

Appendix 2

17/03158/FUL – Oxford High School

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11 August 2017

Our reference: DCC/0869

Oxford City Council: Girls Day School Trust, Oxford High School, Belbroughton Road, Oxford, OX2 6XA

Dear Susie Byrne,

Thank you for inviting the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) to engage in a Design Review for Oxford High School. We thank the design team for their presentation at this early stage in design development. We appreciate the considered approach taken to the design process.

Summary

We are supportive of the scheme and the ambition to provide new improved facilities for the students, however we are concerned that the current scheme is not being developed with enough consideration of wider development and site planning opportunities. The scheme is lacking a masterplan to inform and guide development within the school, we would urge that this is prepared, as a matter of priority before an application for this site is progressed further.

The current landscape design appears constrained by the site layout creating some awkward pockets of leftover space and limiting the ability to provide good quality spaces and routes through the school. Opportunities to relocate parking spaces to a less central part of the site should be explored so that cars do not permeate throughout the heart of the school.

The detailed design of the building has potential to create an interesting new addition that draws on elements of the school buildings' materiality, however we recommend exploring the footprint and positioning of this building to rationalise spaces and movement routes. There is scope for a taller building (of at least an additional storey) in this part of the site without having a detrimental impact on the school or its surroundings. We also recommend testing and refining the façade design to ensure that this reflective feature works well in its setting and feels like a bespoke response to the site conditions.

A follow-up review of this scheme is highly recommended.

Masterplanning and future-proofing

The scheme urgently requires to be set in the context of a masterplan to clarify how the wider site could develop and how this scheme can anticipate or enable a more strategic approach to landscaping, movement routes and future development opportunities. This exercise should include an assessment of whether there are any alternative positions for this

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facility and what are the next buildings on the site that may be nearing the end of their useable lifetime, in order to ensure that this proposal will not prejudice any necessary future development. It would also be beneficial to review whether the proposals are using the school's limited land efficiently e.g. whether a taller building with a smaller footprint might work better and allow for more amenity/landscaped space, or for future development.

As part of this exercise we recommend considering existing and future car parking requirements and suggest re-locating car parking spaces in order to maximise usable outdoor spaces and minimise the number of shared surfaces within the school. The site appears car-dominated with parking permeating throughout, creating potential conflicts between vehicular, pedestrian and bicycle movements. We recommend exploring whether the parking could be moved closer to the boundary and entrance to the school, potentially where the Caretaker's Bungalow is currently located and/or in the south-east corner of the site if a new vehicle entrance could be created off Charlbury Road.

We acknowledge that the approach to the site layout is complicated by a number of trees on site that are subject to a tree preservation order, and that this has had a strong influence on the building's footprint, creating some awkward pockets of leftover space and some unconvincing movement routes and entrances. An example of this is the diagonal internal central corridor leading from the car park to a memorial tree.

Landscape and site layout

The proposed landscape treatment has potential to create some high quality spaces but is being hampered by the positioning of car parking, vehicle routes and the large footprint and shape of the building. As mentioned above, more thought should be given to the role, function and hierarchy of landscaped areas and the potential linkages with the wider school site, and to retaining the really important trees on the site. It is very disappointing that a valuable tree is to be lost due to the projecting first floor at the north west corner of the building. The landscaped spaces adjacent to the new building could better complement the indoor spaces, as an example by providing outdoor classrooms or recreational spaces. Sunny areas would make good amenity spaces whereas the shaded parts of the site could be left as more wild, natural spaces to provide an ecological resource and a counterpoint to the more formal landscaped spaces. The existing boundary treatment along Charlbury Road is of very poor quality and it would be beneficial to improve its appearance as part of this scheme and create a more pleasant termination to the site for its users.

Height, footprint and overhang

We think the modest height of the building is acceptable as it will form a discreet new building within its context, however there may be some opportunity to add additional height in this location. We recommend exploring the potential a taller building either to provide more floorspace or to allow for a building with a smaller footprint. This option should be assessed along with the impact on views within the conservation area.

We think that overhangs can play an important role in providing sheltered outdoor space adjacent to educational buildings, but we are concerned that the currently proposed overhang around the building may impact negatively on the light and character of internal and external spaces around the building, particularly spaces that might also be

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overshadowed by trees and other buildings. We recommend carefully considering the impact of the overhang on individual spaces and removing/refining this where necessary.

Internal Layout

Although we find the internal planning to be ingenious in places, we think that it would benefit from considerable tightening; all spaces could perhaps 'work harder' - a better planned building might result in better value for money. Two important moments in the building (the north west corner facing the school entrance, and the centre of the southern façade) are occupied with arguably unimportant functions, a stair and a store room.

Internally, we think some more careful thought should be given to the configuration and function of different areas and rooms. We are wary of multi-functional spaces. We encourage you to ensure that the display areas in the design street are of a sufficient size and are specifically designed for displaying art in terms of their height, background and lighting

We suggest that the sixth form common room might helpfully incorporate a greater degree of privacy and provide a greater separation between social spaces and study spaces. There is potential to link the sixth form space to a roof terrace area, which could provide a reward for sixth formers and somewhere for younger pupils to aspire to as they move up the school.

We would welcome the opportunity to see more detailed internal drawings and sections at a follow up review.

Façade Design

In terms of the external design, we like the way the first floor 'floats' over the brick-clad ground-floor. We are yet to be convinced by the detailed design of the reflective stainless steel rain screen which will look very different during winter when tree cover is less dense. We recommend testing the materials, reflectivity and pattern at different times of the year and exploring precedents to progress the external design of the building.

The façade treatment appears interesting in concept but it should be bespoke and specific to the site and identity of the school to avoid it appearing out of keeping with the site or dated in the future. We would advise treating the perforated rainscreen as a continuous skin. A more cohesive appearance could be achieved by not cutting out openings around fenestration, but instead increasing the amount of perforations in these areas and building this into the pattern of the facade.

Sustainability

The sustainability strategy for the site appears ambitious and we appreciate the level of thought that has gone into this aspect of the proposal but query the need for both ground source and air source heat pumps and whether they can both be suitably accommodated within the building.

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.

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Yours sincerely

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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 20 July 2017 by Jo van Heyningen (chair), Alan Berman, Dan Jones and Deborah Nagan. 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)

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