



Oxford Design
Review Panel



Design
South East

Appendix 2

Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

135-137 Botley Road

27th July 2022

Introduction

This report is a summary of the design review held on the 14th July 2022 following the presentation of the proposed scheme to the panel. The proposal is for the redevelopment of the current DFS building to provide laboratory and R&D 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 Life. 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

This site is the first part of the regeneration of the Botley Road Retail Park and the vision for this new neighbourhood of Oxford should link to the heritage and character of the city and the immediate context. However, the proposal misses the opportunities to embed the building into the urban grain and to set a robust vision for a new innovation district. All plots of the retail park should come forward in a holistic way to create a sustainable new neighbourhood.

The building itself appears monolithic and the architecture needs further refinement to reduce its impact to adjoining properties and the wider setting. Giving back to the local community should form part of the brief and should inform the way the ground floor uses and movement are arranged on site.

Key recommendations

The local authority should:

1. Develop a vision and masterplan for the retail park and conduct thorough consultation with the local community.

The applicant team should:

1. Revisit and review the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment and view cone policy; this building should not add to the Oxford skyline.
2. Reconsider the scale and massing as part of a holistic strategy for movement, townscape, impact on nearby properties and architectural treatment.
3. Redesign the Botley Road frontage and the north-eastern corner to create a sense of arrival that prioritises cyclists and pedestrians. Open up the café more to the community.
4. Encourage active travel by locating the cycling facilities at the front of the building and reducing the car parking provision.
5. Develop the architecture and elevational treatment further to reflect the innovation that is happening inside the building.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Placemaking

- 1.1. Botley Road used to be a causeway from the city to the countryside; it was never developed because it was the lowest level of Oxford. Its transformation should form part of a strategic thinking around what this place will be, especially as the West End, Oxpens and Osney are being developed as masterplans. Doing the same for the retail park would ensure that the local community is consulted upon, and a vision is established.
- 1.2. The vision needs to be robust and incorporate the wider landscape, transport movements and land uses. Options for a mixed use area with a potential residential component should be explored. If the vision is about creating an innovation park along Botley Road, then this site should be setting the strategic moves that will allow the adjoining sites to add to this character. This new district should be promoting itself as the best place for companies to have their laboratories and R&D spaces. Competition is high in Oxford and as such, a robust vision that creates a new mixed-use, well connected innovation district should be underpinned by the placemaking strategy.
- 1.3. A holistic approach to transforming the wider retail park is strongly recommended to the City Council in order to deliver a successful place. This should be progressed through a masterplan, which could be prepared quite quickly. Any development on this site should not compromise the adjoining ones. Therefore, its boundaries and the relationships with adjacent plots should be fully understood before the proposal evolves further.

2. Sustainable design

- 2.1. The emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was not discussed in detail at this review. Our advice is that the proposal must develop 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.
- 2.2. Flexibility should be built into the design to ensure that the building can adapt and change over time. The current retail use had a 15 year life; by safeguarding future uses and adaptability, the new building can have a longer life span.

3. Views and townscape

- 3.1. Oxford is a city of international historic significance; the views into the city and the green backdrop to the skyline are both equally important in preserving Oxford's character. Current policy has identified several protected view cones, but there are many more that are of local significance and can be impacted by smaller-scale proposals if not taken into full consideration.
- 3.2. Botley Road serves not only as a green corridor leading to the city centre but also as a backdrop to the city. Any development along the road should be informed by a clear analysis of the views that will impact the height and massing.
- 3.3. The impact on the longer views is not about minimising it but about eliminating it altogether. Given the proximity to the city centre and the proposed height, we are not convinced that the proposal will preserve the character of Oxford.
- 3.4. In addition to the longer views, shorter views from nearby properties are also significant when establishing the height and massing. Despite the attempts to set back the upper storeys to mitigate the impact, the proposal still appears overwhelming when viewed from adjacent streets and back gardens.
- 3.5. The prevailing character of the area is a fine grain of two-storey buildings. It needs to be acknowledged and form part of the design development. There should be no expectation that the landscape will mitigate the impact of the massing; architecture should respond to its context first.

4. Movement

- 4.1. The site is very well located within walking and cycling distance from the train station and the city centre. Bus stops are located directly opposite and on the northern boundary. It is therefore evident that the location is highly sustainable.
- 4.2. However, the car parking allocation does not reflect this fact. The lack of a holistic vision and masterplan for this area which could even identify a mix of uses with minimum need to travel, hinders the proposals. The vision of an innovation mixed-use district could be embedded into the movement strategy and propose a predominantly car-free area. Innovation in movement should be proposed with a wider masterplan vision.
- 4.3. The car parking requirements should be quantified and should be monitored and managed in the longer term. We strongly encourage the applicant to develop a travel plan that looks into the short, medium and long term viability of the car parking provision. The relationship with the nearby park and ride is also key and connections between the two may need improvements.

- 4.4. Cycling should be actively encouraged and promoted; this is contradicted by allocating the cycling facilities to the rear of the site. Cycle parking should be part of the arrival experience and be clearly visible.
5. Site layout and landscape
 - 5.1. Current plans for the redevelopment of the West End and Oxpens should relate to this site. A route that links the areas, either through cycling or walking, would be of value.
 - 5.2. The set back from Botley Road is the right approach and it could set a precedent for the entire street. However, the north-eastern corner of the site should be opened-up to allow a more direct access point to the building when coming from the station and the city centre. The argument about resident car parking needs to be considered in the holistic lens of creating a neighbourhood for the future where cars might not be required as all amenities will be within walking and cycling distance.
 - 5.3. There should be a hierarchy for cycling and pedestrian access in relation to the vehicular access. Cycle and pedestrian routes should be prioritised and front Botley Road.
 - 5.4. The landscape design cannot progress unless the fundamental principles of placemaking and site layout are resolved. The character of this area should be preserved, especially the tree lined Botley Road.
6. Architecture, elevational treatment and internal layouts
 - 6.1. Given the vision of an innovation district and an R&D function, the architecture should celebrate the ingenuity that is happening inside. The monolithic nature of the building, which was designed as such to cater for different potential occupiers, needs to be broken down and articulated. A more contextual response towards the fine residential grain in the immediate area and the longer views from the historic town centre is required.
 - 6.2. The building currently has a front and back; we question this approach, especially given the atrium which could be expressed differently on the exterior. Connections through the building should be considered to help integrate the building with future development within the innovation park and to further strengthen the concept of communal collaboration.
 - 6.3. By using the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment to establish the appropriate height, the roofscape could start becoming more creative and interesting. This is a missed opportunity that should be explored further at the next stages.

- 6.4. The proposed terracing towards the residential properties on the eastern side could be used as amenity spaces for the users of the buildings. By incorporating greenery, these terraces can improve the outlook from nearby houses.
- 6.5. We feel strongly that the ground floor café should be more open to the community and inviting to everyone. This building has a responsibility to give back to the local population and the café could serve this function. If moved closer to the road and designed as a sculptural element, it could be attractive to the community.
- 6.6. The elevational treatment of the two primary sides should be broken down and divided into smaller segments. Structural elements such as shear walls and service risers could enrich and fashion the facades and exterior treatment.
- 6.7. Bringing biophilia inside the building in the form of green walls or planters, possibly to the cores, in the atrium will integrate it with the wider landscape and green character of Botley Road.

Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	1861/220714
Date	14 th July 2022
Meeting location	Long Room, Oxford Town Hall, St Aldate's, Oxford OX1 1BX
Panel members attending	Joanne Cave (chair), urban design and planning Andrew Cameron, urban design and transport planning Eric Hallquist, landscape architecture and SUDs Kathryn Davies, historic environment and planning Richard Portchmouth, architecture and urban design
Panel manager	Kiki Gkavogianni, Design South East
Presenting team	David Preece, NBBJ Tim Whitcombe, NBBJ David Williams, Fira Landscape Architects (online)
Attendees	Andrew Winter, Barton Willmore Andrew Fisher, Barton Willmore Colin Brown, Mission Street Alicia Freire, Twin and Earth James Newton, Oxford City Council James Paterson, Oxford City Council Rob Fowler, Oxford City Council Joanna van Heyningen, ODRP Chair (observing)
Online attendees	Marco Tranchina, Elliot Wood Lorraine King, Barton Willmore Ingo Braun, NBBJ Helen Quinn, Design South East (observing)
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"> • Height and massing; • Landscape setting and longer views.
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

Site location	135-137 Botley Road, Oxford OX2 0HN
Site details	<p>The site is approx. 1.5ha and comprises a single storey retail unit. The site lies towards the western end of Botley Road. To the south and west of the site lies the rest of the retail park, comprising poor quality retail warehouses and associated parking for the most part. To the east lies Earl Street a residential street formed of two storey late C19/early C20 artisan/worker housing. To the north of the site lies late C20/early C21 housing in the form of three-storey buildings divided into flats.</p> <p>The existing buildings on the site are low quality 1990s retail warehouses, primarily of red brick construction. Much of the site is given over to car-parking. There are some trees on the site, but the most notable trees are on Botley Road itself.</p>
Proposal	The proposal includes the demolition of the existing buildings and the erection of a five storey building, with additional plant at roof level, to accommodate flexible R&D space and a café at ground level.
Planning stage	The scheme is at pre-application stage.
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	The general principle of redeveloping the site from retail to an employment-based use of a greater density is found acceptable. The site is unsuitable for housing and the existing use makes a very poor contribution to the city and a poor use of Oxford's limited supply of land. The local authority are currently preparing a Development Brief for the Botley Road Retail Park to establish some parameters for the future development of the site.
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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