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Adam Smith
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19 February 2020

Our reference: DC5215

Oxford City Council: Clarendon Centre Masterplan

Dear Adam Smith,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on this proposal at the Design Workshop on 10th February 2020. The scheme is the redevelopment of the Clarendon Shopping Centre that proposes a mix of uses, including: a small quantity of retained retail, a hotel, a student hostel, a research laboratory, offices space, new landscape, public realm and a city square organised around a reinstated street.

Summary

We are glad to have the opportunity to see this scheme at such early stage and congratulate the design team for the quality and detail of their presentation, which communicates a complex site and proposal with all its constraints and opportunities, in a clear way.

We are encouraged by the 40 years of continuity of stewardship of this important city centre destination and interested to hear about the team's analysis and vision concerning land values and future flexibility of use, that would successfully realign the site to the challenges of the coming decades.

We applaud the environmental ambition of the owner and commitment to the highest UN credentials. To achieve these aspirations, we encourage the project team to step back and explore the possibility of repurposing the existing buildings, by retaining the structural frames and reusing materials, to minimise the embodied carbon impact of the new development. A stronger and more rigorous argument will be necessary if the existing buildings are to be demolished.

Sustainability, with increasingly stringent climate targets, needs to be at the forefront of every new development in the UK. We strongly recommend that the project team develop an energy and sustainability strategy that looks at the whole-life carbon performance of the development (including both operational and embodied carbon), as well as the water management on the site.

So that the development can better integrate into the wider context of Oxford, we encourage the design team to look beyond their redline boundary, and to work with



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Oxford City Council to understand their strategic priorities for the city centre, so that the development can reach its full potential.

Finally, we urge the design team to appoint a landscape designer, so the new iterations of their design can be informed and led by a thoughtful landscape design and public realm strategy, and not merely by the footprint of buildings.

Viability and mix of use

For many years, the Clarendon Centre was a pivotal site and popular destination in Oxford's central shopping district. In the past few decades, the city centre has faced new challenges and is undergoing change. We feel that innovative thinking will be required to meet the new demands put upon the High Street. The best way forward may run counter to previously accepted thinking on retail economics: current research and evolving thinking suggests local authorities move beyond a retail-led vision when thinking of future proofing their high streets and town centres. We recognise that a longer view on social and environmental sustainability is needed on such sites and that return on investment may not come quickly. We recommend the project team look into further research and best practice examples on how developments with similar challenges in Oxford and in other UK and international cities have addressed and overcome the complexity of these issues.

We believe that the most fundamental challenge will be to transition to a mix of new uses, which will offer greater long-term viability for the site. To achieve this, the emerging design will need to bring people into and through the hidden, internal spaces of the city block and encourage them to dwell. We think that the currently proposed design, particularly the long horizontal internal facades, is not the best way to support this outcome. We feel that a different design approach will be necessary, where more human-scale, broken-down, "sticky" facades offer the nooks and crannies that are critical for promoting a welcoming character; providing microclimates to stop and linger; and ultimately encouraging economic success. A negative example is provided by Friars Entry, behind the Oxford branch of Debenhams. Here, a set of small shops creates a lively street scene on the northern edge of the lane, while the larger, more introverted and sterile, modern neighbours on the southern side of the lane produce dead spaces and a cold environment for people walking through.

We think that the proposed variety of use is a positive move and potentially more sustainable. Success will depend on promoting activity within the new street scene. It is desirable to have several pools of activity where different uses interact with each other. We feel that the concept of a "boundary object" could help. This is a space for exchange and communication that may not necessarily have a strictly economic function. Examples are a hub for health or social care, an arts space, or even a crèche. We encourage you to consider strategies for introducing these boundary object-like places within the new development.

We think that a successful scheme will seek to produce a vibrant space, offering both movement and a place where people want to stay. We feel that such a space would benefit from balancing the needs of a variety of users and uses. It seems to us that the new R&D function could be a good "boundary object". The laboratory function would



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begin to produce the required sense of excitement and change that could start to animate the new development. However, we think that the creative sector could also play a part in the transformation of the area. A performance or studio space could provide a new, cultural anchor bringing a different demographic into and through the development. Finally, we urge that you encourage a mix of independent, local shops and services, which could establish a virtuous and resilient local economy with an independent market that returns and retains the profits of trade in Oxford - rather than a model which encourages chain stores and multi-nationals, who do not necessarily have a long term stake in the city and tend to export profits from the local economy.

Whilst we welcome the clarity of thinking presented in the development drawings, we are not fully convinced that all of the proposed uses are in the right place. For example, there may be an argument for locating the hotel within the retained Clarendon Building, as a retained McDonald's frame could offer a home to more flexible uses. We think that it would be beneficial to test the proposed distribution of uses against a more detailed study of the capacity of the existing building stock and opportunities for their sustainable re-use.

Policy Context

In order to embrace the emerging social and economic challenges of the High Street, the design team is proposing a mix of use that differs from established policy. The council raises questions concerning the vision for the centre and the existing policy context, which currently promotes a greater proportion of A1 retail space, particularly concentrated on the main shopping streets.

However, Oxford City Council recognises the radical changes that have been happening to our high streets and the changes that will be necessary in policy terms to address those. We encourage the design team to establish an evidence-base for their retail and uses strategy. A compelling argument is required for the low levels of retail, and for the hotel function occupying what has traditionally been prime, high street, retail frontage. This argument may include reference to the GLA's recent guidance on High Streets and Town Centres that supports the development of adaptive strategies, smaller retail units with more flexible floor plates and more agile change between different use classes. Notwithstanding the current inflexible planning system, the local authority might find a way to address these emerging issues in a more strategic way, to allow more flexible and agile change of use required for long-term viability.

Placemaking

We welcome both the generous new square and the reinstatement of the historic street. Both of these bold moves begin to rebuild the fabric of the City by reintroducing a historic hierarchy into the city block. These charming cut-throughs and hidden spaces play a central part in defining the identity and character of Oxford. This also aligns with the research finding that providing more cut-throughs in a place makes people feel more part of their city. However, we feel that the treatment of the proposed internal urban realm is not yet contributing to making this a place where people would choose to come or dwell.

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We believe that the architectural and economic success of this new place will rely on people adopting the new routes and choosing to dwell in the new spaces. The careful programming of the edges will play a key role in the successful activation of the square itself and will bring a sense of change and excitement to the area. However, the current scheme deploys flush, monumental, glazed facades with no occupiable, introverted edges, and we feel that this will be likely to deter people from lingering. Finding all opportunities and moments to blend inside and outside spaces together, where inside spaces spill out to the streets and public square, will enhance the long-term success this place. We strongly encourage the design team to rethink the edge conditions of their new public space to introduce human-scale spaces and find a way to make them “sticky” to enable social interaction. We recommend a strategy that deploys nooks and crannies and deliberate irregularity in the design of their facades using warmer and softer materials to enhance the experience for the visitor. A study of the various microclimates within the scheme would identify the best places for dwell. For example, we believe that the south-facing, internal corner of the new hotel building could be a comfortable and attractive place to gather and linger.

Activity and dwell would be encouraged by re-imagining the internal, linear, circulation routes as a series of pocket squares. These small urban events would encourage both movement and stopping, along the various edge conditions. We believe that it would make more sense to promote an informal character, likely to appeal to the young, rather than a corporate one that would be more at home in the City of London or a financial district.

Identity and local character

We applaud the design team for recognising the changing face of retail and pressure being exerted on our traditional town centres. We support the early appointment of a heritage and townscape consultant and the contextual analysis presented. However, despite this, we feel a disconnect between your analysis and the emerging proposal. We think that the current architectural design is not yet contributing to a strong sense of place and the proposal does not clearly belong to and integrate into the rich and complex streetscape of Oxford.

We think that some further studies will be necessary. The first exercise might be to explore how other cities have grappled with, and successfully resolved, the challenge of placing a sizeable new development within a sensitive historic environment. A second comparative study might look at the hierarchy of local public places to understand their function and quality.

The proposed development site is directly adjacent to Carfax, the historic centre of the City of Oxford. We feel that Carfax itself has long-since ceased to be the actual centre of Oxford: it is no longer a place where people sit and gather; it is not foremost in the imagination of either the residents or visitors; it is not the significant fulcrum point that it once was. Notwithstanding this, we think that no other recent public spaces, has yet successfully taken up the mantle. Consequently, Oxford seems to be lacking an obvious centre. So, we strongly encourage the design team to ask the question: could their site become the new City Centre of Oxford? If so, the new square will need to become a greater place than the others before it.



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Such a question gives rise to a number of challenges concerning identity, character and hierarchy of space. If this place is to be envisaged as the new City Centre of Oxford, how would the design, both of the buildings and of the urban realm, express this primary place in the city hierarchy? If this direction is taken, we recommend a comparative study to identify how other similar cities have successfully defined their centres.

We think that the design team could give more thought to the unique qualities of the townscape that define the character of Oxford. We feel that the diverse mix of building styles, from many eras, generally share a high level of quality. High quality and diversity itself begin to define the Oxford Character.

We think that a second strand that defines the streetscape is the design development of a complex variety of edges and facades that respond to and produce protected microclimates. We feel that this character could be respected and reinforced in the new development by breaking down the monumentality of the proposed facades. Although the current team of architects are clearly making a strong contribution towards a successful outcome, we believe that the diversity that will be necessary to make this a successful scheme could be supplemented by a broader team of architects. We recommend a variety of hands to achieve the complex mix of architecture that may be required.

Finally, as rightly identified in the heritage analysis, the Oxford skyline is a critical element in defining the character of the city. We feel that the current proposal presents an overly flat, horizontal datum that does not sit well within some of the key townscape views. Although we think that the rationalisation of roof levels makes sense, there is also scope for more variation and expression in the roofline. We also think that, if the quality of ground floor spaces could be significantly improved by a reduction in the quantum of development at ground level, this might justify introducing some additional height at certain strategic location (see under Landscape and Urban Realm below).

Connectivity

The scheme sits at the ancient Carfax Crossroads that marks the centre of historic Oxford. Even today, this busy interchange offers the site global and local connectivity to the city and the larger world beyond. When thinking about connectivity, we encourage the design team to look outside the red-line boundary of the site, towards the network of routes that bring footfall into and through the new development.

A great number of people is moving through the historic crossroads; these are potential visitors and clients of the new scheme. We feel that it is essential to undertake an analysis of this population. This study could focus on: who these people are, what brought these people to this place, and what are they actually doing here? The latest Space Syntax analysis should provide a background for understanding and testing circulation flows; but, this perhaps needs updating to incorporate the effects of the Westgate development.

We imagine that a large proportion of the footfall is visitors or tourists; but some will be local Oxford residents who enjoy the many characterful cut-throughs and alleyways of

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the city. Inviting glimpses into the new spaces, within the city block, will help to draw locals and visitors into and through the scheme.

We feel that there is potential for more routes through the site:

- + opening-up an east-west route through Crown Yard
- + opening up the north-south route into Frewin Court, towards the Oxford Union -- both Crown Yard and Frewin Court would lend significant historic character to the network of internal routes
- + re-opening, if possible, the historic link through to Brasenose College at the end of Frewin Court to further increase the permeability of and footfall on the site
- + opening up and improving the connection to Shoe Lane (perhaps by incorporating the development of North Bailey House, which is in the same ownership)

Landscape and Urban realm

We welcome the generous provision of a new urban square and find elements of the landscape design potentially delightful, such as the cascading student terraces onto Frewin Court.

As we have previously mentioned, the success of the scheme will depend on the character and detailed design of the internal urban realm and landscape. Therefore, we urge the appointment of a landscape architect at the earliest opportunity. This designer should become a key member of the team, who is encouraged to question, challenge and ultimately improve the quality of the emerging proposal.

We feel that some very fundamental questions have not yet been asked, or adequately addressed. Firstly, what is the right strategy for designing and delivering a desirable destination? Secondly, what kind of place is the design team trying to create? As a result, we feel that the current references, concerning the corporate look and feel of the place, are probably not appropriate to the true ambitions of the scheme. Furthermore, we think that the conceptual model of the Italian Square is not helping to deliver an appropriate urban realm, in a historic townscape that is rather defined through a network of alleys and lanes.

Returning to our previous comment about the importance of an active “sticky” edge, we believe that it may help the design process to reverse the figure-ground relationship of the drawings. The architecture and internal spaces of the buildings may naturally emerge through designing an interesting, informal, exterior perimeter that is primarily focused on supporting sociality.

We applaud the generosity of new urban realm and think that it could benefit from being even more generous. In this context, we think that more value may be added by losing some area from the floor plate to create a richer experience at ground level that fully explores the relationships between the interior and exterior of the buildings. We encourage the design team to compensate with small, localised increases in height, if required. The local authority seems to agree that a design resulting in a more interesting roofscape and higher quality public realm on ground level could justify additional height, if this approach delivers a higher quality scheme overall.



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We strongly recommend further view analysis and sunlight and shadow studies to better understand the most and least favourable microclimates with respect to temperature and wind and other factors.

We think that there is a real opportunity to deliver a quality environment here and encourage the design team to provide a minimum of 50% greenspace within the landscape. As the local authority has pointed out, the roof is indeed the fifth facade of the building and could be more intensively greened. We also recognise the local authority's ambition to improve and upgrade the Cornmarket and the Covered Market. We feel that the new Clarendon Centre ought to form part of an integrated green-infrastructure network; following the ambition for street trees in the Cornmarket into the interior of the new scheme, where possible.

Environmental and sustainability

We are aware that we are now on path to 2030 net zero carbon. It is critical to take every opportunity to reduce emissions and maximise the reduction of any embodied carbon, wherever possible. We are concerned about the degree of demolitions and construction proposed and encourage the design to work harder in their thinking about repurposing of existing buildings, particularly structural frames. We think that a very strong and rigorous case needs to be made for the demolition of any existing buildings. It is an important consideration when locating the various uses to consider if a particular use lends itself better, or adequately, to an existing structural frame. Furthermore, there are considerable savings to be made through retention, including: reduced need for archaeological excavations; limiting the management of dust pollution and related health impacts; costs associated with the removal of rubble and screening the street. We recommend a broad brush, cost-benefits analysis considering the comparative logistics of construction, including vehicles movements and air quality.

We recognise that many of the existing buildings and structural frames offer precisely the informal, industrial aesthetic which supports the required character for sensitive placemaking in this location. We feel that it will be considerably more difficult to deliver such informality and patina through the predominantly new-build scheme currently illustrated. Even the rough facade onto the Crown Inn Pub lends itself to building an informal sense of place.

We feel that there is a missing analysis and plans that clearly explains the rationale of the demolition retention and reuse strategy. Making this argument would be extremely helpful in arriving at the right balance and conveying the reasons for a given design outcome.

We encourage the design team to develop an exemplary, sustainable, passive energy strategy; this might be based on the 5th generation concept of exchanging heat and cooling using an intelligent network of heat pumps across the whole site.

The quiet and internal site lends itself to a passive ventilation strategy with opening windows. However, given the close proximity of the research laboratory to the hotel, care should be taken to consider the impact of any contaminating discharges.



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Finally, we encourage the design team to make full use of the roofscape to produce a blue-green environment that exploits opportunities for water harvesting and attenuation and photo voltaic energy production.

Next steps

Given the scale and importance of this project in Oxford and the considerable amount of work recommended in this letter, we strongly advise revisiting the timetable for this project and the proposed date of applying for planning in July in particular. We think that there is need for further testing and research that could significantly improve the scheme.

Therefore, we recommend a follow-up session to review the emerging design and offer further support, in relation to:

- + considerations of reuse and demolition
- + connections to the wider city, possibly presenting a broader strategy including Shoe Lane and North Bailey House, that may potentially offer another suitable option for the location of the hotel
- + more detailed landscape and facade proposals that explore how the scheme might work in practice to support both social animation and viability
- + the proposed roofscape in relation to the significant viewpoints
- + revisiting the distribution of uses, with the possibility of including or discounting residential units

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,

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Review process

Following a site visit, discussions with the design team and local authority and a pre-application review, the scheme was reviewed on 10 February 2020 by Jo van Heyningen, Maayan Ashkenazi, Alan Berman, Noel Farer, Barry Shaw, Jonathan Ward. 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.abe@designcouncil.org.uk.



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cc (by email only)

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