



Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Garden Building, Wolfson College

15th July 2022

Introduction

This report is a summary of the design review held on the 1st July 2022 following the presentation of the proposed scheme to the panel by the design team. The proposal is for the extension of Wolfson College to provide student accommodation. The masterplan for the site was presented to provide background, but it was not part of the design review.

The summary on the following page highlights the main items raised during the session. We then provide the key recommendations aimed at improving the design quality of the proposal. The detailed comments are presented under headings covering the main attributes of the scheme and we close with the details of the meeting (appendix A) and the scheme (appendix B).

Paragraph 133 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) states that *“local planning authorities should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These include workshops to engage the local community, design advice and review arrangements, and assessment frameworks such as Building for a Healthy Life⁵¹. These are of most benefit if used as early as possible in the evolution of schemes and are particularly important for significant projects such as large scale housing and mixed use developments. In assessing applications, planning authorities should have regard to the outcome from these processes, including any recommendations made by design review panels.”*

Summary

We welcome the opportunity to engage with Wolfson College in this exciting project. Wolfson College is an exceptional institution sitting in a spectacular site with great architectural history. The College is ambitious for this project, and it is therefore reasonable to expect the highest standard of design for the new buildings.

The project is promising, but a thorough understanding of the heritage – both in built and landscape terms – has not yet been demonstrated. The current articulation of the proposal does not refer to its context or to the unique landscape and architecture of Powell & Moya. These are gaps in the design process that need to be filled before the details are fixed.

We look forward to engaging with the project further once our recommendations have been worked through and the design progressed.

Key recommendations

1. Develop a cohesive and holistic sustainability strategy for the proposed building and set clear long-term targets.
2. Carry out a Landscape and Visual Impact Analysis to inform the location and design of the proposed building and the relocation of the spire.
3. Make a heritage assessment of the site and its buildings, using the procedure established by Historic England. Use this analysis of the objective and relative significance of the historic features to inform the project's massing, siting and architectural expression.
4. Develop a long-term strategy for car parking and ensure the interventions could be phased out if the need for car parking diminishes in the future.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Sustainable design
 - 1.1. The emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was discussed at this review. However, no clear targets have yet been set, especially for the proposed student accommodation building. The site-wide strategy is progressing and is promising, but specific measures for the new building are required.
 - 1.2. The proposal must include a clear strategy for minimising embodied, operational, and transport-related carbon emissions, and optimise the use of renewable energy to align with the Government's emerging zero carbon policy. This should include measurable targets informed by respected calculation methods. The strategy should also address water use, biodiversity net gain, and waste reduction in construction and operation through circular economic principles.
 - 1.3. Alongside environmental sustainability, social sustainability needs to be embedded into the design. Health and wellbeing as well as wider and immediate connectivity need to be reflected in the design process. The wider opportunities for creating social value and providing community benefits offered by the construction and operation of the project should also be addressed. The College should establish targets for reducing the need for offsetting through the regenerative nature of the campus.
 - 1.4. In terms of the detail, the option of providing waste water heat recovery should be explored, to significantly reduce the domestic hot water demand, for example through shower waste water recovery. Storing hot water underneath the kitchen could also be explored. These measures could reduce the size of the heat pumps and could also reduce the size of the plantrooms and the plant that needs to be on the roof. This will free up space for other functions at roof level and in the building.
 - 1.5. Regarding sustainable drainage systems (SuDS), attenuation on the roof should be explored to reduce excavated SuDS solutions, and surface features that reduce the amenity of the grounds. We encourage the team to look into SuDS in detail and ensure any interventions at roof level are compatible with solar panels.
 - 1.6. Feeding rain water to the larger trees would be a positive move. The climate is likely to become drier, and therefore redirecting waste water would be beneficial for both the building and the trees, providing the waste water did not harbour any contaminants.

2. Design strategy

- 2.1. Wolfson College sits in a unique location in Oxford where academia and the natural landscape meet. This, and the culture of the College, were intrinsic to the design of the campus by Powell & Moya, that continues the English picturesque tradition (including accommodating accident and surprise), in its architecture and landscape.
- 2.2. A thorough analysis of how the original design evolved, how the landscape was shaped and what were the main elements of siting and allocation of uses is fundamental to the design strategy for the masterplan and the detailed design of the new student accommodation. It was clear at the review that the design team had a good understanding of these aspects. It will be helpful to see this articulated to an appropriate level of detail in the formal submission.
- 2.3. The historic significance of the site should be analysed objectively and presented in the form of a heritage assessment or a conservation plan. This will provide a firmer justification for the additional development and the potential implications.

3. Landscape strategy

- 3.1. The history of the site as a farm, then a villa, with extensive tree planting in the 1800s should inform the landscape strategy. It would be beneficial to understand the trees' age and species, and to unfold the story that the landscape tells about this unique place. This understanding should inform a wider masterplan.
- 3.2. Oxford has a longstanding tradition of gardens that offer high biodiversity, but also of parkland with soft landscaping. These elements need to be thoroughly surveyed and understood before any decisions are made about removing trees, particularly for future developments elsewhere on the site. The removal of the few identified trees and shrubs for this site is understood. It is worth exploring with the ground staff if the Parrotia could be reduced in size and relocated during the winter period.
- 3.3. Analysis of the current views into and out of the site, and from various passageways and walkways within the College that impact on the proposed site, would be very helpful for informing the location of new planting, the resitting of sculpture, the height of the new building, and the enhancement of the new building in its locality. We strongly recommend a Landscape Visual Impact Analysis is carried out to inform the design.
- 3.4. The different functions of the gardens which are used as retreats by the students, and the parkland, which is primarily a gathering space, need to be retained as part of the masterplan and this specific development. The paths and access points need to form part of a wider strategy that brings all elements together.

- 3.5. The relocation of the Merton spire should be informed by the analysis of the existing landscape. Opening up views towards the spire should not be at the expense of views towards the river and gathering areas. The fire engine path should also be considered before the new location of the spire is decided.
 - 3.6. In handling the area between the new building and the existing Block B, care should be taken to protect the verdant landscape rather than allowing it to become a plaza, which would undermine the feeling of a picturesque park. Thus a green sward of grass and clover might need to be reinforced with Golpla or similar to allow for fire vehicles.
 - 3.7. Allocating space for biodiversity on the roof is not essential for this site, given the extensive area on the ground, but may be considered as part of a green/blue roof solution, possibly with solar panels. This level, occupied by plant in the current proposal, has the potential to offer verdant amenity in the form of useable external space or living space, and we urge that these be considered. The analysis of views from a distance would be important regarding this possible development of the design.
4. Site layout and car parking
 - 4.1. The masterplan that has been prepared did not form part of the review, so the justification for, and the location of the proposed accommodation building, were not discussed in detail.
 - 4.2. The spaces between the existing buildings and the new block should be considered holistically. Block B was intentionally cranked in relation to the other blocks. The proposed building should not mimic but be informed by this relationship.
 - 4.3. The reprovision of some of the car parking lost to accommodate the new building should be informed by the aspirations of the College to discourage car journeys, and by a quantified analysis of the reasonable needs of students, staff and visitors. The needs of the 'less mobile' should be considered as well as those of blue badge holders which will need to be reflected in the surface choice of materials for ease of use. Less well used parking spaces could be green using Golpar or similar.
 - 4.4. A strategy that could eliminate car parking in the future and reclaim it as garden could be developed so that appropriate design elements are incorporated at this stage.
 - 4.5. Using the appropriate materials to give a greener feeling is essential to retain the parkland character of the site. Electric vehicle charging points should be added to accommodate current and future needs.

5. Architecture

- 5.1. The character of the existing campus derives from a picturesque aesthetic which allows for the easy combination of elements of different kinds. In comparison, the new block appears monolithic and uninflected in its massing with a relatively large footprint. Options should be explored, to find a better response to the existing buildings on the site.
- 5.2. The characteristics of the original architecture should be taken into consideration when designing the new building. The expressed frame, horizontal emphasis, repetition of façade elements, indirect and glimpsed views, modelling of the facades, uncluttered roof lines and use of top-floor setbacks, are all important in responding to and reinforcing the character of the campus.
- 5.3. There may be potential to build higher, possibly set back, and achieve a more efficient development if the design is informed by an appreciation of these features.
- 5.4. We were not convinced by the proportions of the proposed facades, in terms of the relationship of openings to solid surface, and the vertical emphasis of glazing. The horizontal dimension is dominant in the original buildings and should not be lost in the new block. The vertical emphasis of the windows in the current design should be rethought, and other options explored, for example lifting the cill level and continuing masonry beneath.
- 5.5. Full-height windows tend to display the clutter of daily life behind, particularly in student accommodation with limited internal space. The extent of glazed area, and its orientation, can necessitate supplementary cooling.
- 5.6. The choice of materials should be derived by the sustainability strategy. They should be easy to maintain and have a long life cycle. Subject to this, the proposal to use knapped flint as a facing material seems an appropriate choice.
- 5.7. The use of a single material might be more appropriate than using a decorative strip of slim white banding.
- 5.8. The roof should be decluttered and studies on how it looks from short and long views undertaken. The opportunity to make use of the roof area for activities or additional accommodation should be explored.

6. Internal layouts

- 6.1. We understood and appreciated the separation of the proposed building from Block B, but we felt that this could be much better exploited than it is by the proposed entrance sequence. The location of the plant space on the ground floor makes it more difficult to create a generous and welcoming entrance area.

- 6.2. Although new undergraduate student accommodation is often provided, as proposed here, in the form of a wide rectangular block with a double-loaded central corridor, we questioned whether other options, including that of single-loaded corridor, should be explored in this very special place, as it could offer higher quality accommodation for Wolfson's graduate students.

Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	1880/220701
Date	1 st July 2022
Meeting location	Wolfson College, University of Oxford, Linton Road, Oxford, OX2 6UD
Panel members attending	Joanna van Heyningen (chair), architecture and public realm Steven Bee, historic environment and urban design Mark Swenarton, historic environment and architecture Penny Wagner, landscape architecture and urban design Jonathan Ward, sustainability and building services engineering
Panel manager	Kiki Gkavogianni, Design South East
Presenting team	Jean Wang, Penoyre & Prasad Ian Goodfellow, Penoyre & Prasad Jonathan Cook, JCLA Tristan Couch, Skelly & Couch Built Environment Engineer Ellie Thomas, Max Fordham
Other attendees	Alan Berman, Honorary Fellow at Wolfson College Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council Gill Butter, Oxford City Council
Site visit	A site visit was conducted prior to the review.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this review was not restricted. The local planning authority has asked us to look at the following topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Site layout;• Car and cycle parking provision;• Architectural detailing.
Panel interests	No conflicts of interests.
Confidentiality	This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application. Full details on our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.

Appendix B: Scheme details

Name	Wolfson College
Site location	Wolfson College, University of Oxford, Linton Road, Oxford, OX2 6UD
Site details	The site comprises an existing ground level, hard surfaced and impermeable car park with provision for approximately 34 standard spaces plus 1 accessible space. Immediately west of the car park lies an area of lawn surrounded by landscaping which also forms part of the application site. The site sits within the wider Grade II listed Wolfson College campus which also falls within the North Oxford Victorian Suburb Conservation Area. The site lies wholly within flood zone 1 (lowest probability of flooding). The existing listed buildings at Wolfson, designed by architects Powell and Moya, occupy the majority of the campus with varying quad forms, responding to the riparian setting.
Proposal	The proposal is for a student accommodation building which would comprise approximately 1,700sq. m. over three storeys, providing 50 en-suite student rooms with kitchens, dining and social spaces on each floor. The existing carpark will be relocated to the western side of the site.
Planning stage	The scheme is at pre-application stage.
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	Local Plan Policy H8 permits new student accommodation on existing College campus sites where the use during university terms or semesters is to accommodate students being taught or conducting research at that site. In terms of the relocation of the car parking facility, used by staff and visitors, the City Council and Highways Authority's objective is to achieve a shift towards sustainable modes of travel and reduce air pollution in light of the climate crisis. As set out at policy M3, the parking requirements for all non-residential development will be determined in the light of the supporting Transport Assessment; the presumption will be that vehicle parking should be kept to the minimum necessary to ensure the successful functioning of the development.
Planning history	None.

This report is a synthesis of the panel's discussion during the review and does not relate to any discussions that may have taken place outside of this design review meeting. A draft report is reviewed by all panel members and the Chair ahead of issuing the final version, to ensure key points and the Panel's overarching recommendations are accurately reported.

The report does not minute the proceedings but aims to provide a summary of the panel's recommendations and guidance.

Confidentiality

If the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to those who attended the review meeting. There is no objection to the report being shared within the recipients' organisations provided that the content of the report is treated in the strictest confidence. Neither the content of the report, nor the report itself can be shared with anyone outside the recipients' organisations. Design South East reserves the right to make the content of this report known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed, pre-application reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application or public inquiry. Design South East also reserves the right to make this report available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please inform us.

If the scheme is the subject of a planning application the report will be made publicly available, and we expect the local authority to include it in the case documents.

Role of design review

This is the report of a design review panel, forum or workshop. Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of a number of considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions.

The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority. We will try to make sure that the panel are informed about the views of local residents and businesses to inform their understanding of the context of the proposal. However, design review is a separate process to community engagement and consultation.

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