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Appendix 2a

17 August 2020

Our reference: DC5303

Oxford City Council: Thornhill Park

Dear Rafi Wechsler,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) with the opportunity to advise on this proposal at the ODRP workshop on 30 July 2020. We thank the design team for the comprehensive virtual site visit and presentation of this scheme. This letter summarises the recommendations made by the panel on the day.

Context

Thornhill Park is a development site on the outskirts of Oxford. The Oxford Local Development Plan 2036 designates this site for a housing-led development to meet significant local housing demand. The development site includes the former Neilson House office block and annex building, which have recently been converted by Shaviram into 134 flats through a separate scheme under Permitted Development. This review is for a proposed additional development of the wider site comprising of 442 homes, a hotel and employment use – primarily through an innovation centre. We note that while this development is being considered separately from the completed permitted development scheme, the two schemes will share infrastructure and common amenity spaces. There are protected mature trees on the site, predominantly around the perimeter of the site, with some in prominent central areas. We understand site management and maintenance of the site overall is likely to be achieved by the owner of both sites.

Summary

The design team presented a bold vision for a landscape-led development at this site and we feel this ambition is well placed in this unique location at the boundary of sub-urban and rural areas, and agricultural land use. We welcome the proposals to deliver housing and employment uses on this site. However, we believe that currently the proposal does not yet find the right balance between:

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- + **Height and density** – the proposed buildings across the site appear to be at least two storeys too tall. We recommend exploring changes to the layout of buildings within the site to accommodate the quantum of development while better reflecting the low-rise character of this area.
- + **Landscape ambition and the approach to open space** – The aim to ‘bring back the forest’ through landscaping is an appropriate ambition for this location on the very edge of the city. However, the movement of vehicles and extensive space for parking severely undermine the ambition for a green and pedestrian friendly environment. We recommend creating a clear hierarchy of spaces within the landscape approach, simplifying road and pedestrian routes, and limiting space given to vehicular traffic.
- + **Sustainability, net zero carbon and issues arising from the coronavirus pandemic, such as the quality of open space** – We believe this important and ambitious scheme on the edge of the city needs to demonstrate a commitment to sustainability. Environmental, ecological, and social sustainable sustainability should lead the design development to ensure this scheme’s success and longevity for its residents, the City of Oxford and the developer.

We would encourage the client and design team to take a step back at this stage to reconsider the approach to the scheme and site layout as follows.

Delivering on the Local Plan

We welcome this proposal which will bring significant housing and employment use to this formally vacant site, adjacent to one of Oxford’s Park and Ride locations. We feel the proposed scheme can deliver on the aims of the Oxford Local Plan 2036 whilst creating a vibrant and exciting new community.

- + **Housing** – The priority of this scheme should be in delivering on ambitions of the Oxford Local Plan 2036 for minimum of 534 homes on the Thornhill Park development site. Including the 134 homes already constructed at Neilson House, this development would create a total of 576 homes. We think it may be possible that this quantum could be accommodated, but we would urge the applicant team not to compromise on the quality of internal and external living space, or on achieving a balance of unit types and sizes. Further design development may lead to a reconsideration of the quantum of development proposed.
- + **Innovation Centre** – The Local Plan also requires employment use, given the strategic location of the site. We believe the proposed innovation centre could be a positive asset, bringing quality jobs. We also welcome the retention of the lodge building for this use; although not locally listed, it does hold heritage value.
- + **Hotel** – In principle, we feel this is an appropriate location for a hotel. In addition to easing demand for short-term accommodation in Oxford, a hotel will attract

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people to the site, helping to activate the space and increase the viability of commercial and ground floor amenity spaces - which residents can also enjoy.

Site Layout and Buildings

- + **Height** – We believe seven storey buildings to be too tall for this site. Buildings in neighbouring areas are typically low-rise residential with maximum heights of five storeys, for example in Barton. The relationship between this scheme and neighbouring sites must be shown in sectional drawings.
- + **Site access** – We support the re-location of the site entrance to the west of the existing access; this will create a more direct route into the site.
- + **Red line Boundary** – We feel strongly that this scheme cannot be considered in isolation from the re-development of Neilson House. They share common infrastructure, access, and amenity. We recommend that the layout should be explored as a masterplan for the whole site, including the parking and public spaces around Neilston House.
- + **Public Square** – Further work is needed to highlight and improve the public square as the heart of this site. The current site layout and placement of buildings surrounding the square do not yet create this focus. The edges to the square also appear undefined. As all traffic entering the site passes through the square there is the potential for conflict with pedestrians here. Further work is required to define the route and address priority, speed, and visibility to ensure this area can be enjoyed safely.
- + **Vehicle Routes** – The current vehicular route through the site is convoluted, requires a substantial amount of land and results in a significant amount of roadway. Splitting traffic to the eastern and western side of the site could help to limit the impact of vehicles and hard landscaping on this new neighbourhood.
- + **Pedestrian routes** – With the main site entrance from a busy trunk road, secondary pedestrian/cycling entrances will be critical to ensure residents can comfortably access other local amenities, and people from nearby areas can benefit from the amenities on this site. We recognise that the connections inherited are not ideal and we encourage you to make the most of these and develop a strong through route on the site from Ringhurst to the Park and Ride. This may also mean reducing the footprint and/or creating connections between some sizeable buildings, such as the long run of terraced housing to the west of the site.
- + **Wider strategic connections** – This site offers great connections and we advise the developer to engage with the city and county councils on any opportunities to further improve accessibility. There is potential to reduce speeds on the A40 to a one more appropriate to a residential area. Reconfiguration of the A40 could also provide a better pedestrian and cycling environment.

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Landscape and public realm

- + **Car Parking** – The current approach to parking does not reflect the landscape and ecology vision of this scheme or the excellent transport links available from this site. Given the adjacent Park and Ride, this is an ideal location to provide only very limited private parking on the site and to create a low traffic community. We recommend exploring options for car-sharing clubs, electric car charging, and cycle hubs. We also advise the applicant team (with the Oxford City Council) to open a dialogue with stakeholders on the potential access the park and ride facilities during quieter hours.
- + **Car Free** – In addition to the above, we recommend you consider the possibility of the southern part of this site becoming car free. Removing road infrastructure from this area would open additional space for development and landscaping, contributing towards the ambition for forest living.
- + **Hierarchy of public spaces** – We encourage the design team to be bolder in their approach to developing character areas and focal points, with wider variety in the planting, as well as in the style and alignment of buildings. In particular, we feel the public square would benefit from further definition, particularly at its edges. The surrounding buildings do not create a well-defined space, and the landscape approach here is not yet visibly distinct from the connecting Forest Boulevard.
- + **Seasonality** - The planting approach requires careful consideration to ensure that outdoor spaces are attractive and usable throughout the year and over time as they mature. Visualising the landscape proposals in different conditions will help to understand how they will be experienced.
- + **Species** - We recommend further analysis of the plant and tree species being considered for the site. We do not recommend birch trees for residential developments due to the amount of pollen they produce which can heighten allergies. Pine trees can be prone to losing their branches meaning their use in proximity to buildings should be considered carefully.
- + **Productive Landscapes** – We would encourage proposals for productive landscapes which are functional as well as decorative. For example, growing spaces or allotments could complement the proposed community spaces. This can also be a good way to encourage residents to take ownership of the landscape.

Social and Environmental Sustainability

- + **Microclimates** – We think that the proposed height and proximity of some buildings will have a negative impact on public spaces, with the potential for wind tunnels, echoing noises, and overshadowing. We advise undertaking shadow studies and further analysis to understand where height can be accommodated.
- + **Housing** – We welcome the inclusion of 50% affordable housing in this scheme and encourage you to ensure that these are high quality homes. At this early

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stage in its development, we were not shown plans of the proposed buildings, but it was confirmed to us that it was your intention that the blocks of flats should have double loaded central corridors. We ask that you reconsider this approach, and we are particularly concerned that almost half of the homes will be single aspect, which, in our view, will provide a poor quality of life for those who live here. We recommend continuing to develop the site layout and building design to help increase the quality of internal and external spaces, specifically providing more dual aspect homes.

- + **Roof spaces** – we encourage you to utilise the many roof spaces for environmental purposes and to further enhance biodiversity. Given the proposed building heights roof amenity spaces may also afford excellent views to both the countryside and the city.
- + **Sustainable Urban Drainage** – We welcome the analysis undertaken into the potential for SUDs on this site. We would encourage developing drainage plans alongside the site layout to allow appropriate space for these systems. SUDs and their attenuation ponds can be unsightly and may have an unpleasant smell. We therefore advise exploring further where and how SUDs can be embedded within the site plan.

Management and Servicing

- + **Rental Model** – Having a single developer overseeing the management of the site and a 100% rental model offers opportunities to shape and adapt the offer of management services. As this scheme is hoping to attract long term rental tenants we encourage the client to explore the management services offered by other similar schemes, and to consider how tenancy agreements can positively encourage people to make this their long-term home.
- + **Servicing** – We suggest thinking holistically about how to meet demand for external servicing of this site. A single drop-off point for deliveries would be beneficial as it would limit vehicle movements through the site, with residents benefiting from not having to be at home when deliveries are made. Communal bin stores for houses, in addition to flats, would be beneficial as it can reduce clutter outside homes. We recommend locating bin stores, within easy access of homes, to allow ease of servicing and limited movement through the site.
- + **Maintaining Public Spaces** – The cost of upkeep of such extensive public realm and landscaping is likely to be significant and requires further consideration so that the high management costs are not passed to the residents. We suggest adapting the balance of public and private open space so that residents are provided with more private garden space which they will manage independently. In addition, informal ways to encourage the community to manage open space, such as growing areas, can help to reduce maintenance costs in the long term.



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Architecture

Work has gone into the local character study, but at this early stage this is yet to show in the visualisations. Currently the initial approach to building design in the visualisations does not reflect or complement the special character of the local area. We suggest exploring whether some parts of the site can be designed by one or more different architects, within the discipline of the masterplan, in order to achieve architectural variety in a natural way. This has been very successfully done elsewhere, for example at Accordia in Cambridge.

Thank you for consulting us and please keep us informed of the progress of the scheme. If there is any point in this letter which requires clarification, please contact us.

Yours sincerely

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Project Manager

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Review process

Following a virtual site visit, (and) discussions with the design team and local authority, the scheme was reviewed on 30 July 2020 by Jo van Heyningen (Chair), Jessica Bryne-Daniel, Martin Stockley and Mark Swenarton. 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

Chris Wyman	Shaviram
Dominic Chapman	JTP
Doris Chan	JTP
Liz Liddell-Grainger	JTP
Chara Iacovidou	JTP
Roger Smith	Savills
Ben East	Cole Easdon
Nisha Parajuli	Cole Easdon
Phil Smith	BMD
Oliva Guindon	Greenage
Nadia Robinson	Oxford City Council
Rosa Appleby-Alis	Oxford City Council
Victoria Lee	Design Council
Ross Crawford	Design Council