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Planning - Oxford City Planning Committee

On **Tuesday 21 November 2023** At **6.00 pm**

23/00693/FUL: Appendix 2 - Report of the ODRP

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Appendix 2

Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Pusey Lane

20th October 2022

Introduction

This report reflects the design review held in Oxford on 6th October 2022, following a site visit and presentation by the design team.

The proposal is for the redevelopment of Pusey Lane and refurbishment of 19-21 St. John's Street providing 2-4 storey graduate accommodation and amenity for St John's College.

A summary of the Panel discussion is provided below, highlighting the main items raised. We then provide the key recommendations aimed at improving the design quality of the proposal. Detailed comments are presented under headings covering the main attributes of the scheme and we close with the details of the meeting (appendix A) and the scheme (appendix B).

Paragraph 133 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) states that *“local planning authorities should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These include workshops to engage the local community, design advice and review arrangements, and assessment frameworks such as Building for a Healthy Life 51. These are of most benefit if used as early as possible in the evolution of schemes and are particularly important for significant projects such as large scale housing and mixed use developments. In assessing applications, planning authorities should have regard to the outcome from these processes, including any recommendations made by design review panels.”*

Summary

We welcome the opportunity to review this important project, one which aspires to provide high-quality, sustainable, long-term graduate accommodation a five-minute walk from St John's College.

However, whilst we are in favour of improving and greening Pusey Lane, we do not support the proposed demolition of the entire row of existing buildings. A more thoughtful approach would be to adapt and reuse existing structures as part of a scheme based on an ambitious zero-carbon strategy. In addition, further refinement is needed to improve the quality of the internal accommodation and open spaces.

We recommend this scheme returns for a further review once our recommendations have been addressed.

Key recommendations

1. Re-evaluate the demolition of the existing buildings, carry out a pre-demolition audit and explore how the existing structures could be re-used.
2. Pursue a whole-life zero-carbon strategy as part of an ambitious approach to sustainable design.
3. Carry out sunlight and daylight analyses to test the quality of external and internal spaces as well as the impact on neighbouring properties.
4. Refine the external massing and internal layouts to optimise the experience for students.
5. Incorporate windows into the western façade and introduce further articulation.
6. Maximise greening and biodiversity across the site and avoid building in the northern courtyard to retain the site's limited open space.
7. Work closely with the Bursar and landscape architect to ensure there is a management and maintenance strategy in place for proposed planting along Pusey Lane.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design and sustainability strategy

- 1.1. A fabric-first, Passivhaus-inspired approach should be the starting point based on delivering zero-carbon across the development's lifetime accounting for operational, embodied, and maintenance carbon.
- 1.2. Although the team has assessed retaining the existing buildings along Pusey Lane, we are unconvinced by the proposition to demolish all of them on the grounds of sustainability and we cannot support the principle of demolishing the entire row of existing homes to replace 2-storey buildings with new 2-storey accommodation.
- 1.3. We would like to see adaptation and reuse of some or all of the existing buildings. One approach may be to retain the existing buildings in the centre of the terrace, with adaptations, and treat the site as two east-west orientated projects rather than one linear north-south site. This would also enable minimal impact on the private residents of 12-18 St. John's Street which back onto the west of Pusey Lane.
- 1.4. There is also an opportunity now to address embodied carbon by using well-chosen materials efficiently. A pre-demolition audit should also take place to fully assess the potential for reuse of materials from the existing buildings.
- 1.5. The team should investigate an off-site strategy for construction to minimise disruption to neighbours whilst working with low-embodied carbon elements, such as timber frames.
- 1.6. Sun path analysis, providing an understanding of the quality of light in different spaces, should support design development. We suspect that many bedrooms, especially on the ground floor of the new development, will not benefit from adequate levels of sunlight. Daylight and sunlight studies should also be carried out to understand how the proposed buildings will impact the surrounding private gardens and dwellings of those who live here all year round – particularly in low sun times of the year.

- 1.7. We are comfortable with the proposed internal adaptations to 19-21 St. John's Street. As part of their retrofit, we suggest researching new types of materials and breathable insulation to maximise the benefit of this space. Maintaining key historic features such as fireplaces and cornices is the right approach. However, we question the necessity of demolishing the extensions given the embodied carbon implications. Although we appreciate these are perhaps challenging internal spaces to work with, we would encourage making use of the existing structures.
- 1.7.1. As well as mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR), other ventilation options should be explored such as decentralised ventilation which may be more appropriate and less costly than MVHR, which will have to be maintained.

2. Public realm

- 2.1. The aspiration to improve the character of Pusey Lane is a positive vision and we endorse it. We welcome the team's consideration of how the street can become more accessible and incorporate planting, but the visual material is not yet describing these aspirations fully.
- 2.2. The team should engage now with residents to start a constructive and open dialogue. The feedback received should be used to refine the scheme's design. This scheme may be able to offer neighbouring residents improved rear access to bin stores, for example.
- 2.3. We are confident that most types of planting are deliverable along Pusey Lane. The team should establish at an early stage the level of management the landscape requires and work closely with the bursar to ensure it will be maintained in the long term. The detailed design will be what determines the success of the landscape. For example, railings may be introduced to protect planting from litter and vandalism. The planting could utilise the whole of the available frontage space.
- 2.4. The cobbles on Pusey Lane contribute to its character. Although we endorse the desire to make the lane accessible, this should not be done at the expense of the street. Introducing a tarmacked raised pavement would ruin the character and a balance should be struck between character and accessibility. We are positive about the idea of sawn basalt setts but the team should ensure that the introduction of new setts does not impede Pusey Lane's role as a servicing route.

- 2.5. Although Beaumont Buildings is an interesting precedent to refer to in terms of landscape and greening the street, it is a very different condition to Pusey Lane. There is much more natural light, and it is home to a private residential community whose inhabitants have their own individual planting arrangements.

3. Landscape and open space

- 3.1. Open green space on the site is at a premium. The buildings have the potential to frame high-quality green spaces. The team should work more closely with the landscape architect to retain, enhance and create green features as much as possible.
- 3.2. We are therefore unconvinced by the proposal to build on roughly a third of the northern courtyard space, eroding green infrastructure including some key trees, and green space, to deliver the common room which could perhaps instead be accommodated more economically within one of the existing buildings. The courtyards could become very special places, with high-quality planting to encourage biodiversity and insects.
- 3.3. The building and landscape could enmesh much more closely. The colonnade walkway has been considered from a hard landscape perspective, seemingly without consideration of the scope for greening, such as the incorporation of extra planting and climbers. The colonnade is also likely to be a very dark space and will not be as open as the visuals suggest. A thoughtful approach to lighting and security is needed to ensure residents feel safe.
- 3.4. The green roofs are an important aspect of the proposal. Although we appreciate privacy concerns, we would encourage the design team to explore if some access to upper-level gardens could be provided for the dwellings so that students can benefit from this space and the additional sunlight levels that would be experienced here.
- 3.5. The walls between the gardens in the southern courtyard could be removed and the historic boundaries demarcated on the ground, to create a more generous outdoor space. However, this may only be possible if the historic importance of the walls is negligible or of no importance. The landscape architect should seek advice prior to detailed design.

4. **Architecture and internal layout**

- 4.1. The bedrooms are not high-quality, well-lit spaces. They are single aspect, and we think small for the intended occupation of graduate students, who will be spending the best part of a year here.
- 4.2. We are unconvinced by the symmetrical arrangement and suggest that this be reconsidered in favour of considering the different qualities of environment from south to north. The massing needs to maximise orientation opportunities and ensure there is a sensitive response to the neighbouring context.
- 4.3. The western brick façade has no windows and lacks articulation and interest for those who will view it from the west. It is important to incorporate windows for the benefit of those living in the dwellings themselves and those who will look at the western elevation. For example, there may be scope for angled south-facing windows with a bay to avoid overlooking neighbours.
- 4.4. This a modest street, yet the choice of materials, and the use of stone cladding, suggest a replication of the new St Cross building opposite. The materials used should be a sensitive response to the street's character and scale and not overly elevate its sense of importance.
- 4.5. The panel understands the reason for an internal layout incorporating seven staircases and five lifts for thirty-three rooms, but think this is costly and disproportionate. A different configuration could reduce the number of lifts and staircases to ensure materials and space are used efficiently.

Reference number	Ref: 1865/221006
Date	6 th October 2022
Meeting location	Kendrew Quad (B24), 21 St Giles', Oxford OX1 3LW
Panel members attending	Joanna van Heyningen (chair), architecture and public realm Lanre Gbolade, architecture and housing Paola Sassi, architecture and sustainability Penny Wagner, landscape architecture and urban design Steven Bee, planning, regeneration and urban design
Panel manager	Lizzie Atherton, Design South East
Presenting team	Toby Martin, TSH Architects Nick Hardy, TSH Architects
Other attendees	Ian Stokes, Works Bursar, St. John's College Zoe Hancock, Principal Bursar, St. John's College Nick Worledge, Worledge Associates Liz Pickup, Worledge Associates Huw Mellor, Carter Jonas Mike Habermehl, Adams Habermehl Landscape Architects Jonathan Pollard, Couch Perry & Wilkes (CPW) James Paterson, Oxford City Council Gill Butter, Oxford City Council Rob Fowler, Oxford City Council
Site visit	Panel members visited the site before the meeting, accompanied by the client, design team and City Council officers
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this workshop was not restricted. The local planning authority has asked us to look at the following topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placemaking and the change to the character of Pusey Lane • Sustainability • Heritage impact

Panel interests	No interests were declared.
Confidentiality	This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application. Full details on our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.
Previous reviews	No previous reviews

Appendix B: Scheme details

Name	Pusey Lane
Site location	Pusey Lane, and 19-21 St. John Street
Site details	The site comprises of the western side of Pusey Lane, and 19-21 St. John Street. The west side of Pusey Lane comprises of four 1970's blocks of two-storey post-graduate student accommodation. On the corner of Pusey Lane and Pusey Street is 'The Lighting store' a former Victorian lecture room. 19-21 St. John Street is part of the Grade II listed terrace of 7-23 St John Street. To the east of the existing site across Pusey Lane, is St Cross student accommodation, the rear boundary wall of Blackfriars Priory enclosing the Priory garden.
Proposal	Proposal to develop the entirety of the western side of Pusey Lane with an arrangement of 2-4 storey graduate accommodation and refurbish 19-21 St. John Street. To the west of the proposed Pusey Lane development, a new arcaded walkway will maintain access for the residents of 12-18 St. John Street to Pusey Lane. The Pusey Lane development will link directly with 19-21 St. John Street at the northern end, correspondingly the southern end will link with 7-11 St. John Street.
Planning stage	Pre-application with intention to submit a full application in December 2022.
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council

- Planning context** The existing mews buildings are of limited value, The site lies within the Nineteenth Century Residential Quarter character area of the Central Conservation Area and in the setting of numerous listed buildings. These include the Grade II listed terrace at 7-23 St John's Street and two Grade II listed boundary walls which lie to the east of the site in close proximity. As well as the Grade I listed Ashmolean Museum and the Grade II* listed Pusey House, which lie to the east of the site. The site also backs onto the Georgian terrace at 7-23 St John's Street, some of which are owned by the college and benefit from communal rear gardens and some of which are in a private C3 residential use who have private gardens and require access through the application site.
- Planning history** The Bosanquet scheme, Phase 1 of St John's proposed redevelopment of Pusey Lane, was completed in 1971 with post-graduate accommodation and garages.

Confidentiality

If the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to those who attended the review meeting. There is no objection to the report being shared within the recipients' organisations provided that the content of the report is treated in the strictest confidence. Neither the content of the report, nor the report itself can be shared with anyone outside the recipients' organisations. Design South East reserves the right to make the content of this report known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed, pre-application reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application or public inquiry. Design South East also reserves the right to make this report available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please inform us.

If the scheme is the subject of a planning application the report will be made publicly available, and we expect the local authority to include it in the case documents.

Role of design review

This is the report of a design review panel, forum or workshop. Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of a number of considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions.

The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority. We will try to make sure that the panel are informed about the views of local residents and businesses to inform their understanding of the context of the proposal. However, design review is a separate process to community engagement and consultation.

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