

Northern Gateway, Oxford City Council

Design Workshop

Notes from 28 April 2016

Thank you for providing Design Council Cabe with the opportunity to advise on the Northern Gateway proposal at the Design Workshop on 28 April 2016.

Summary

The high aspirations for this proposal match the importance of Northern Gateway as Oxford's largest development project, supporting the city's role as a global leader for innovation and research. The recent acquisition of the site by Thomas White Oxford (TWO), a subsidiary of St John's College, and subsequent appointment of a new design team, Fletcher Priest Architects, provide a welcome fresh start to the scheme. The combined expertise and experience of the client and design team as well as the long-term interest of the land owner have the potential to provide a good foundation for the design and delivery of a successful new quarter in Oxford.

We strongly encourage the team to take more advantage of the opportunities this significant scheme offers for Oxford. The current thinking is promising, underpinned by an ambitious vision and ten key design principles to create a new holistic place and the comprehensive analysis of global innovation districts is commendable. Given the limited amount of developable land in Oxford and the planned improvements to the public transportation links across North Oxford, a new quarter in this location that is urban in character is justified. We suggest exploring further how this new place could be designed to be unique to Oxford, taking into account the information from the research at this stage. More time is needed to develop the design thinking and approach and we strongly recommend a hybrid planning application to deliver the project.

The ten design principles for the Northern Gateway

The points raised at the workshop meeting have been structured around the ten design principles developed by the client and design team as below:

1. Global trajectories
2. Thomas White Oxford (TWO)'s vision
3. 'Oxford-ness'
4. Making a piece of city
5. Transforming perceptions
6. Overlaps and interaction
7. Long term adaptation
8. Landscape
9. Climate and energy
10. Mobility

We offer the following suggestions in taking the design principles forward and look forward to engaging in future dialogue as the proposal develops. It might be useful for the team to consider a



set of objectives that emerges from the exploration of each of these principles. This would help guide the project through the design and then development period.

1. Global trajectories

The extensive research by the design team on innovation districts and university campuses across the globe provides a solid basis for the masterplan thinking and design of Northern Gateway. To ensure the scheme is practical and resilient, the lessons learnt through these precedents could be developed more in the project by:

- Undertaking further analysis of the key themes from the growth of a campus and the use of satellite campuses, for example MIT and Cornell Technology.
- Assessing the Kings Cross masterplan in more detail given the similarities in terms of scale and the role of a university as a key element of the development.
- Continuing to compare the site and buildings to other national and international developments through urban studies to better understand and grasp the scale of the Northern Gateway.

2. TWO's vision

A high benchmark for this new quarter in terms of creating a place that underpins Oxford's reputation as an exemplary place to live, work and study needs to be defined in TWO's vision, informed by Oxford City Council's strategy for North Oxford, by:

- Designing a development that is innovative and deliverable, by investigating and exploring ambitious concept, for example being carbon neutral, promoting sustainable transport, integrating edible landscapes and food growing.
- Developing innovative long-term operation, management and maintenance strategies for buildings and spaces to ensure Northern Gateway remains a well-run and desirable place.
- Developing a fully integrated mix of uses that is recognisable as being part of Oxford, and that will present a positive draw to investors and researchers from around the world, and meeting their needs.

3. 'Oxford-ness'

The extent of 'Oxford-ness' for the new quarter would benefit from further clarification in the masterplan design to demonstrate how the scheme combines ambitious, innovative global standards and the existing character of the Oxford. We suggest:

- Understanding the design briefs, ambitions and approaches of other future developments in the city centre and on the outskirts of Oxford further to ensure Oxford continues to grow and expand as a holistic place in relation to other major developments, such as Barton Park, for example.
- Understanding the character and distinctiveness of the city - the city council's work on character might be a suitable starting point. Continuing to test the building height strategy across the site to create a variegated skyline with slender and articulated buildings to make a positive contribution to the "dreaming spires". Taller elements set against the surrounding

suburban area would reinforce the urban character of Northern Gateway as opposed to the current situation dominated by highway infrastructure.

- Providing verified views of the wider context incorporating existing and future buildings heights for better assessments of the proposed building heights. The initial studies to test long range views across the site with the proposed buildings are helpful. We encourage Oxford City Council to work collaboratively with the client and design team in this regard, particularly if taller buildings above the heights set in the Northern Gateway Area Action Place are proposed.

4. Making a piece of city

Currently the site layout with a series of blocks “stamped” across the site appears simplistic, evocating a business park rather than the closely knit fabric of a new quarter fostering exchange and synergies between different users. The formal character, scale and orientation of the main east-west street connecting the three parts of the site is successful, but the proposal lacks a clear hierarchy for routes, buildings and spaces and a strong focal point which is required to create a distinct piece of Oxford with a thriving urban character. We recommend:

- Exploring different types and sizes of the urban blocks to create a strong street-based character, taking cues from the historic street pattern of Oxford and small scale alleyways between places to support integration between users.
- Considering how to differentiate the fronts and backs of buildings in more detail, particularly for the mixed-use typologies to create successful street and spaces rather than backyards and service areas.
- Creating a centre of gravity at the heart of the masterplan, offering a singular/special use similar to the market square with the church in the historic town which reinforces Northern Gateway’s role as a key destination in Oxford.
- Using the centre of gravity to enhance the sense of orientation for users across the site. Once this point is fixed, explore different parameters and permutations of the surrounding street layout, open spaces and buildings.
- Using both large scale and finer grained grids that would allow a more interesting urbanity and mix of uses, including large and small public spaces.
- Identifying and reinforcing different levels of use intensities in the layout of the streets, open spaces and building design. Stronger focal points in the north-east and south-west parts would be helpful in activating these areas and developing the urban character.
- Providing more clarification of the rationale for the street hierarchy and creating more opportunities to link streets and key nodes across the site, including for example, a more defined route to the service station to the north. Currently some streets do not appear to have a clear end point.
- Developing a clearer strategy for the location and distribution of uses, particularly housing, across the site including further opportunities to mix housing with other uses. Housing currently appears too concentrated and isolated in some areas, for example in the south western part of the site which appears to be mono-cultural in character and use.
- Considering a stronger edge along the south western boundary of the site to demarcate the transition between the new urban development and the meadows and nearby canal to the west. The detached houses along this edge are particularly out of place from the rest of the

masterplan and surrounding area in terms of building layout, scale and density. Precedents such as Accordia in Cambridge show how such a transition can be achieved successfully.

5. Overlaps and interactions

The success of Northern Gateway will depend on the fruitful exchange between the different user groups, the new quarter and the historic city, currently expressed by physical and social links between the new and existing communities, for example, and the use of schools in the wider area. The proposed multi-layered blocks have the potential to support social interaction between departments, residents, employees and visitors by breaking up the traditional building typologies. This is an interesting and innovative concept, but still in its early stages of development. We suggest:

- Ensuring the masterplan is well-integrated into its wider context and taking a more outward-looking and connective design approach. At present, the current design approach feels somewhat restrained by the redline boundary.
- Continuing to engage with the local authorities and communities in the wider area, particularly Cherwell District Council, given future growth to the north of the site.
- Taking a stronger three dimensional approach to the design of the multi-layered blocks, but ensuring future proofing when change occurs. The initial studies to test these blocks are promising.
- Continuing to test the building scale and massing in relation to the urban context together with the requirements for the internal uses. At present the dimension of a typical block appears bulky, akin to the typical footprints of blocks that can be found in a business park context.

6. Transforming perceptions

Currently, Northern Gateway is dominated by busy motorways. The initial design approach to the arterial roads help transform this character. Reducing the speed of the A44 and limiting the car parking on the site identified in the Northern Gateway Area Action Plan are positive moves. To further transform the current perception of the area we suggest:

- Announcing the new quarter to car drivers heading south from the Peartree roundabout by a distinct change in quality in the street design, for example by planting new trees and introducing well-designed street furniture, and robust, long-lasting paving material.
- Taking a bolder and more strategic approach to the site edges, particularly when seen from the A34 which offers the opportunity to develop a city view that matches Oxford's reputation.
- Reconsidering the multi-storey car parks along the A40. Given this is a major thoroughfare into the city centre, it warrants active building uses which the uses as currently proposed cannot provide.

7. Long term adaptation

At this stage a more holistic and realistic approach to the project is required to ensure this new piece of city will be truly transformational, future-led and innovative, to be able to take into account changing demographics and requirements, transport and technological advances. This is

particularly important with regards to the infrastructure works which seem to be a series of smaller, disconnected interventions without a clear perspective. We encourage Oxfordshire Council and Oxford City Council to define and express their long-term requirements regarding future ambition and innovation at this stage. It would be beneficial to:

- Reconsider the street widths as more infrastructure will require more space which may lead to increased building heights and impact on the proposed building typologies.
- Embed long-term adaptability as a design driver in developing plots and block designs.

8. Landscape

The landscape design starts weaving in the characteristics of the meadows surrounding the site while enhancing the urban setting of Northern Gateway. The concept of a sequence of larger open spaces that are urban in character, serving a wide variety of user groups is positive. However, a stronger landscape narrative and strategy that is fully embedded in the vision for Northern Gateway, strategically addressing the challenges of this new piece of Oxford is required to develop a landscape that is resilient, promotes biodiversity, health and well-being and an active lifestyle, integrates sustainable water management and can sustain a growing population and adapt to their needs over time. We recommend:

- Developing different characters for 'wild' green spaces across the site to help ensure that the open spaces support active uses and do not feel sterile.
- Thinking in more detail about how the existing landscape to the south west of the site adjacent to the canal and wildflower meadow could be integrated, in order to make best use of it as a green and active buffer to the surrounding areas and as an open space that is easily accessible and used frequently, providing a series of 'green rooms' that can be used for leisure and play.
- Exploring ways in which this green space could extend into the site, for example, through a series of green fingers that connect the central parts of Northern Gateway with the surrounding meadows.
- Investigating whether car parking could be integrated within the open spaces to help better distribute car parking across the site and avoid large, concentrated car parking zones or congested streets. Lessons on how other European university cities have dealt with car parking to maximise public space need to be considered. The Northern Gateway offers the opportunity to be innovative.
- Exploring further initiatives for roof planting.

9. Climate and energy

We note that at this stage of the proposal strategies for climate and energy, in line with an overall strategy for sustainability, are yet to be developed. It will be worth developing the green and blue infrastructure, including sustainable urban drainage, much more in the landscape design to support the overall sustainability of this proposal.

10. Mobility

We encourage Oxford City and Oxfordshire County Councils to continue working with the client and design team on the street layout and detailed design, and to provide necessary information on

the future strategy for public transportation. It will be important to see how these plans are being meaningfully and strategically embedded in the proposals. The approach to movement and mobility of users across Northern Gateway, particularly pedestrians and cyclists, and sustainable urban drainage requires further thought and detail. We suggest:

- Exploring in more detail how the buildings and roads could be better designed to mitigate noise, air pollution and congestion along the highways, and the initial attempts to do so in the design approach.
- Identifying different means of access for pedestrians, cyclists and cars across the site and ensure these are secured in the design approach and detail of these routes.

Planning application

We recommend a hybrid planning application to initiate development and provide long term guidance to ensure a successful new place will be delivered. To ensure the design of the buildings and spaces is driven by the highest ambition in terms of design, details, materials and construction, we recommend:

- Developing an illustrative masterplan supported by parameter plans to help set and define the ambition for the Northern Gateway, as individual proposals are likely to emerge at different stages of the masterplan delivery.
- Developing public realm and open space, streets, key buildings elements in Phase 1, to set a high standard for the proposal should be part of the detailed application.
- Key performance indicators such as biodiversity, carbon use, water, microclimate should be identified at this stage to help set high environmental and social targets throughout the masterplan delivery and construction.
- Ensuring that the Design Code, if one is developed for this masterplan, is understood by everyone.

Attendees

Design Workshop Panel

Keith Bradley (chair)
 Jon Rowland
 Noel Farrer
 Tom Holbrook

Scheme presenters

William Donger	Thomas White Oxford
Marcus Mackay	Thomas White Oxford
Jonathan Kendall	Fletcher Priest Architects
Stina Hokby	Fletcher Priest Architects
Martha Alker	Townshends Landscape Architects

Nick Church Peter Brett Associates
Rob Linnell Savills

Local Authority

Andrew Murdoch Oxford City Council
Gill Butter Oxford City Council

Design Council Cabe staff

Thomas Bender
Victoria Lee

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.

This page is intentionally left blank