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Adam Smith
Lothbury Investment Management Limited
155 Bishopsgate
London
EC2M 3TQ

19 November 2020

Our reference: DCC/5215

Oxford Design Review Panel: Clarendon Centre – Returning Review

Dear Adam Smith,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on this proposal at the Design Review on 5 November 2020.

Summary

In the context of a changing retail environment and uncertainty about the nature of town centres, we are encouraged by the ambition and vision set out in this proposal and we stress the importance of this scheme to Oxford City Centre. The opportunity for this site is significant in the context of the surrounding townscape with all its idiosyncrasies, histories and characters that typify Oxford. We welcome the extensive townscape and architectural analysis which demonstrates the project team's commitment to a scheme of real quality.

As before, we support the commitment to making a street and courtyard that are open to the air, and we welcome the opportunity to advise on this scheme for a second time. We are pleased to see a number of positive design moves in the intervening time, including a strong landscape concept in the courtyard, greater permeability across the site, the commitment to 'sticky streets', and evolving architecture. We are also excited by the potential of the courtyard as a retail and leisure destination. However, the team's thorough analysis is not yet fully apparent in the design of the scheme. We recommend the design team use this analysis to develop a more confident and expressive architecture.

The principal concerns of Oxford City Council and Historic England pertain to the impact of this proposal on near and distant views. We share these concerns and believe that the design team will need to demonstrate a greater commitment to developing a varied, engaging, and characterful roofscape. In the absence of an improved roofscape, we advise the design team that the scale and quantum of accommodation may need to be reappraised.

Contributing to the character of a conservation area

We recognise the challenge of building within a conservation area and believe the design team appreciates the unique qualities of Oxford City Centre. The site's location thus offers a unique opportunity to contribute to and enhance this historic and well-loved townscape.

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The figure ground analysis shows how Oxford contains both formal and rigid quadrangles as well as the tight alleys and courtyards of the city itself. This quality has been picked up in analysis and has begun to inform a permeable site layout through narrow alleys and connections. We are concerned that the scale and dimensions of the alleys and courtyard are compromised by the bulk and scale of the proposal. We recommend that the design team explores this through detailed sections across the site.

The site is adjacent to many listed buildings. We strongly recommend the design team set the aspiration for this project to be a listed building of the future. To achieve this, the design team needs to develop an architectural language that communicates where we are now as a city and society. As such the built form should respond to the age of pandemic and climate change. Ultimately, we encourage the design team to characterise this unique modernity without losing the qualities that make Oxford unique.

Street and Courtyard design and function

The courtyard space represents a unique opportunity to provide an attractive, enjoyable and characterful space to support Oxford's unique co-location of education, commerce and research. We believe the precedent images of Square Des Bouleaux are not an authentic comparison for an inner Oxford Courtyard space. Instead we recommend the design team look at the Novartis Campus in Basel and focus on the capacity for landscape design, street furniture and amenities to create a sociable, scholastic environment. We recommend the design team conceive of this scholastic environment as a place where researchers, students and staff can easily access and socialise with one another. This public space could find meaning through being designed to stimulate scientific discussion and innovation. We encourage you to facilitate neighbourliness, for example by introducing balconies that face each other over the street or the courtyard, and by allowing ground floor lab or office spaces to open out onto the public realm.

To achieve this sociable environment, we recommend the design team continue to explore the sticky streets concept and further interrogate how both the landscape design and building elevations can work together to encourage people to dwell and socialise. We also recommend the design team explore how changes in levels across the courtyard could demarcate some pocket spaces towards the edges.

We recommend the landscape design continues to take a prominent role in creating a sticky and social space. To help refine this design further, we recommend the following points of focus:

- Retain the use of water in the design and further explore how it can be used as an animated feature of the space
- Study the expected people flow through the courtyard and how people might engage with the landscape features as they move through the space
- Examine the optimal quantum of planting in this space but retain the current species in a continuous tree pit
- Locate furniture and functions based on sun paths and quality of environment and avoid using Frewin court for outdoor café space.

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We question whether this current proposed design inhibits flexibility in the function of the space. If the design team decides to continue with the current approach then we recommend it is deliberate, and aspires to creating a courtyard space that is a destination in its own right, rather than as a stage for a range of functions.

Roofscape – impact on views and from street level

We recognise the concerns of Oxford City Council and Historic England on how the height and massing of the proposal interrupts and changes the quality of long- and short-range views. We also understand the concern that the overall scale and bulk may be overbearing or dominant from street level. The use of setbacks is a reasonable approach to mitigate against sense of dominance from street level. However, in this instance, some of the setbacks are insufficiently wide to achieve the appearance of a lower and less bulky building. We recommend the design team consider how the nearby Town Hall uses parapets, pitched roofs and chimneys to achieve this trick of the eye despite being a building of comparable height and bulk.

The sense of an immediate and rectilinear form in the foreground of the view from Carfax Tower is a result of the massing and form of the building in contrast to the diverse roofscape surrounding the site which typifies much of Oxford. While we agree that the surrounding roofscape is not necessarily attractive, it does speak to the character of Oxford, as an ancient city that has been built on small sites incrementally over centuries integrating a variety of styles, logics and histories. Despite being on a larger site, we recommend the design team consider how this proposal can capture the architectural nuances and qualities of Oxford that projects a continuity of a very old city. This could be achieved through a layered approach to the roof with a greater variety of materials, scales and forms. It is worth considering placing smaller scale spaces, such as office or residential units, above the big scale functions, in order to allow for this variety.

There are many ways in which the architecture of the roofscape could be enhanced and we encourage the design team to explore further design iterations. However, while we recommend the design team explore these options for the roofscape, we advise that ultimately these alterations may still not be sufficient to address the impact of a larger building on this site. If the roofscape is not sufficiently improved, we advise that the scale of the building may also have to be lowered.

Roofscape function

The proposed roof gardens offer an interesting and different piece of public realm that is relatively rare in Oxford. However, the function of the roof as a series of enjoyable spaces is hindered by the fact that currently it is not possible to walk from one to another.

Furthermore, it is compromised by the bulk of the proposed plant. We recommend the design team work on improving the energy and water demands of the buildings so that the size of the plant can be reduced. We offer the following advice and potential options to achieve a smaller plant function:

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- Using shower heat recovery systems to reduce the hot water load on the student accommodation
- Adapting the heat pump heating system to distribute each element of the system across different floors rather than collecting it all on the roof
- Exploring options for natural ventilation to reduce the burden on mechanical systems which depend on plant on the roof
- Distributing the plant across the roof and breaking up the massing of the remaining plant to minimise the appearance of a large slab
- Integrating water retention and reuse into the landscaped spaces

Urban design

The introduction of new lanes, connections and the courtyard represents a great opportunity to support a viable and vibrant commercial offer. Good urban design will be fundamental to achieving an attractive offer for prospective tenants. As with delivering a concept of sticky streets, we recommend the design team look to replicate some of the attributes of the Covered Market such as narrow, active frontages and smaller, affordable units.

As such we recommend the applicant clarifies the commercial strategy for the ground floor units and ensures that the scale of spaces and uses, whilst being designed for a flexibility of use which will ensure the new Clarendon centre is viable in the coming decades, are decided in line with a clear design concept for how these units will function and appear at street level. We advise that the courtyard may only need one successful café or restaurant to act as a catalyst for placemaking and a stronger commercial offer for other units.

We recommend exploring the idea of a series of small units facing onto the south-north route, like an arcade, allowing an engaging and diverse group of retail and leisure uses within smaller units where visitors can slowly pass through, taking time to shop and dwell.

Finally, further thought on the night-time functions of the courtyard could be an exciting opportunity to further enhance the offer in this space and create exciting night-time space. To achieve, we recommend the design team develop an attractive lighting strategy as well as providing the right mix of uses.

Elevation treatments

We recognise the efforts made by the design team since the last review to incorporate some of the panel's recommendations to develop many of the facades. These are developing well but we believe some of the more prominent or challenging facades require further design work.

The design team have embraced the opportunity of retaining the existing Clarendon Building while still providing ground floor access into the site. We support this design move, particularly the addition of a light well into this access. However, the design team can be more ambitious with its adaptation to the existing structure and further refine the elevation on Cornmarket Street. The soffit height is currently too low, and the dimensions of the access route is not consistent with the glimpsed, vertical views between buildings that typify Oxford City Centre. We recommend the design team explore options for a narrower, double-height

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entrance through to the central square. An up lit, circadian lighting strategy could further improve this route. At ground level, we recommend the design team consider a more legible and bold design that defines a gateway or portal into the central square. We also recommend the façade at ground floor allow for diagonal views to this entrance to improve the legibility of the entrance to the courtyard.

Finally, we believe the elevations within the courtyard should echo the strong concept in the landscape design and explore using similar materials where appropriate. The ground-floor elevation within the courtyard could meld with the landscape to create a coherent and legible space for outdoor seating and amenity space.

Regarding the student accommodation, the design team should look for a more varied and modulated elevation, and we question the use of curtain walling here. We are concerned that the student block contains north or south-facing single aspect rooms, accessed from a central corridor. We think that this part of the project needs further design work in order to create a place that is nicer to live in, and has more character in its external expression. Student rooms are probably best served by opening windows, for ventilation, but also to allow for a feeling of connectivity.

Massing, scale and sunlight into the site

The site's location between Cornmarket Street and Queen Street presents an opportunity to provide enjoyable and convenient connections through Oxford City centre and support the work done thus far to achieve the right permeability of this site. Much of this and the success of the central square are dependent on users seeing and being drawn to an attractive and sunlit environment within the square. In this regard we believe the proposed massing and form of the buildings to the south prevent sufficient sunlight from entering into the space and Crown Inn Yard. We recommend the massing is analysed in detail to address such concerns and the design team explore creating an additional ground floor connection to Crown Inn Yard, below the office units. Furthermore, at present the loading yard receives more sunlight than other parts of the site. We recommend the design team consider how this attribute could be utilised, through providing windows onto this yard and/or relocating other functions here. Greater permeability, sunlight and high quality urban and landscape design could all define an attractive and comfortable space here that would allow visitors, office workers, students and research staff to dwell and use the adjacent shops, cafés and businesses.

Natural ventilation and openable windows

We recognise that the detail on ventilation is not yet developed. We recommend the design team achieve as much natural ventilation as possible across offices, R&D spaces, commercial units and student accommodation. We also recommend manual openable windows on external facing spaces, which are integrated with the façade treatment and could provide greater expression to the building elevation. Openable windows and balconies at upper floors and simple access to ground floor spaces could ensure that the development is resilient to COVID-19 and provides a healthier and more comfortable internal and external environment for its residents. The sound of activity in the central square could contribute to a busy and dynamic character and a desirable place.

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Sustainability

Detail on whole-life carbon use, biodiversity and efficient water use is currently lacking in the presentation of the proposal despite the inclusion of sustainability consultants in the design team. We recommend the design team look closely at the embodied carbon of proposed materials and examining where carbon-savings can be made through more sustainable choices. We also recommend explore the scope for modular and prefabricated construction techniques for the new buildings which can shorten construction programmes. Ultimately, we expect this development to be net zero carbon in use and the embodied carbon in construction to be offset during the lifetime of 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 contact us.

Yours sincerely,



Theo Harrison

Design Council Programme Manager
Email: theo.harrison@designcouncil.org.uk
Tel: +44(0)20 7420 5264

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 5 November 2020 July 2019 by Joanna van Heyningen, Jonathan Ward, Deborah Nagan, Alan Berman Maayan Ashkenazi, Barry Shaw. 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 email only)

Attendees

Adam Smith	Lothbury IM
George Norton	Lothbury IM
Simon Radford	Lothbury IM
Felicity Byrne	Oxford City Council
Amy Ridding	Oxford City Council
Huw Mellor	Carter Jonas
Justin Ziegler	Marchini Curran Associates
Nick Marchini	Marchini Curran Associates
Nicholas Worlledge	Worlledge Associates
Noel Farrer	Farrer Huxley
Melissa Alagna	Farrer Huxley
Karolina Moch	Farrer Huxley
Rodrigo Garcia	Hoare Lea

Design Council Eagle House, 161 City Rd,
Hoxton, London EC1V 1NR United Kingdom
Tel +44(0)20 7420 5200
info@designcouncil.org.uk
www.designcouncil.org.uk @designcouncil



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Rachel Fletcher	Historic England
Luciana Gallo	Historic England
Jade Huang	Design South East

Design Council

Theo Harrison	Design Council
Gyorgyi Galik	Design Council

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