



Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Trinity House, Oxford Business Park

15th August 2022

Introduction

This report is a summary of the design workshop held on the 4th August 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. This was the second review of the same proposal.

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.”*

Key recommendations from previous review 26/6/22

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.

Summary

We welcome the opportunity to re-engage with the project; unfortunately several aspects of the proposal are still speculative and cannot be discussed in detail even though the team is intending to submit a planning application shortly. We are not convinced that the sustainability targets can be achieved if the proposed design does not change and develop significantly.

Even though the elevational treatment has improved, the proposal is similar to that which was reviewed in June and many of our comments have not been taken into consideration. The massing, siting and wider movements are problematic and cannot be resolved in isolation from the sustainability and energy strategy and the wider masterplan for the business park.

Key recommendations

1. Develop a realistic sustainability and energy strategy that informs the design and takes into consideration the carbon analysis of the basement provision in addition to the demolition of the existing building.
2. Amend the elevational treatment to provide the necessary number of solar panels facing south west and the appropriate horizontal shading on the southern/south-western elevations.
3. Analyse the movement patterns around the site and develop a wider movement plan, prioritising pedestrian and cycling modes, to inform the location of the entrances to the building.
4. Explore in detail the maintenance and watering strategy for the green wall; ensure that the elevational treatment behind it is articulated, should the green wall fail.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Sustainable design
 - 1.1. The proposal needs to be leading the way in terms of sustainability and zero carbon given the fact that it is the first new development in the business park, but also because of its use as an innovative R&D/laboratory space. The targets as set out in the presentation are aspirational and a good starting point; however, we are unconvinced that the siting, massing, orientation, demolition and provision of basement will help achieve them.
 - 1.2. A full carbon analysis of the demolition needs to be undertaken to provide realistic numbers on the reuse of a portion of the materials of the existing building.
 - 1.3. The basement provision was discussed in detail at the previous review. Even though the applicant has provided additional information on the other functions that the basement will and could serve in the future, we strongly encourage further testing prior to the design being finalised. Detailed structural engineering should happen at this stage and we advise that thorough ground investigation works are carried out on the site itself, rather than making assumptions based on existing bore holes over 100m away. We cannot see how the engineering team can prove that the proposed basement is 'more sustainable' than no basement. We recommend that an independent engineer assesses this aspect of the proposal when the time comes.
 - 1.4. The R&D and laboratory use will generate a substantial energy demand and will need large quantities of air and water to service the building. These should be tackled as part of the design development, for example by utilising the sawtooth roof for electricity generation through solar panels. Overheating should also be tackled by the provision of appropriate shading panels, especially horizontal ones on the southern elevations. These points should be looked at in detail at this stage as they are likely to impact on the elevational treatment and potentially the site and floorplan layout. This also provides opportunities for creativity within the elevational treatment, a reduction in cooling demand and the potential for additional electricity generation.
 - 1.5. Alternative ways of generating heat should be explored. The basement structure could be used to run pipes through the piles to connect to the ground. This is subject to the appropriate ground conditions, which should be surveyed as soon as possible.
 - 1.6. The whole life carbon of the building should be explored and predicted in detail. In order to achieve a fully sustainable outcome, this building should not become obsolete in just a few decades (like the existing building on the site) and should be adaptable to accommodate other uses in the future.

2. Movement, site layout and entrances
 - 2.1. At the previous review, we mentioned the need to look at the wider connectivity, both existing and future. The new train station that will open in 2025 will change the way that people reach this site and the business park. Even though the wider movement and connectivity are primarily a focus for the masterplan, they need to be considered as part of this proposal because it will be the first plot to come forward.
 - 2.2. The analysis of the movement patterns of the future users should guide the siting of the building within the plot and the location of the entrances. The distances between the building and the boundaries are restricted and do not reflect the potential different entrance points. A holistic approach should be taken to understand these relationships and design the site layout accordingly.
 - 2.3. Only one entrance is proposed, which might not conveniently serve the pedestrians and cyclists coming from the station. We encourage the team to explore the option of multiple entrances that prioritise active travel and serve people arriving from different directions.
 - 2.4. Active travel should form part of the sustainability strategy. Pedestrians and cyclists should be encouraged to use these modes to reach the site. We support the segregated entrance for the cyclists and the proximity of the showers to the cycle parking. The option of short-stay outdoor cycle parking should also be offered, including for visitors and couriers who arrive by cycle; these facilities should be easily visible and close to the main entrance.
 - 2.5. The longer term function of the basement needs to be included in the sustainability targets. The car parking might become obsolete, and as such, a strategy to use this space for other activities should be established. The strategy should include monitoring and establish 'triggers' for when car parking should be converted to other uses. We encourage the applicant to look beyond current guidance on electric cars and consider a future where motorised vehicles are not the primary method of transport.
 - 2.6. Consideration should be given to external seating provision; business parks rarely have benches where people can rest for a short period. Seating areas and benches can be accommodated on the site not only for visitors but also for the users of the building to have another option of an outdoor area.

3. Landscape strategy

- 3.1. The Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment (TVIA) should be used to inform the design, especially the height and massing. Even though the assessment is still work in progress, there is no indication in the design that its results have impacted how the building is formed and articulated. A full TVIA should be submitted as part of the planning application.
- 3.2. The positioning of the building is likely to overshadow the trees to the north, the landscaped terraces are facing primarily north and there is inadequate space left around the building. The landscape strategy should form part of the early design development, along with the wider movement strategy and sustainability aspirations, as mentioned above.
- 3.3. We are unconvinced by the green wall; the precedents shown are of car parks where green walls are mechanisms to hide what lies behind. This principle is conflicting with the use of the building which should be a celebrated marker building within the business park.
- 3.4. The maintenance and watering of the green wall could prove problematic, especially given the likelihood of frequent heatwaves and droughts due to climate change. Additionally, the required infrastructure to keep the plants vertical will probably outweigh the benefits. As a result, we consider the green wall to be a substantial risk in terms of reaching the sustainability targets and of providing an articulated building. Further analysis should be undertaken, and a clear and robust justification should form part of the planning application. If the green wall is eventually included, access for maintenance should be considered and form part of the building maintenance strategy.

4. Elevational treatment

- 4.1. The articulation of the elevations and roof profile has improved since the previous review. The sawtooth roof specifically is a creative way of providing solar panels that do not negatively impact the design and at the same time face the right direction (southwest) for maximum solar gain. The relationship between the glazing and the texture of the materials is promising.
- 4.2. The elevation behind the green wall should be articulated to the same extent as the rest, should the green wall fail.

Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	1862/220804
Date	4 th August 2022
Meeting location	Online (Zoom)
Panel members attending	Joanne Cave (Chair), urban design and planning Paul Appleby, energy and environmental engineering specialist Lindsey Wilkinson, landscape architecture and historic environment Camilla Ween, sustainable transport and development Wilf Meynell, architecture and sustainability
Panel manager	Kiki Gkavogianni, Design South East
Presenting team	Elias Niazi, David Roden Architects Eddie Jump, Thornton Tomasetti Jake Williams, Buro Happold Mike Martin, Turkington Martin Thomas Renn, Breakthrough Properties
Other attendees	David Roden, David Roden Architects Harri Aston, DP9 LTD Adam Wlodarczyk-Black, Breakthrough Properties Claudio Ricci, Velocity Transport Gabriela Amaya, KJ Tait Kevin Murphy, KMHeritage Felicity Byrne, Oxford City Council Tahima Rahman, Oxford Design Review Panel mentee (observing)
Site visit	A site visit was conducted at the previous sessions. A site refresher was carried out 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 and scale; • Proximity to boundaries; • Maintenance and viability of green walls; • Basement parking.
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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