



Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Plot 5000, ARC  
Oxford

17 April 2024

## Introduction

A design review was held online on the 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2024, preceded by presentations by the local authority and design team.

The proposals are for the demolition of the existing building and erection of a new laboratory-enabled office building with ancillary commercial space.

A summary of the Panel discussion is provided, highlighting the main items raised, followed by a set of key recommendations aimed at improving the design quality of the proposal. Detailed comments are presented under headings covering the main attributes of the scheme. The document closes with the details of the meeting (appendix A) and the scheme (appendix B).

Paragraph 138 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2023) 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

We welcome the opportunity to review detailed proposals for Plot 5000 within the wider ARC campus. The work to date on site-wide strategies, including establishing key moves such as the Connector, is evidently beneficial to informing a design response for individual plots, ensuring that they each contribute to a cohesive and well-functioning place.

However, we remain unclear on whether the high-level vision for the ARC campus is to densify and intensify an edge-of-town business park, or genuinely to transform the site into a visionary innovation campus; to establish the latter as an objective for the project is a clear indication of the applicant's confidence that they control a sufficient amount of the business park to be able to bring about some level of transformation, which is welcome.

Clarifying the vision will strengthen the narrative of this place and enable a more convincing set of design drivers for the design team to respond to when considering the wider context for the building and landscape at Plot 5000.

We hold reservations about submitting a full planning application without working within an established masterplan framework.

## Key recommendations

1. Clarify the vision for the ARC campus to inform the design development.
2. Continue to develop and review site-wide strategies, including movement hierarchy, green and blue infrastructure, sustainability strategy, open spaces, biodiversity, height, and opportunities for road rationalisation.
3. Resolve the relationship between the building entrance, the Connector, John Smith Drive and the heart of the scheme to create a more legible arrival experience to Plot 5000.
4. Reconfigure the arrangement of the building's architectural components, including the sawtooth roof and entrance, to respond to orientation, wayfinding, and hierarchy of internal and external spaces.
5. Develop a stronger natural and ecological story within the landscape strategy, applying natural precedents to demonstrate how this scheme will meaningfully respond to the climate and biodiversity crises.

## Detailed comments and recommendations

### 1. Planning and design strategies

- 1.1. We appreciate the desire to progress the development of the ARC campus and to submit a full application for this plot. However, the submission of individual planning applications does not negate the need for site-wide strategies for parking, connectivity, landscape, fronts and backs, servicing, building heights, energy, and sustainability principles. We acknowledge that the applicant does not control all of the land within the business park, but their interventions will be of sufficient significance and scale that a clear sense of how the future place will function will undoubtedly bring certainty and confidence. We therefore continue to endorse the progression of such strategies to clarify the vision for the park in its entirety, and to shape a design response that is sufficiently contextually responsive.
- 1.2. We are concerned that the planning strategy means that this plot will come forward in absence of an approved site-wide masterplan. The team should set out how they will avoid making design decisions in a piecemeal manner which may be at odds with a future site-wide plan, and instead create an exemplary scheme that positively contributes to the wider masterplan.
- 1.3. The masterplan parameters referenced have not been established in an approved outline application, so should not be implied as fixed parameters from which to develop the project. Instead, the rationale for the massing should be drawn from the established evidence base and analysis to create a sustainable building in response to the climate crisis, optimising orientation, usability, and user experience.
- 1.4. The roads are outside of the plot's red line, but they are within the masterplan scope and within the ownership of the client. We question whether the roundabout to the north of the building is required. We would welcome thinking within the masterplan on how the road could be rationalised to increase and improve the quality of open, non-shaded space.
- 1.5. The campus will have a range of fascinating activities taking place within largely functional buildings. Both the Connector and marketplace offer opportunities to explore how these activities can be expressed and connected to support community-building across the ARC campus. Community engagement offers an opportunity to understand how the Connector, buildings, and public spaces can meet the needs of the people employed here.

## **2. Views and visual impact**

- 2.1. Having reviewed the verified views, we are comfortable that the team has addressed the visual impact of the building and has presented a clear case regarding how they have mitigated the visual impact of the scheme.
- 2.2. The sawtooth roof helps to break up the massing of the building in the verified views, softening the impact of the roofline.

## **3. Sustainable design**

- 3.1. The standing advice from Design South East 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 legal commitment to Net Zero Carbon by 2050. The proposal should demonstrate its compliance to a respected zero carbon pathway, for example as set out by the UKGBC Net Zero Whole Life Carbon Roadmap for the Built Environment. The sustainability strategy should be tied to measurable targets and detailed modelling work informed by respected calculation methods (as applicable), and also address water use, biodiversity net gain, waste reduction and circular economy principles alongside climate resilience and overheating.

## **4. Public realm and landscape**

- 4.1. A lack of clarity around the street hierarchy within the masterplan is leading to John Smith Drive and the Connector competing with one another in the proposals when considering on which route to locate the primary entrance. Instead, locating the entrance on the northern end of the building facing the water and connected to the heart of the scheme could solve this issue to create a logical approach from both routes. Alternatively, an entrance nearer to the Connector could be explored to reduce the arrival emphasis on vehicular modes.
- 4.2. Beyond the Connector being a route through the site, we would welcome a wayfinding strategy to describe how it will connect a range of activities, meander through the car park and interface with the marketplace space as well as offer a variety of experiences for people moving through the ARC campus.
- 4.3. Testing the role of external spaces, on both a diurnal and year-round basis, will enable the team to describe the purpose and assess the comfort and usability of these spaces as the climate changes to achieve optimum conditions for people year-round.

- 4.4. The quality and character of the waterside gardens, woodlands, and roof terrace could be strengthened in the proposal to describe how working with nature can provide an aesthetically pleasing and rational response to biodiversity net gain as well as create a desirable and useable public realm. Natural precedents could provide a better starting point in showing how these spaces will relate to one another to demonstrate the viability of the ecological niches created and how they appear seasonally. For example, considering how the rooftop planting could relate to the rocky beach below or how water could support and enhance the woodland ecology.
- 4.5. The site already benefits from an established watery landscape. How water will be dealt with across the site – channelled, filtered, released, and used to enhance ecology – should be better described as part of the natural narrative. The SuDS strategy should clearly state measurable carbon savings made by channelling water, rather than using plastic piping.
- 4.6. The relationship between the building edges, woodland routes, and the Connector appears weak. The design team should explore how these elements could be better integrated and softened with fewer right angles and hard edges and less hard landscaping – particularly when considering the experience of the Connector as a calm, natural route. Introducing paths and trees in the car park will also slow vehicles down and provide shade whilst celebrating the arboretum character of this space.
- 4.7. We endorse the use of soft and green landscaping for the car parking where possible to indicate that in the future this space will be given over to landscape, as well as to contribute to the drainage strategies and distribution of water across the site. The service bay and car park entrance to John Smith Drive is very open. Planting could be used more effectively to screen and enclose parking to enhance the experience of the drive and to prevent this access from being read as the building entrance.
- 4.8. It is unfortunate that cycle facilities will be located on the east side when cyclists will largely be approaching from the west along the Connector. The team should show how the placement, design and integration of cycle facilities benefits and encourages cyclists as an exemplar for the rest of the masterplan.
- 4.9. The green wall to the first-floor terrace space is high. This needs careful consideration so that it does not dominate the adjacent route between the building and the ponds.

## 5. Architecture

- 5.1. We note that the building will provide a high level of laboratory provision (up to 70%). This will complement the less lab-focused buildings on the campus and enhance the strong innovation focus to the campus. We understand that sufficient provision has been provided for future plant and that gas tanks, for example, will be incorporated into the design for planning.
- 5.2. We welcome the use of the sawtooth roof, referencing the industrial heritage of the adjacent car plant to create a distinctive roof profile and to give the building a strong identity. This will improve the character of the campus and help with wayfinding. The roof terrace and first floor terrace are also positive features that will provide better workspace for occupants, as is the generosity of the 'forum' space in the reception to provide a more open and active environment at the ground plane. These combined features will greatly improve the campus vitality, interaction between occupants and improved health and well-being.
- 5.3. The architecture is not yet responding sufficiently to orientation. The roof-level amenity integrated within the sawtooth roof may be better located or extended to the south of the building where it will be bathed in sunshine and could provide a more distinctive skyline for those approaching from the Connector. This would enhance navigation of the campus.
- 5.4. There is an opportunity for the façade articulation to create a stronger hierarchy within the bays and to distinguish between back of house areas – such as cleaning rooms and bike storage – and the front door. The front door could benefit from a more distinctive treatment, as it currently has a similar expression to other bays.
- 5.5. The difference in modulation between labs and office space could be developed to incorporate improvements in solar shading.
- 5.6. We commend the full-height undercroft parking that can be converted from car parking in the future. The experience of moving through the undercroft and into the building could be described in more detail to understand the quality of this space.
- 5.7. To create a stronger narrative for the innovation campus and the building, it may be worth exploring the link between innovation in the Oxford Motors and medical science research, including The Nuffield Trust and Foundation.

## 6. **Materials and detailing**

- 6.1. More sustainable alternatives to brick, such as natural stone, should be explored, as well as how more metallic and industrial materials could be incorporated to create a less civic and more industrial response, using colour to link to landscape elements.
- 6.2. Paragraph 140 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2023) states: 'Local planning authorities should seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used).' In order to be consistent with this national policy, the applicant team and local authority should note Design South East's general guidance on material quality and detail. At planning application stage, the quality of the detailing should be demonstrated through large scale drawings at 1:20 and 1:5 of key elements of the building/landscape and should be accompanied by actual material samples which should be secured by condition as part of any planning approval.



## Appendix A: Meeting details

<b>Reference number</b>	2166/030424
<b>Date</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> April 2024
<b>Meeting location</b>	Online via teams
<b>Panel members attending</b>	Joanne Cave (Chair), urban design and planning Deborah Nagan, landscape architecture and urban design Justin Nicholls, architecture and regeneration
<b>Panel manager</b>	Helen Quinn, Design South East
<b>Presenting teams</b>	Luke Schuberth, Aukett Swanke Valentine Lezius, Aukett Swanke
<b>Other attendees</b>	Lizzie Atherton, Design South East Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council Rosa Appleby-Alis, Oxford City Council Emma Winder, Oxford City Council Steven Sensecall, Carter Jonas James Ellis, Carter Jonas John Staker, Advanced Research Clusters Hal Woodhouse, Macregor Smith Lizzie Palmer, Macregor Smith
<b>Site visit</b>	The panel conducted a site visit at a previous design review. A recap digital site visit was carried out prior to the review.
<b>Scope of the review</b>	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this review was not restricted.
<b>Panel interests</b>	The panel did not indicate any conflicts of interest.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	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

<b>Name</b>	Plot 5000, ARC Oxford
<b>Site location</b>	Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4
<b>Site details</b>	<p>Plot 5000 sits within the wider ARC campus and is bordered by John Smith Drive and a roundabout to the north and east, Plot 5700 to the west and Plot 2700 to the south.</p> <p>The existing Plot 5000 is a 3-storey building plus plant, situated in a landscaped plot with associated car parking. Within the red-line boundary includes provision for the Connector – a cranked route that extends south and borders the eastern boundary of Plot 5500.</p>
<b>Proposal</b>	Demolition of the existing building and erection of a laboratory-enabled office building with ancillary commercial space (all Use Class E). The proposal includes provision of new access, motor vehicle and cycle parking, landscaping (including partial delivery of landscaped green spine (the Connector)), and services infrastructure.
<b>Planning stage</b>	Pre-application with intention to submit a full application.
<b>Local planning authority</b>	Oxford City Council
<b>Planning context</b>	<p>The application site is a Category 1 employment site and as such, under the requirements of policy E1 of the Oxford Local Plan 2036, the site 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.</p> <p>As the development proposes an intensification of office and lab spaces for research and development purposes, making efficient use of the brownfield and greenfield employment sites, the principle of the proposal is found to comply with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and policies S1, E1 and RE2 of the Oxford Local</p>

Plan 2036. Therefore, the principle of development is considered to be acceptable.

Other relevant policies include:

- Policy AOC7 (Cowley Branch Line Area of Change). An Area of Change has been identified on land around the Cowley Branch Line, which is planned to be reopened for passenger services and operational by the end of 2026. Whilst ARC Oxford lies just outside the identified area on the proposals map, it is wholly considered part of its context and subject to an associated site allocation.
- Policy SP10 (Oxford Business Park). ARC Oxford (as Oxford Business Park) is subject to a specific allocation. The allocation states planning permission will be granted for B1 and B2 employment uses, with other complementary uses considered on their merits.

With regards to the proposal's impact on heritage assets and views out from the city, the following policies and Technical Advice Note (TAN) are relevant:

**LP Policy DH2, Views & Building Heights:**

Seek to retain significant views both within Oxford and from outside, in particular to and from the historic skyline. The following criteria should be met:

- Height & massing choices have a clear design rationale and the impacts will be positive
- Regard should be had to the design guidance set out in the High Buildings TAN.
- Proposals should be designed to have a positive impact through their massing, orientation, relation to street, impact on important views including both in to the historic skyline & out towards Oxford's green setting.

**High Buildings TAN, 2018:**

- 5.7 "High buildings within Oxford have the potential to affect the visual amenity and character of the city, as well as the significance of its many heritage assets. This is primarily through visual change affecting important visual features

such as built and/or natural landmarks, the setting of heritage assets or change to the built and natural fabric visible in views to, out from and across the city.”

- 5.8 “The analysis of the effects of visual change must therefore be based on an understanding of how setting contributes to heritage significance of an individual asset.”

The Four Visual Tests:

- Visual obstruction
- Visual competition/complement
- Skylining
- Change of character

The TAN identifies that buildings taller than 15m high at the Business Park site will skyline in views from St Mary’s Tower.

**LP policy DH3, Designated Heritage Assets:**

- Planning permission will be granted for development that respects and draws inspiration from Oxford’s unique historic environment, responding positively to the significance, character & distinctiveness of the heritage asset & locality.
- Great weight will be given to the conservation of designated heritage assets and their setting.

It should also be noted that other ARC proposals are currently being considered by Oxford City Council at Plot 2000 (planning ref: 22/02880/RES) and Plot 4200 (planning ref: 24/00335/FUL).

#### Planning history

In November 1992, outline planning permission (ref: 91/01303/NO) was granted for the demolition of buildings/structures associated with the former motor works located on the ARC Oxford site, to be replaced by buildings containing circa 125,000sqm of B1 floorspace and 10,451sqm of C1 floorspace, alongside supporting infrastructure. This outline consent (which was subsequently extended several times) was the catalyst for the development of ‘Oxford Business Park’.

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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