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Appendix 2b

Rafi Wechsler
Shaviram
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Farley Court
Allsop Place
London
NW1 5LG

17 December 2020

Our reference: DC5379

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 Design Review on 03 December 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. The Design Review and our advice follow from a previous Design Workshop, held on on 30 July 2020

Scheme 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 Nielsen House office block and annexe building, which have been converted by Shaviram into 134 flats through a separate scheme under Permitted Development.

This review focuses on the proposed development of the wider site comprising of 402 homes, a hotel, and an innovation centre. We note that while this development is being considered separately from the completed permitted development scheme, the two will share infrastructure and amenity spaces.

Summary

There has been a great deal of progress from the previous workshop, and it appears that this scheme is moving in the right direction. There is now a better balance in height and density on the site, and the site layout and landscape proposals have developed. However, there are some areas where some further improvement and design work are needed.



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To support the project team in moving forward in developing the detailed design of this site, we offer the following strategic advice:

- **To prioritise the experience and well-being of residents and to design for a community.** With the potential for over 1000 residents on this site, the community who live here need to feel they have spaces within the landscape, and community facilities to call their own. Consider this place from the perspective of the people who will live there, and let this perspective and experience lead the design process.
- **To be bold in delivering on the landscape, environmental and sustainability ambitions.** Build upon the existing qualities of the landscape and demonstrate how this development is forward-thinking and ambitious in its aim significantly to increase the tree planting this area. Put social and environmental sustainability at the heart of every decision, as you continue to explore ways to integrate the landscape and architecture of the buildings.
- **To deliver quality housing to meet the ambitions of the Local Development Plan.** This site is an important site for housing in Oxford, and it will require density. We encourage you to make the most of this. To attract people to choose to live here, the place and the homes must be something they feel genuinely invested in.

Height & Density

Oxford's ambition for this development site to deliver a significant number of new homes for the city means that this will be a high-density development. The buildings will be highly visible, and we believe the new development is not something to hide; rather, it should be celebrated through exemplary design.

The wireframe drawings presented were helpful to understand the potential impact of these buildings from different viewpoints. Overall, we believe the distribution of building heights across the site appears to better relate to the surrounding context, with the most significant buildings concentrated to the centre of the site.

The buildings to the north-west of the site, near to the neighbouring low-rise housing at Risinghurst (presented in viewpoint 5), appear to dominate the skyline from these existing streets. We recommend exploring further design iterations to reduce the building mass, soften the building edge and provide screening towards this sensitive boundary.

Access, Parking & Transport

We feel that the proposed changes to traffic routes through the site, namely splitting residential traffic east/west when coming into the site, is a positive move. This approach will limit the numbers of cars crossing the Village Green, and will allow the Woodland Walk to be car-free apart from emergency access. This new approach goes some way towards prioritising pedestrians in these key public realm areas. However, to be successful, there must be clarity on how this traffic is managed on site, to ensure drivers



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are clear on where to go when arriving. There must be clear wayfinding to support navigation and an understanding of how general traffic will be blocked from crossing the woodland walk. This route entails the majority of cars travelling through the part of the site that has already been developed and will involve changes to the existing car-parking provision, which should be demonstrated clearly in the proposals.

Parking still appears as a dominant feature within the site layout, and we would hope to see this reduced further. While car ownership is anticipated to drop in the future, we recognise that there is currently an expectation for the provision of parking spaces. We encourage the project team to future-proof the development and demonstrate how Thornhill Park will encourage more of its residents to adopt sustainable modes of travel, and that the scheme supports the UK's current climate targets. In addition to showing car parking within the plans, we would like to see how other, active, public and shared travel options are not only accommodated but lead the design and create better connectivity to and across the site. Easy access to car clubs, storage for electric bikes and e-scooters will be important considerations for residents choosing to invest their lives in this place.

This development will change the character of this part of Oxford from suburban low-rise to a more urban and densely populated suburb. This change should raise many questions for both Oxford City Council and Oxford County Council, about how they plan for and deliver services in this area. We encourage both authorities to work with the developer to consider a holistic approach, particularly towards current expectations and assumptions around the necessity of parking. This joint approach will ensure that this site, and the area as a whole, are well connected and flexible to future behavioural and technological changes.

Landscape

Overall, the landscape concept has been strengthened, but we believe there is still work to be done. The design team should imagine how they would approach the site if it were already wild and forested. In this scenario, every cut of the ground would cause damage and impair the quality of place, and the landscape would lead the design. We advise prioritising the existing features of the landscape, including planting, SUDs, and drainage ditches. We recommend the planting of native species to enhance this approach. And we advise that future maintenance of the landscape over the long term should be a priority.

- Village Green

The Village Green character area does not yet appear to be the centrepiece of the scheme. This green space should be what attracts residents to congregate and where they want to spend their time outdoors. Currently, it is a car-led design, not distinct from the Woodland Walk, and it is undermined by the car parking to the east adjacent to Marley House. This space requires considerable development to



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make it feel like an enclosed, designed and purposeful space in which people want to linger.

- Woodland Walk

We support the vision for a woodland trail but feel that clear and direct paths routes are needed. Softer paving materials can designate a change from the urban framework to more wandering nature trails, and we also suggest that meandering paths can be more intriguing when they are allowed to be formed naturally within the landscape. Consider the materiality of footpaths and develop a pallet which responds to the textures and colours of the buildings the footpaths serve.

- Nature Play Trail

While we welcome retaining this existing through path as a nature trail, we suggest spreading the opportunity to play throughout the site. The current location of play facilities near to the SUDs provisions may not be the most desirable location, and parents may not feel safe allowing their children to play independently here. Having all the play space condensed to the eastern edge of the site also limits the opportunity of playing whilst passing by. The Woodland Walk may better support this aspiration.

Buildings & Architecture

The architectural approach appears to be moving in the right direction, and we welcome the emerging building typologies and approach to materiality.

- Innovation Centre

The innovation centre will be the focal point announcing arrival at Thornhill Park, and we believe this building should appear in contrast to the architecture of the rest of the scheme. It may be possible to build taller here, up to 5 floors, to create a feature building. We believe there is an opportunity to separate the innovation centre from the existing lodge building, which would allow more freedom to develop something unique here. The lodge building, if separate from the innovation centre, could become a space for the community.

- Mansion Houses

As the demand for density in Oxford increases, we expect to see more of this type of building. This is an opportunity to set a precedent for how a mansion typology should look within the Oxford character. Look at existing buildings such as the 5-storey Randolph Hotel for reference. The current relationship between the building and courtyard is confused. As the primary access, the courtyard will be perceived as the building front, not the back. Currently, the balconies overlook a courtyard that is predominantly parking and will not be desirable. We suggest that parking in these courtyards should be limited so that the majority can become a landscaped place for residents to sit or for children to play.

- Hotel

The reduction in the scale of the hotel appears appropriate for this location. We encourage you to develop the architectural response to the hotel alongside the residential development.



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- Pavilions
The pavilion buildings would benefit from having defined building fronts and backs, to clarify for residents the primary entrances.
- Balconies and private amenity space
We recognise the importance of private amenity space for residents and welcome that all homes have access to a balcony, terrace, or garden space. Balconies are an important extension of people's homes, and in-set balconies, in particular, are more functional spaces for residents, acting as additional outdoor rooms. We encourage thinking about balconies as both part of the home and part of the landscape, with the possible inclusion of built-in planters.

People & Community

With the potential of over 1000 residents living between this scheme and the existing permitted development apartments at Nielsen House, we believe residents should have a place they can call their own. We are not convinced that providing community space through the for-profit hotel is the right approach and suggest these facilities should be separate. We think it is essential that space for the use of residents be provided. This could be as part of the innovation centre if a good relationship with the Village Green can be established.

A series of diverse community landscape spaces should also have a prominent role within the site layout. The proposed community growing areas appear small and are located away from busy public areas. We advise re-locating these where people can see the activity happening, which will help further encourage the community to take ownership of these spaces. The village green could be an appropriate location.

Internal Layout

Unfortunately, internal layouts were not presented to the panel in enough detail to comment on the quality of the homes or the relationship between homes and their surroundings. The panel offers the following comments:

- We welcome the reduction in the number of single-aspect homes and encourage you to continue to work towards reducing this number further. We also advise against south-facing single aspect homes, which are prone to overheating in summer, especially with rising temperatures due to global warming.
- We welcome the avoidance of double-loaded corridors in the mansion blocks.

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 03 December 2020 by Jo van Heyningen (Chair), Deborah Nagan, Martin Stockley and Mark Swenarton. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

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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.

Attendees

Chris Wyman	Shaviram
Keith Mapinger	Shaviram
Dominic Chapman	JTP
Doris Chan	JTP
Liz Liddell-Grainger	JTP
Lucy Beech	JTP
Roger Smith	Savills
Ben East	Cole Easdon
Phil Smith	BMD
Oliva Guindon	Greenage
Nadia Robinson	Oxford City Council
Rosa Appleby-Alis	Oxford City Council
Amanda Ford	Oxford City Council
Gyorgyi Galik	Design Council
Ross Crawford	Design Council

Observing

Jade Juang	Design South East
Sarah Brown	Design South East
Joanne Cave	Design South East