 April 2018

Dear Stephen Withers-Green,

Thank you for inviting the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) to engage in a Design Workshop for St Edward's School on 5 April 2018.

Summary

We are supportive of the ambition to provide new accommodation and facilities for the pupils of St Edward's School. Of the sites presented on the day, we think that the chosen location is the most suitable development site as it will have a coherent connection with existing school buildings. Whilst we see the merits of developing this site, the design and landscape is not yet integrating with the existing buildings and spaces on the site, nor is it creating a sense of identity for this new building.

Each new development scheme now and in the future has an important role to play in improving the identity and quality of the existing campus. The school campus appears to have been developed in a piecemeal fashion over time and therefore each new scheme has a duty to build coherence and strengthen the school's identity across the campus. An integrated sustainable masterplan approach that considers the requirements of the school, its overall future expansion and wider public realm could better shape the proposal for this site and help support the rationale for the building and landscape. Such a plan could incorporate landscape, buildings, facilities management, orientation, energy and ecology. The current proposal could then follow the ambitions of the masterplan in terms of the hierarchy of buildings, open spaces and access. The scheme for the new accommodation block could build more on this vision and guide how the landscape and green infrastructure might develop.

To create a cohesive connection to the existing school buildings within the site, we think the building orientation, layout, landscape and building design require further testing. We advise giving more thought to the relationship between buildings and spaces both within and outside the red line boundary, particularly in terms of the phasing programme. In terms of the proposed site layout and architectural treatment, we think the building is not distinctive enough, is lacking an identity and would benefit from a bespoke treatment. The elevation appears dominated by the roof, making the building appear top heavy. The environmental credentials could be more ambitious, particularly with regard to natural light and ventilation within the building. We would advise developing the detail of the form, elevations and sustainability to create a unique building that complements the wider school campus.

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Site layout

The existing layout of student and staff accommodation on the western part of the school campus already has a series of external spaces, which, with care, could become a delightful informal set of landscaped courts, linked by good planting, paths and seating. The new site has the potential to become the next in this sequence.

The proposed route between the site and existing student accommodation block to the east is a key route and potential piece of streetscape in the site which could provide opportunities for pupils and staff members to meet and interact. Locating parking spaces along this route makes it appear car-dominated, creating potential conflicts between vehicular, pedestrian and bicycle movements and compromising the use of this route as a social space. It also provides a disappointing fourth elevation to the proposed new court. We would suggest re-locating car parking spaces in order to maximise usable outdoor spaces and minimise the amount of hardstanding. It would be worth exploring whether the parking could be moved closer to the boundary and away from the heart of the site.

The proposed pair of L-shaped blocks offer the opportunity to create a centralised open space adjacent to this pathway. We are not yet convinced that the L-shaped configuration is the best approach for this site as it and the central courtyard fundamentally rely on the pair being built out, albeit in different phases. Should the funding not be available for the second block, the single L-shaped block will appear as an incoherent, stand alone block in undefined open space. Also, it is not yet clear how the courtyard contained by the proposed blocks will function and complement the existing landscape as well as the indoor spaces. We suggest exploring other building configurations, that will work both as a single phase and in two or three phases. For example, a long block (with openings) that is parallel and closer to the route can create a tighter site layout, and extensions to this block can be added at a later stage at either end. Alternatively, rotating the L-shaped blocks to create a west-facing court is worth investigation. This would result in buildings lining the route, and this might make it feel more active and welcoming. We would advise considering the overall phasing of the project to ensure each building element works by itself.

There is an opportunity to enhance the biodiversity in the site which the landscape could better capitalise on. At present, the landscape comprises of grass and trees, but could incorporate other types of planting, such as shrubs and trees of different heights to support biodiversity, particularly given the loss of open space on this site. The open space could also be used for activities for students such as planting and gardening as well as providing opportunities for learning about ecology. We suggest considering in more detail how the courtyard will be used on a day-to-day basis, particularly in terms of footpaths and using the space as a meeting place for pupils, taking advantage of orientation.

Massing and building design

Whilst we think the height of this new building is acceptable, stepping down in height towards the west could add interest to the composition and create a sense of hierarchy. The new building would benefit from further assessment within views from nearby public spaces to establish whether there is an impact and how the new building could preserve or enhance these views. We would advise carrying out a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA). We think that the scale of the roof makes it appear overly prominent and top heavy within the elevation as a whole. We recommend exploring ways to make it less dominant

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Preparing sectional drawings would enable a better understanding of the profile of this new building.

We think the building would benefit from being designed afresh, in order to create its own sense of identity, rather than copying the architect's earlier student housing building. Adopting a high environmental specification could be a way of creating a unique building that provides an opportunity for learning about sustainability technology and practices. In particular, we recommend further exploring scope for natural ventilation within the building, ensuring the environmental and sustainability strategy is developed in conjunction with the building design and establishing how this might affect the elevational treatment. Thought should be given to future-proofing and how the building could be made adaptable in the long term in the event it is no longer required for boarding accommodation.

We look forward to seeing it again.

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

A. Osborne

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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 5 April 2018 by Joanna van Heyningen (Chair), Paul Appleby, Jessica Byrne-Daniel, Peter Studdert and Michael Crilly. 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 dc.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk.

CC (by e-mail only)

Attendees

Stephen Withers-Green

Nicholas Hardy

Hannah Deacon

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