

Will Rohleder
Reef Group
51 Welbeck St
Marylebone
London, W1G 9HL

14th May 2020

Our reference: DC/5267

Oxford Design Review Panel: Boswells Building, Broad Street

Dear Will Rohleder,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to comment on the proposal for Boswells at the Design Workshop held on 30th April 2020. This is the scheme's first workshop.

Summary

Boswells is located in the heart of Oxford's Central (City & University) Conservation Area. The building has two frontages, each with differing architectural characters that positively contribute to the streetscape. Boswells is also locally significant, having been a family department store in the city centre for almost a century.

We are confident that the design team are cognisant of, and engaging with, this sensitive nature of the scheme's context. We are encouraged by the process work shown so far, including thorough testing of the scheme in its immediate and wider townscape setting and in designing a public consultation strategy. Our main concern is whether the project's very tight programme allows enough time to draw up all the detail needed for a full planning permission application and engage with the public on those changes in advance of the proposed planning submission date.

In terms of the preferred design option presented, we are supportive. Whilst the height goes beyond the 18.2m datum set by Oxford City Council, the scheme has been carefully designed, so that it does not overly dominate the existing building below or negatively impact key views. The contemporary approach to the architectural language is working well, appearing lightweight and not competing with the host building. The detailing and materiality need further development to support this but are looking promising. The massing is also successful, and the ground floor will contribute to active frontages in the city. The layout and usability of the proposed 5th floor need further testing and there are a few issues to be resolved in the internal layout over the next stage of work. The sustainability strategy is ambitious and should be fulfilled to set a precedent in Oxford for the standard possible with renovation projects.

We offer the following advice in bringing the scheme forward.

Building Height and Massing

The scheme proposes remodelling the existing 4th floor externally and internally, and adding a 5th floor, increasing the building height by one storey. The design team have a good understanding of the impact of this in the scheme's wider context, both in terms of designated key planning views and locally important views, and this has informed the proposal. A number of design options for the rooftop extension position, massing and form were checked from multiple perspectives: long-range view cones, mid-range surrounding streets, the immediate street below and high-level prominent viewpoints in the city, such as the adjacent St Michael at the North Gate Church's Saxon Tower. This led to the preferred option shown at the Design Workshop. We are supportive of this approach and think that it has produced a successful solution that sits comfortably in its context. The scheme does not appear to negatively impact the views, and the design team are aware of the need to test a few more views from Carfax tower and the Weston Library terrace (once COVID-19 lockdown restrictions are lifted to allow access). We are aware that the Visual and Landscape Assessment is yet to be completed and would urge you to double check the scheme's height against this.

We also suggest further investigating and illustrating the views to be enjoyed from the proposed 5th floor of the Boswells building. This exercise will help the team better consider the extent, location and layout of spaces on the terrace for visitors in the future. The layout and design of the lounge and roof terrace spaces should consider avoiding views onto rooftop plant/air vents of surrounding buildings, and try to maximise views of the city spires to the East, East/West views down Broad Street, the Scheduled Monument city wall ramparts below, Sir Christopher Wren's Tom Tower to the South, and the surrounding Oxford hills where possible.

Of all the townscape views tested by the design team, the proposed massing was most visible from Magdalen Street East. A few possible solutions were discussed in the Design Workshop to alleviate this whilst making the spaces on the 5th floor as useable as possible. Firstly, consider if the outdoor terrace space could be bigger if fire issues were mitigated by measures such as sprinklers. Secondly, consider whether moving the mass to the East would be helpful to create a larger terrace space for events that is less visible from Magdalen Street East and can take advantage of the evening sun. In all configurations, issues of overlooking, privacy and noise for the neighbouring buildings would need to be balanced with the functionality of the spaces and the best massing for the townscape.

Ground Floor and Additional 5th Floor

We understand that the ground floor is to be renovated as hotel lobby and restaurant/bar/deli open to the public. We think that this would provide active and diverse uses along the high street. We also support the ambition to use an open plan layout to make the whole of this floor feel like part of the city's public space, allowing members of the public to make use of all spaces, including the hotel lobby as co-working space. This aspiration needs to be clearly communicated in consultation to help illustrate this public benefit of the scheme.

On the ground floor alternative positions for the main entrance to the building were also discussed. It was concluded that the current location (off Broad Street) is preferred. This would allow for guest taxi drop off and deliveries and has the appropriate level of prominence for entry to a hotel of this size, providing a sense of arrival.

The proposed 5th floor will provide two rooftop terrace spaces and a lounge, only accessible to hotel guests and for private pre-booked events because of fire safety and management issues. We acknowledge that there can be public benefit to providing a bookable room that enjoys key views over Oxford in this central location. Nonetheless, the question of whether the new 5th floor proposed is economically viable should be further tested and feed into this strategy. The project team should also consider ways of making these new spaces more accessible and affordable for all.

We recommend testing a series of usage scenarios that explore the exact layout, management, hours of operation, staffing, amenities and servicing needed for each. For instance, would the indoor and outdoor spaces function well if hired out as a wedding venue? We think it is likely that one larger space may be more useful than two smaller if this can be balanced with the other factors that affect the layout, such as avoiding noise for neighbours. This would help the design team to define different characters for the spaces, increasing their appeal and value.

Materiality and Architectural Language

We are supportive of design team's approach to the top floor elevation - treating the two buildings (Broad Street and Cornmarket Street) as distinct - as this responds positively to the scheme's immediate and unique context. There should be some dialogue between front and back in terms of the materiality. The form then can respond to the surrounding roofscapes and views relevant to each elevation, whilst the materiality unifies the additional storey. For instance, the architectural language of the south extension towards the church yard was discussed. We think that this treatment (distinct from the north) is successful as it creates interest on this elevation, although more studies such as a hipped roof option could be tested to see if a more subtle form could work well in this location.

The contemporary approach to the proposed new 5th floor and articulated 4th floor remodelling, plus conservation of the existing building, is also strong. The proposal appears to sit comfortably on top of the host building. The design detailing should be developed and examined more extensively at this stage. It was noted that the neighbouring Waterstones building has particularly dramatic cornicing. This could be an element to pick up on, acknowledging the scheme's neighbour through a contemporary interpretation. However, this would need to be quite subtle so that the original building remains the focus from street level and Waterstones remains the most prominent building in the street's hierarchy. We recommend looking to nearby colleges in Oxford for precedents of contemporary extensions to historical buildings that add value to the heritage assets.

Materiality has not yet been decided upon, but the project is at an early stage, and the high-quality precedents and material options shown in the design team's presentation are encouraging for the future outcome. Glazed ceramic has the potential to work well because the reflective finish could provide a lightweight effect, whilst the solidity of this material could blend into the context and the existing building below.

Internal Layout

This Design Workshop focused more on the external aspects of the scheme; however, a few internal issues are worth noting. At present, there are a few hotel rooms that appear

not to have any windows and/or enjoy good views. Whilst we recognise this is a tight site and that a hotel is being accommodated in the existing building, the design team should endeavour to address these concerns where possible, particularly ensuring natural light to all rooms. The Mandrake Hotel precedent for the atrium space (using green walls and bouncing light to improve this view for those hotel rooms looking onto it), has great promise. We would encourage you to continue this line of enquiry. Whilst improving these conditions, be mindful of surrounding overlooking/privacy issues, particularly where habitable rooms of student accommodation abut the site boundary.

Sustainability

The conservation and reuse of the Boswells building in itself is a good approach to both sustainability and local distinctiveness. We understand that the design team's intention is to upgrade the current building's condition and performance, aiming for Passive House standard, BREEAM Excellent and Oxford NRIA. We are supportive of the team's ambition as the existing building's performance will be greatly improved. The new parts of the building are an opportunity to go further in reaching for these sustainability goals.

The design team should consider whole life design and carbon footprints when choosing materials and suppliers. These measures may be costly in the short term but will lead to long term savings both in reducing impact on global climate change and economically in the running of the hotel.

The intention to re-provide the solar panels on the roof is positive, and we suggest exploring if/how they can be integrated with a green roof to increase biodiversity. We also understand and encourage proposals for low level lighting to help minimise adverse light pollution at night, and ways to improve energy and water efficiency currently being reviewed by engineers.

Public Consultation

It is clear that the design team are cognisant of the scheme's sensitive context, as evidenced by the public consultation strategy worked up with specialist consultants. This is a very positive move. The strategy's consideration of how to engage during COVID-19 lockdown conditions is also very good. Our major concern is that the project's timescales are extremely tight and may not allow adequate room for meaningful public engagement. It is important to ensure that consultation is not a tick-box exercise that happens too late in the programme for any public concerns to be addressed. In light of this, we would encourage the team to begin public consultation as soon as possible.

In the Design Workshop we also discussed a few strategic moves which might aid the consultations. One such method was the idea that the interior design and ground floor "shopfronts" could be used as an opportunity to showcase Boswells' history and connect to local popularity. We are supportive of this idea as this trace of history will both help to sell the idea to the local community and give the hotel a local distinctiveness that will appeal to visitors. Another was to produce illustrations of 5th floor and ground floor public spaces, honestly and clearly explaining level of accessibility, possible uses, and character/atmosphere of each space. These will help the public to see where there is benefit to them. We would also encourage you to share your key views of the preferred scheme tested in the immediate streetscape and wider townscape of Oxford.

Next Steps

We do not anticipate that a further Design Review is necessary but would welcome the opportunity to be kept informed about the scheme's development.

Yours sincerely,



Kirsty McMullan

Design Council Project Manager

Email: kirsty.mcmullan@designcouncil.org.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 7420 5312

Review process

Following discussions with the design team and local authority, the scheme was reviewed on 30th April 2020 by Keith Bradley (chair), Clare Wright, Vincent Wang and Ali Mangera. 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 email only)

Panel

Keith Bradley (chair)

Clare Wright

Ali Mangera

Vincent Wang

Oxford City Council

Michael Kemp

Amy Ridding

Maura Cordell

Andrew Murdoch

Rosa Appleby-Alis (observing)

Clare Golden (observing)

Attendees

Will Rohleder

Jason Russell

Eleanor Alexander

Matteo Boldwin

Jon Alsop

Ed Rehill

Alan Cook

Reef Group (Applicant)

Reef Group (Design Team)

Reef Group (Design Team)

Reef Group (Design Team)

Savills

Savills

Aquila Holdings

Rachel Fletcher	Historic England
Hannah Hamilton-Rutter	RPS Group

Design Council	
Victoria Lee	Design Council
Kirsty McMullan	Design Council