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24 June 2014

Oxford City Council: Westgate Centre

Dear Sara Fuge,

Thank you for presenting the scheme to the Oxford Design Review Panel on 12 June 2014. We are delighted to have the opportunity to comment on this significant proposal again. The scheme has progressed considerably since we last reviewed it, particularly in terms of the landscape design. We applaud the collaboration between the design teams to address the areas where the different blocks and design approaches come together. However, we continue to think that the overall bulk of the proposal and its horizontality are potentially overpowering and would benefit from further vertical articulation to make it fit into Oxford's skyline. We also think that the public space and landscape design could progress further to match the quality of the buildings and to provide a fully enjoyable and welcoming experience for pedestrians.

Impact on the Oxford skyline

This is a significant project for Oxford both in terms of providing a new retail experience and impacting on the skyline. We are pleased to see various long distance views to assess the buildings. While the buildings appear inconspicuous in view VV20, view VV24 raises a number of concerns. We feel the roof of South Square blocks the view of three Oxford landmarks and suggest reconsidering this element. Its materiality, reflectivity and colour will have an impact on its presence and prominence in the skyline. Oxford's skyline has a rich mix of magnificent vertical features and we encourage the client, design teams and local authority to continue exploring how the current horizontality of the proposal could be interrupted and taller or lower elements introduced. Some of the proposed buildings, for example the John Lewis block and the cinema, could be broken up at the top to inject variety. The plant treatment across the scheme can also contribute to a varied roofscape. We welcome the changes to block 2 where the rearrangement of the roof plant creates a more interesting composition, but we still feel that a more dramatic intervention in terms of height would be more beneficial. We think that the roof plants of block 3 do not serve the purpose of breaking the skyline and therefore there is no value in drawing attention to them. The plants of the John Lewis building are also visible and should also be considered in the long distance views. It will also be



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- important to think about future technical progress and changes to avoid that the roofscape will be altered haphazardly with infills and unplanned additions.

Public realm and landscape design

We find the development of the public space and landscape design commendable and look forward to seeing it evolve further. We encourage the design team to continue exploring how pedestrians will experience the different urban spaces, roads, squares and arcades. We think that more work is required to allow pedestrians dominate the streetscape over buses and cars, for example in Castle Street and around the entrance into the car parking. Subtle changes of materials and a refined palette will help define spaces and give pedestrians the confidence to use them. Overall, the design of the street surfaces and the introduction of decorative elements, for example the bands of dark stone which create gratuitous graphical thresholds, appear over-complex and we suggest a simpler approach which can perhaps draw more from the geometry of the adjacent buildings. We find that the object building, for example, at the junction of Norfolk Street and Castle Street could inform the design of the streetscape in a more meaningful fashion. Signage and lighting across the whole scheme also needs to be resolved in a consistent and well-designed manner.

Bonn Square

Bonn Square in particular will benefit from further simplification in terms of the treatment of the street surface. The sweeping curve in the ground does not make the square more legible and distracts from the entrance into the arcade and library. We feel that the library entrance could be further emphasised and recommend looking at the soffit and its detailing to design a space that matches the building's significance. We are delighted to see the details for the proposed screen; it is a solid piece of architecture and we urge the client to maintain this high quality through to construction. We also commend the introduction of windows in the tower which give the library more presence and provide an interesting vista along New Road. The tower is a convincing present-day reinterpretation of the Oxford spires. Its simple, elegant geometry stands in the tradition of the Nuffield College Tower nearby. We feel that the tower is crucial to the townscape composition and an indispensable element of the proposal and should be delivered and constructed as designed.

Old Greyfriars Place

Old Greyfriars Place has the potential to become a pleasant, intensively used public space framed by attractive buildings. We admire the way the new elements and the existing buildings come together, particularly how the faceted façade of block 3 relates to its context. Great care will be required to maintain the crispness and quality of this elevation. We encourage the design teams and client to revisit the landscape element of Old Greyfriars Place. Currently, too much space is given over to cycle parking and we suggest using more compelling cycle racks that could contribute more to the quality of the square. It could also be interesting to introduce climbing walls as a creative way to provide activity in the square. The tree in the centre is a key feature of this space, both in terms of the view along Tum Again Lane and being the focus point of Old Greyfriars Place, and we urge the design teams



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and client to undertake an arboricultural survey to assess the tree's life expectation and to establish whether a new tree should be planted.

Internal squares

Offering 24 h public access across the whole scheme is commendable, and we applaud the improvement of the junctions between the different blocks. Middle Square, for example, comes together now as a successful space, covered by a simple and elegant roof. We like the shop windows at the end of Greyfriars Lane and Norfolk Street which act as a useful identifier and also refer back to the windows in the tower at Bonn Square. We are less convinced by the resolution of the roof of South Square which impacts on the long distance views and does not fully protect the space below from rain and wind. We think that the access to South Square from Old Greyfriars Street requires further work. Every effort should be made to avoid the steps into Greyfriars Lane and to allow a smooth and barrier free transition into the scheme. We suggest revisiting the bridges that connect block 2 and block 3. The glazed nature of the upper bridge is questionable as it is part of a service route and likely to look cluttered if not carefully managed. The slot drain along Norfolk Street is an appropriate solution for a mall, but we recommend reassessing its position in the ground and its strong structuring impact; it will be important to think about how this element will be terminated and continued into other parts of the scheme.

We enjoy the idea of trees and planting inside the buildings to add an element of greenery to the scheme. We suggest rethinking how to best place the trees. Currently, the tree in Middle Square on the upper level feels uncomfortable. A tree growing from the ground floor would perhaps be more appropriate and the vertical extent of greenery could be achieved differently. We also recommend reassessing the distribution of trees in South Square to establish a more useful relationship with the proposed seating. The rearrangement of King Cross Square in London, for example, introduces large planters which also serve as seating. We encourage the design teams and client to investigate whether the trees could grow from the car park under South Square to inject another level of drama and excitement into the scheme.

Thames Street, Abbey Place

The proposal has the potential to fundamentally change the quality of Thames Street and we commend the way the scheme addresses the neighbourhoods to the south, encouraging pedestrian access from this direction. To fully achieve this and to safely navigate the different roads and the access into the car parking, we think further improvements to the road layout and landscape design are required. We suggest introducing extra wide pedestrian crossings and to realign the crossing at the south-western corner of the site. Currently it directs people to the corner of the John Lewis building which could create an uncomfortable pinch point. The proposed car park entrance is successfully resolved. The combination of the ramp with its grooves and lighting and block 1a towering above it creates a dramatic and compelling piece of architecture. The southern elevation of this block could perhaps benefit from introducing windows. The planting and landscape design around the perimeter of the site need another layer of thought to achieve the rich detailing and complexity required for this scheme, particularly along Abbey Place, which still appears road dominated. We question whether the trees along Thames Street are in the right location and



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suggest reassessing whether they fully serve as a screening device along the south elevation. It could be interesting to explore alternative ways to resolve the streetscape and introduce shading. We also find that the column announcing the Westgate Centre would benefit from further refinement to make it feel less hard.

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

cc (by email only)

Matthew Hele	Westgate Oxford Alliance
Neil Read	Westgate Oxford Alliance
Sarah Stevens	Turley
Duncan Mason	Turley
Peter Coleman	BDP
Adrian Price	BDP
Edward Fowler	BDP
Oliver Smith	Gillespies
Glenn Howells	Glenn Howells Architects
David Henderson	Glenn Howells Architects
Reinhold Schmaderer	Glenn Howells Architects
Simon Hudspith	Panter Hudspith Architects
Gareth Hunter	Panter Hudspith Architects
Bob Allies	Allies and Morrison
Simon Fraser	Allies and Morrison
Jeremy Dixon	Dixon Jones
Edward Jones	Dixon Jones
Michael Trigg	Dixon Jones
David Edwards	Oxford City Council





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Michael Crofton-Briggs	Oxford City Council
Murray Hancock	Oxford City Council
Lois Partridge	Oxfordshire City Council
Taufiq Islam	Oxfordshire City Council
David Brook	English Heritage
Richard Pleat	English Heritage

Review process

Following discussions with the design team and local authority and a previous pre-application review, the scheme was reviewed on 12 June 2014 by John Lyall (chair), Colin Haylock, Eddie Booth, Jessica Bryne-Daniel, Mark Swenarton and Richard Coleman. 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 may share confidential letters with our affiliated panels only in cases where an affiliated panel is taking on a scheme that we have previously reviewed. 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 designreview@designcouncil.org.uk.



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