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# Helena Kennedy Building, Oxford Brookes University Design Review

Notes from 22 February 2018

### Summary

The scheme has progressed well since the last review and we support the principles of the proposal. The new building helps in fostering innovative ways of working and the contemporary nature of the architecture will create a distinctive building for Oxford Brookes University. We offer some comments to refine the building design and landscape, but we think it is important to review the parking arrangements for the site to prevent the public realm from being dominated by cars.

It is positive that a wider campus development plan has been prepared since the last workshop, and it is also evident that significant work has been undertaken on how the site will integrate with the surrounding area. However, the new building will sit within the vicinity of the Grade II\* listed Headington Hill Hall and we think more thought on how the proposal could enhance the setting of this heritage asset is required - by considering this building as part of the site. More work is required on the landscape to better frame this new building and create a stronger connection to this special context as well as to rationalise parking and movement routes.

We support the restrained architectural approach and rational response to the context which creates a distinctive contemporary building that responds to its potential for a noteworthy building for Oxford Brookes University and the surrounding area of Headington. Internally, the principle of combining and providing new facilities for design, technology, the arts, and architecture on one site is a great opportunity for Oxford Brookes University to facilitate interaction between the different departments and generate new insights and ways of working. Whilst we appreciate the open nature of this building, it might benefit from a sense of hierarchy and rules to set some parameters for each of the departments that will occupy this space and would recommend continuing to experiment and explore creative options. In addition, some further work on the positioning of the 'fab lab' space and the noisier uses would help advance the design. We would also recommend some work on the detailing of the building, particularly at roof level to refine its design.

### Relationship with the wider context

It is evident that significant work has been undertaken since the last workshop to understand how the Helena Kennedy building will integrate with the wider campus, and this is positive. Connections

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between the site and the wider campus will be important in strengthening the relationship between the university's facilities and accommodation. However, we think that more work is required to achieve a good level of integration with Headington Hill Hall. The proposal presents an opportunity to significantly enhance the Hall's surrounding context. It may be helpful to consider redrawing the red line to accommodate this building within the boundary, given that it is a key feature within the site and considering how the development can deliver benefits for this striking heritage asset. At present the Headington Hill Hall's context is compromised by the adjacent car parking and there is scope to improve this landscape.

### Landscape

The setting of the scheme is noteworthy and therefore the landscape makes an important contribution to the character and identity of the wider campus. We think the Helena Kennedy building could have a stronger connection to this special context and the landscape could better support the innovative nature of this new building. The proximity of the nearby woodland and abundance of majestic trees within the site present a unique opportunity to create a very special place.

It is positive that a wider analysis of the landscape and the on-site trees has been carried out since the last review, we recommend continuing to develop the tree strategy for the proposal, taking into account successional tree planting for the future when the existing trees reach the end of their life span. Some of the existing trees constrict visual and physical permeability within the site and therefore we suggest continuing to assess whether the removal of some of these trees could help rationalise movement and improve the openness of the site. For example, the role of the row of lime trees as a screening device between this site and Headington Hill Hall has come to an end with the removal of a building and there is potential to create a greater sense of arrival to Oxford Brookes University from the gate house to the east of the site by removing a few of the existing Holm Oak trees in this location. At the minimum, raising the canopy of some of the trees by pruning could be considered to help improve the openness and wayfinding of the site.

The distribution of car parking and vehicle and pedestrian routes across the site, the choice of paving material and markings equally has a significant impact on the character of the landscape. At present the Headington Hill Hall's context is compromised by the adjacent car parking, whilst surrounding the new Helena Kennedy building with a strictly orthogonal car park layout detracts from its appearance. We think it would be fruitful to consider this project as a "building sitting within a clearing in the woodland". To this end we recommend positioning the car parking spaces amongst the trees in a more informal way and using discreet markings in order to achieve the required number of spaces. We also recommend continuing to assess access, deliveries and vehicular movements.

We recommend continuing to progress the work on pedestrian movement routes and desire lines that has commenced. For example, we think that the paths would be more useful if they were straight and followed the routes that people will want to take, and a more contemporary ground



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plain design would better support the architectural approach. To help the scheme integrate with the surrounding university facilities and student accommodation and the suburban settlement beyond, it would be beneficial to create a new direct route north to the Clive Booth Village, ideally as soon as possible and preferably as part of these proposals.

### Building design

We support the ambition of the client and design team to create a notable piece of contemporary architecture in this location to promote Oxford Brookes University. A proposal of this nature would celebrate innovation in the design and functioning of the building whilst enhancing its natural and historic context. To progress the design, we recommend some more work on the roof treatment – the oversailing roof and soffit, and particularly how the columns could better complement the large Scots pines which are a key feature of the campus. Falling leaves from the surrounding trees are likely to accumulate on the flat roof and the overall maintenance of the roof and water runoff requires further thought. A more distinctive roof form could be explored which might resolve this issue and better complement the building.

We recommend more work on uses and the adaptability of the internal layout as well as preparing drawings showing flexibility to demonstrate the building will be functional and viable in the long term whilst meeting the needs of each separate university department. We welcome the ambition to create adaptable spaces to help facilitate the innovative practices within the building. However, creating a sense of hierarchy and rules within this flexible space in addition to defining the location and type of some of the uses would help to fix parameters that could shape and configure the internal layout and the building footprint and define ownership of spaces for different departments. At the same time the size, configuration and location of the 'fab lab' space could constrict its future growth and flexibility and we recommend continuing to explore its positioning within the building. In terms of the proposed uses, the team should carefully consider the positioning of noisy activities and move them to less prominent locations. We support the location of café which will benefit from impressive views and provide a valuable asset for both students and the wider public potentially. However, we recommend considering positioning the café in a corner or across the full width of the building to maximise these views.

### Attendees

#### Design Review Panel

Joanna van Heyningen (Chair)  
Dan Jones  
Martin Stockley  
Deborah Nagan  
Tony Edwards

#### Scheme presenters

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Paul Austin	Oxford Brookes University
James Roach	BGS
Hamish McMichael	BGS
Clara Byrne	BGS
Chris Pattison	Turnberry
Susie Byrne	Turnberry
Brie Foster	Turnberry
Dafydd Warburton	LDA

### Local Authority

Adrian Arnold	Oxford City Council
Andrew Murdoch	Oxford City Council
Gill Butter	Oxford City Council

### Design Council Cabe

James Harris  
Annabel Osborne

### Historic England

Richard Peats

### 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](mailto:cabe@designcouncil.org.uk).

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# Helena Kennedy Building, Oxford Brookes University Design Workshop

Notes from 12 October 2017

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on this proposal at the Design Workshop on 12 October 2017. We look forward to engaging in future dialogue as the proposal develops.

### Summary

To help deliver the key objectives for this scheme and other neighbouring sites in the university's ownership and ensure a coherent and joined-up approach between sites, we recommend developing a masterplan framework at the earliest possible stage. This framework could also help to inform the future expansion of the University's campus and future development proposals going forward.

The principle of combining and providing new facilities for design, technology, the arts, and architecture on one site is a great opportunity for Oxford Brookes University to facilitate interaction between the different departments and generate new insights and ways of working. To achieve this aim, we welcome the demolition of the existing Helena Kennedy building which appears in need of redevelopment to meet the current needs of Oxford Brookes University.

It is crucial that this proposal responds to both its striking setting and its potential for a noteworthy building for Oxford Brookes University and the surrounding area of Headington. We think there is scope to create an inventive, contemporary building that respects its wider context and encourage the team to continue to experiment and explore creative options for this building. We support the modest height and innovative function of the building which begins to respond to the landscape and key views. To move forward in the design process, we recommend that the design team better define the key parameters of the scheme starting with the wider context. To do so, more thorough contextual analysis is required, particularly in terms of trees, key desire lines, movement routes and views.



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### Relationship with the wider context

To develop a successful proposal for this site that integrates with the wider campus, a good understanding of the context beyond the redline boundary of the site is needed. It is yet not clear how the scheme integrates with the surrounding university facilities and student accommodation and the suburban settlement beyond. At this early stage of the design process we recommend a more thorough contextual analysis of the wider campus and its relationship to the site.

- Connections between the site and the wider campus will be important in strengthening the relationship between the university's facilities and accommodation. We recommend exploring pedestrian, cycling and vehicular routes outside the redline boundary in further detail and mapping new routes to and through the site to improve connectivity across the campus. Connections to the pedestrian bridge over Headington Road should also form part of this analysis.
- Further thought should be given to the location of the main entrance, and the number of entrances and types of entrances for different users into the site. The main entrance into the site is not yet clear in the current proposal. Studies on the wider connectivity are needed to help define the entrance points to the building, and whether creating additional entrances would undermine the role of the principal access to the building.
- Consider how car parking across the wider campus could be rationalised and reduced to remove the potential for conflicts between vehicular, pedestrian and bicycle movements. To help achieve this objective, thought should also be given to future car ownership trends and the long term parking requirements for the University.
- Given the striking setting within the vicinity of the Grade II\* listed Headington Hill Hall, we think this proposal offers the opportunity to celebrate and help frame this Hall in the positioning and orientation of the proposed Helena Kennedy Building. It is a key feature within the site that could be capitalised on as the proposal presents an opportunity to significantly enhance the Hall's surrounding context.
- At present the Headington Hill Hall's context is compromised by the adjacent car parking. Relocating and/or redistributing these spaces to create a more usable space that better frames this building would be a benefit.
- We encourage the design team to carry out a more in-depth analysis of long and short views across the site, specifically from the city centre and Headington Road. We suggest assessing which of these key views should be opened up to give the building a bit more prominence within the campus and from key routes in the wider area. Given the sensitive context, the reflectivity of the new building should be tested in long and short views.
- A number of potential views within the site are obstructed by trees, and we suggest considering which trees should be removed to enhance the visibility of this key building. The existing trees constrict visual and physical permeability within the site and therefore we suggest exploring the removal of some of these trees to help rationalise movement and improve the openness of the site.

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- The loss of any trees would need to be justified by an exemplary approach to the architecture and landscape. Raising the canopy of the trees by pruning could be considered to help improve the wayfinding of the site.
- There is a potential to create a greater sense of arrival to Oxford Brookes University from the gate house to the east of the site by removing a few of the existing Holm Oak trees in this location.

### Building design

We support the ambition of the client and design team to create a notable piece of contemporary architecture in this location to promote Oxford Brookes University. We think a proposal of this nature could celebrate innovation in the design and functioning of the building whilst enhancing its natural and historic context.

- We suggest the design team explores and build on the concept of the exhibition space within the design at ground floor level to help celebrate the innovative practices within the building and make it more outward looking.
- Acknowledging that the building design is a work in progress, we support the modest height of the building as it will form a discreet new building within its context.
- More thought should be given to how the building design and construction will be affected by wider contextual issues and constraints. As an example, the tree root protection zones during the construction period, innovative construction methods could be explored to address this issue such as deep piling in a central location and shallow piling in others and cantilevers.
- We suggest investigating a quieter ground plain treatment to help give the proposed building more prominence within this landscape-led setting. This could help to make the building appear to 'float' within the trees and look more lightweight in appearance.
- Whilst we welcome the proposed regular grid of the building, we think the grid could be irregular in some parts of the building to create interesting internal spaces and a more distinctive external structure.
- We welcome the ambition to create adaptable spaces to help facilitate the innovative practices within the building. However, defining the location and type of some of the uses within this flexible space would help to fix parameters that could shape and configure the internal layout and the building footprint.
- The quality of the internal spaces for the users could be further explored at this stage. In the design development of the building, the orientation could better inform the building design, particularly in terms of solar gain. Whilst we welcome the use of glazing in this context, the proposed materials should take into account the potential for the building to overheat. Overshadowing from trees could also affect the internal spaces.
- There is an opportunity for the University to showcase the expertise of its built environment departments in the building design; more thought should be given to the environmental credentials of this scheme in this regard.



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### Attendees

Design Workshop Panel  
Keith Bradley (Chair)  
Dan Jones  
Martin Stockley  
Kathryn Davies  
Deborah Nagan

### Scheme presenters

Paul Austin	Oxford Brookes University
James Roach	BGS
Hamish McMichael	BGS
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Adrian Arnold	Oxford City Council
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Gill Butter	Oxford City Council
Louise Waite	Oxford City Council

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