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Simon Sharp
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22nd November 2018

Our reference: DCC/0995

Oxford City Council: Castle Hill House redevelopment, St Peter's College

Dear Simon Sharp,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on the Castle Hill House redevelopment proposal at the Design Workshop on 08 November 2018. The review focused on strategic elements of the design and how the proposed development relates to its wider context. Given that this scheme is still in early stages of design, the quality and design of the internal environment were not discussed during the workshop.

Summary

We support the principle of the two buildings on the site and welcome the initial landscape and building design studies to date. However, we think that there are many more opportunities to develop the site layout, and landscape and building design to create a stronger identity for the scheme – one which better integrates this development within the existing campus, the heritage context and the surrounding townscape itself. We appreciate that the design team has endeavoured to address the challenges with site topography and further constraints regarding the heritage context of the site. However, before settling on a final design, we believe the scheme would highly benefit from further site studies and design iterations to achieve the best possible outcome. The proposed massing and the height of the building can work on this site, but we strongly encourage the design team to test slightly different site layouts and building orientations to better relate to and build on the existing character of this area, and open spaces and routes within the site. We strongly support the team to give the landscape greater priority within the design process. We recommend that the best outcome can be only achieved by reconsidering the proposed approach to car parking. The proposed elevational design is in its early stages of design and will require more work. We suggest the following guiding principles for the design development of the scheme.

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St Peter's College & the integration of the scheme in the wider context

We strongly encourage the team to develop a more integrated placemaking strategy for areas within and surrounding the development. This could help residents and visitors read the different sequences of places more easily and create a more coherent 'campus' for St Peter's College. While we acknowledge that Bulwarks Lane is a public access route, we encourage the design team to incorporate the lane as much as possible into the design process and provide every opportunity to engage with the community. By enabling a significant improvement in the public realm on both Bulwarks Lane and New Road, the scheme could not only enhance a campus-feel but enable movement throughout the site and improve the feeling of security.

The site is within the Central Oxford Conservation Area and therefore has a prominent location in Oxford with key views to multiple heritage sites. We also encourage the team to think about the framing of views from, through and to the development and take every opportunity possible to open up more views to the city's residents and visitors to Castle Mound and to the surrounding heritage sites. Ways in which physical and visual connectivity could be enhanced and improved between St Peter's College, Bulwarks Lane and the site – including creating strategic breaks in the boundary wall to the north of the site – should be considered. The existing wall of Canal House along Bulwarks Lane however should be kept intact.

By treating and opening up the proposed entrance on Bulwarks Lane, the scheme could make a more positive gesture to the community. Further improvements could be achieved by a more integrated approach to landscape on the north of the site along Bulwarks Lane. Possible solutions such as setting back the rear of the building from the current wall, curving differently the back wall alongside the development and even creating a second courtyard on Bulwarks Lane are also options to be investigated. Opening up access routes along the wall of St Peter's College campus would further enhance connectivity and movement on Bulwarks Lane and design out crime. We are concerned, for example, that the indentations in the current building design in this location can create spaces for anti-social behaviour.

Site layout and car parking

A more holistic site layout that relates to the neighbouring listed buildings and spaces is needed in this prominent location of Oxford. This approach will help to ensure that the site is optimised both in the short and longer term. If there is an opportunity to acquire more land on the east of the site, we believe that could create a more distinctive and rationalised area between New Road and Bulwarks Lane, and an overall stronger masterplan.

We recommend continuing to test the orientation of the southern building at this stage of the design process. Slightly shifting the orientation of the south building – to be parallel with the

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adjacent New Road – could improve the overall site plan. The current plan seems to fight against the existing urban grain of the wider area and alignment of New Road.

While we would like to see a car-free development on the site, we appreciate the current necessity for car parking for the College. We encourage the team, however, to further reduce the number of bays and relocate the car parking away from the New Road given its prominence from this key route. The car parking could be located towards the north of the site where habitable rooms cannot be incorporated, for example. Alternatively, the car parking could be relocated from its planned location to the west side of the site adjacent to Nuffield College. A combined car parking area between Nuffield and St Peter's College could be potentially considered and brokered to better optimise space and car parking for both colleges.

If car parking is to be reduced or relocated, there is a potential to provide a new, low-rise building as a replacement alongside New Road. This building could, for example, be used for communal spaces or a dining area which would benefit from the key views to a garden quad. By developing a more coherent elevational language around the garden, a lively 3-sided garden quad could be created on the west side of the development.

Landscape & access

The scheme would also benefit from a landscape study throughout the seasons. We encourage the team to find ways in which the landscape informs a more holistic response to the site and its context and seeks ways of ensuring that the overall design is sensitive to the landscape's innate qualities. The type of trees that will need to be planted will need thorough research and design consideration. In principal we support the tree strategy, including the removal of the apple and tulip trees and the retention of the liquid amber.

The lime tree that is outside of the boundary of the current development was also discussed in relation to the proposed works. It may be possible to remove the tree, if that enables a more integrated landscape strategy in the future, and as it appears to be coming to the end of its life. Ways in which the landscape could give more prominence to Canal House should be also considered. It would be also important to consider how the tree strategy builds up on the existing line of London Plain trees along New Road. New, feature trees along this route could potentially add to the green character of the street and add a visual attraction along this key route. We suggest trees within the car park should be low to enable views to Canal House.

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Access

The current entrance strategy to the site is beginning to work well but it should be further tested and optimised. Bulwarks Lane can work as a primary entrance. We believe, however, that a larger outdoor entrance courtyard to the north of the site is needed to improve wayfinding and the sense of space along this tight route and could provide a space for gathering. We suggest 'cutting the corner' of the proposed building to the north of the site which could also help to enhance the flow of movement through the development.

We think that the sequence of spaces along the route through the site from east to west should be reconsidered. The eastern end of the passage adjacent to the proposed building appears canyon-like. We believe that the passageway between the two buildings should be a grander, more legible route through the site. This would include further exploration of the site levels, the sequence of spaces and the proposed staircase on the west side of the south building to create a more straightforward route that leads to the garden which feels safe.

We encourage the team to continue looking at ways in which the current entrance and boundary treatment on New Road could be redesigned and provide a more inviting, secondary access to the site. The current location of the refuse store should be moved from the south of the building as this elevation presents a primary frontage to New Road and a large number of pedestrians walk along this key route.

Building design, height & massing

Whilst we welcome the initial approach to building height, it will be worthwhile continuing to test the height of the building to the north. We also strongly encourage the design team to reconsider the roofscape and develop a more sculptural roof-design that is not merely a continuation of the façade.

The character of the two buildings should be further developed. We recommend that the design team tests the character of the two buildings further and potentially develops different characters for these buildings. A more refined and robust architectural design that would reflect the calm and refined character of the surrounding buildings would be welcomed. A calmer elevation would sit more comfortably next to Canal House.

The west elevation of the north building is crucial in the overall character of the scheme as it provides a key frontage onto the garden and is visible from New Road. We therefore suggest that this elevation is considered in much more detail. The front elevation of the south building adjacent to New Road should be also reconsidered as – if it remains as proposed – it could appear a bit fortress like.

We also suggest exploring different elevational treatments of the two buildings. Landscape could inform the brick colour(s) and materiality of the development across the site. The views

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from and to the site, and the way building materials are treated and change in different weather conditions and with time can inform the elevational design.

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 contact us.

Yours sincerely,



Gyorgyi Galik

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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 8th November 2018 by Keith Bradley (chair), Jessica Bryne-Daniel, Sarah Wigglesworth and Charles Wagner. 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.

Attendees (cc-d)

James Graham	St Peter's College
Doug Shaw	St Peter's College
Andy Waterman	Waterman Project Management Ltd
Simon Sharp	JPPC Chartered Town Planners
Richard Rose-Casemore	Design Engine
Richard James	Design Engine
Guillaume Baltz	Guillaume Baltz Landscape and Garden Design
Nicholas Doggett	Asset Heritage Consulting
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