



Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Trinity House, Oxford Business Park

24th June 2022

Introduction

This report is a summary of the design workshop held on the 9th June 2022 following the presentation of the proposed scheme to the panel by the design team. The proposal is for the redevelopment of Trinity House, which sits within the Oxford Business Park, to provide R&D and laboratory space.

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 the project at this early stage. There are two main challenges to the successful resolution of this proposal: firstly, the lack of an end user to inform the design, and secondly, the development of a masterplan for the entire business park which is outside the applicant's control and has not been made public yet.

We encourage the applicant to engage proactively with the masterplan team throughout its development, so that the design for the site is informed by that work and also informs the thinking behind the masterplan. This will help resolve some of the key issues, such as car parking and overall transport strategy, as well as sustainability targets.

The lack of an end user to inform the layout of the internal areas, fenestration, and massing creates confusion; this proposal is trying to respond to too many options, resulting in an undefinable character and a less than satisfactory outcome in the context of the Business Park.

We are looking forward to re-engaging with the project once our recommendations have been worked through and the design has progressed.

Key recommendations

1. Carry out a comprehensive contextual analysis to explore the existing and proposed character. Analyse the historic character of this place and its role within the wider city. The consultant landscape architects should undertake a landscape and visual impact assessment to help inform the design process.
2. Produce a detailed and robust sustainability strategy; this strategy should inform the key design decisions, such as the car and cycle parking provision and the creation of a basement.
3. Produce a thorough survey of the existing building, its structure and materials, to fully justify its demolition and scope the potential re-use of materials. The findings of this survey need to be reflected in the design of the new building.
4. Establish an architectural vision and narrative that bring together the context and setting, sustainability targets and historic uses, and with clear reference to the wider masterplan.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Sustainable design

- 1.1. The emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was not discussed in detail at this review. We applaud the aspiration for reaching BREEAM Outstanding and for using LETI guidance as a benchmark. Our guidance is that at a subsequent design review and at planning application stage the proposal must produce a clear strategy that details how the development will minimise 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 strategy should be tied to measurable targets and detailed modelling work 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.
- 1.2. The principle of demolishing the existing building is not fully justified, especially given the high sustainability targets. Surveys of the structure and materials should be undertaken to inform the decision for demolition, or preferably deconstruction to allow the parts to be recycled or reused. Different options of retrofit should be presented and the reasons for their rejection explained. The existing building could also form part of the new building, or its foundations re-used. There are several options that would reduce the whole-life carbon emissions of the project which must all be interrogated in detail.
- 1.3. Creating a basement level would contradict the sustainability aspirations because of the additional excavation required, spoil to be removed, excessive foundations needed and damage to ground/soils for adjacent planting. Therefore, we encourage the team to explore this further and carry out the relevant surveys and studies to make an informed decision.
- 1.4. The amount of car parking does not align with the sustainability aspirations and national shift towards active travel. A cohesive transport strategy is necessary which should form part of the masterplan for the Business Park. The history of the site, where all workers of the car plant used to cycle to work, could be an interesting starting point for the transport strategy.

2. Context and setting

- 2.1. The starting point for the design development should be the immediate surrounding context, existing and future. A thorough analysis, which includes the historic context of this particular part of Oxford, needs to be undertaken before the design progresses any further. The character of the Business Park itself should be analysed, which primarily consists of buildings sitting within landscaped plots and has a car-centric approach in its layout. These elements should be interrogated further to understand their historic role, current contributions and how the character can evolve in the future.
- 2.2. At the heart of this exercise is the masterplan for the wider area which will set the principles for future development, for example in terms of a transport strategy, building character and sustainability targets (including GI/ biodiversity). This masterplan is outside the applicant's control; therefore, we recommend that the local authority coordinates the discussions between key stakeholders and that the applicant team slows the pace of their design development to align with the development of the masterplan.
- 2.3. The layout of the Business Park is informed by buildings within the matured landscape and this relationship needs to be understood. We are unconvinced that the proposed building, which fully fills its plot pushing right to the boundaries, demonstrates sound consideration of its context or character. The building's height and mass currently appear over-scaled for the plot, and there is no sense of what impact this will have on the surroundings, including nearby residential properties. We recommend that the consultant landscape architects become more involved in the design process, specifically that they input into a landscape and visual impact analysis and a townscape analysis to establish the built capacity of this plot within its specific setting.

3. Architecture and internal layout

- 3.1. The design development gives a clear analysis of what the specification means in terms of massing. However, the lack of an end user is complicating matters as there is no brief to give this building a character and direction. Therefore, the proposal appears generic and noncommittal.
- 3.2. By introducing a brief over the specification, which does not reverse it but gives it a character, the building could emerge from a complex and sophisticated design exercise that understands context. For example, the brief could be to create an adaptable building that has a flexible structure to accommodate different end users. Decoupling the office from the laboratory space could provide additional flexibility and offer an interesting architectural approach.

- 3.3. The proposal needs to develop in three dimensions and in section, for example to look at different internal levels. Some of the issues mentioned above could be better resolved and an interesting character created by working in this way.
- 3.4. The elevational studies are promising, however glass should only be used when there is an explicit requirement for it, as heat losses are generally five to ten times worse through 'glazing' rather than 'wall'. In this instance, a holistic approach to reducing energy demand could also help to inform and enliven the architectural expression on the elevations.
- 3.5. In order to minimise solar gains and glare to the lab spaces, we recommend solar shading, especially from the high summer sun. The elevations could incorporate some form of intelligent solar shading which tracks the sun (feels quite appropriate for this building). Alternatively, it could be simple and fixed.

Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	1775/220609
Date	9 th June 2022
Meeting location	Carter Jonas, Mayfield House, 256 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 7DE
Panel members attending	Joanne Cave (Chair), urban design and planning Catherine Burd, architecture and historic environment Lindsey Wilkinson, landscape architecture and historic environment Martin Stockley, civil engineering and transport planning Wilf Meynell, architecture and sustainability
Panel manager	Kiki Gkavogianni, Design South East
Presenting team	Elias Niazi, David Roden Architects
Other attendees	David Roden, David Roden Architects Harri Aston, DP9 LTD Thomas Renn, Breakthrough Properties Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council Rosa Appleby-Alis, Oxford City Council
Site visit	A site visit was conducted prior to the workshop. All panel members attended.
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, height and massing;• Car parking provision.
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	Trinity House, Oxford Business Park
Site location	Trinity House, John Smith Drive OX4 2RZ
Site details	<p>The site comprises a rectangular parcel of land at the junction of Garsington Road and John Smith Drive, accessed off John Smith Drive within the Oxford Business Park. Built development on site is currently in the form of a three-storey office building with dual pitched roof. Surface parking extends over the majority of the site to the north-east of the building, interspersed with soft landscaping. The site is bounded by trees and hedges.</p> <p>Surrounding built form comprises two- and three-storey buildings in a range of employment uses. Residential dwellings fronting Phipps Road lie approximately 90m to the west of the site.</p>
Proposal	Demolition and redevelopment of the site to provide a six-storey building with mechanical plant mounted on the roof top. The building would provide R&D lab and office space. This development is speculative, with no tenant on board at this time.
Planning stage	The scheme is at pre-application stage.
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	The site is a Category 1 employment site and as such, under the requirements of policy E1 of the Oxford Local Plan 2036, it is protected for employment floorspace only. Planning permission will be granted for the intensification, modernisation and regeneration for employment purposes of any employment site if it can be demonstrated that the development makes the best and most efficient use of land and does not cause unacceptable environmental impacts and effects.
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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