



Oxford Design
Review Panel



Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

38-40 George Street, Oxford

02 May 2024

Introduction

A design workshop was held on the 18th April 2024, preceded by a site visit and presentations by the local authority and design team.

The proposal is for the demolition of the existing cinema and the erection of a five-storey aparthotel with community space and a café at ground floor.

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 engage with the applicant and council on this important project and applaud the considerable amount of work that has evidently gone into the proposal. Whilst the existing cinema has a certain significance, we recognise the economic and community benefits that this project will deliver, and we support its redevelopment. However, it is frustrating that the commercial brief has placed tight constraints on the project – including the need for an additional storey and a short timescale for planning submission – that could limit its success.

We concur with the heritage officer’s assessment that there is a high level of less than substantial harm on the view from Castle Mound. The arrangement of the rooftop plant, in particular, is problematic in its relationship to the townscape. The building does not yet engage sufficiently with Gloucester Green, particularly in terms of the entrance sequence into the community space, which is not successful and does not make for a flexible internal space that will be sustainable for long-term community use.

We encourage the applicant to take the panel’s recommendations into consideration ahead of the planning submission.

Key recommendations

1. Clearly articulate the embodied and operational carbon targets so that the scheme – as an Oxford City Council project – can act as a sustainable exemplar to others.
2. Reconsider the need for a tower on this building. Choose whether to minimise the visual impact of the rooftop plant, or to commit to an architecturally distinct tower that is well considered in terms of its relationship to the townscape.
3. Create a more permeable ground floor – including a through-route at one level, if possible – to improve the flow of movement through the community space and its relationship to the external urban environment.
4. Work with MakeSpace to design a community space that fits their vision and can be adapted for specific uses, rather than generic ones, and that is not inhibited by the structural grid.
5. Simplify the elevation by designing from the George Street views.
6. Consider stepping the façade up from west to east in response to the existing street levels and to offer more headroom to the community space.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Heritage and townscape

- 1.1. The design team should acknowledge that the existing ODEON building has its own significance to this part of Oxford; however, we appreciate that it would be difficult to convert to other uses and we do not feel strongly that the building should be retained. The redevelopment of this site could bring about an advent of change for this part of the city by ushering in a step change in the quality of George Street and Gloucester Green; and the provision of an aparthotel and community space could create an exciting synergy that would cement this part of Oxford as a civic and community location, as well as bringing economic and community benefits.
- 1.2. We agree with the heritage officer's assessment that there is a high level of less than substantial harm on the view from Castle Mound and that a lower height would be better. However, given the short timescale before submission and that the pressure on the design team to add an additional storey to the building has come from Oxford City Council in their role as client, we find it difficult to advise the design team on how this might realistically be resolved. The relationship between the proposed tower and the townscape – particularly the Nuffield Building – will be critical in this view.
- 1.3. The Grade II listed Faculty of History opposite the site is the most important building in the vicinity and the proposal could improve its outlook by creating a more open and active elevation to George Street. It would be helpful to anticipate how the future pedestrianisation of George Street might change the relationship between the two buildings; however, we acknowledge that it may now be too late in the design process to make significant changes to the building form or to pull it back from the street.
- 1.4. Given that the increase in building height will further limit direct sun into Gloucester Green, the proposal could be considered to create a degree of harm to the square. We suggest that this should be offset by creating a more positive relationship between the new building and Gloucester Green, which previously has been considered a 'back-of-house' elevation.
- 1.5. The relationship of the proposed building to the Faculty of History building is particularly important to the George Street context. The role of the proposed tower in this relationship should be very carefully considered.

2. **Roofscape, elevations, materials, and detailing**

- 2.1. We do not consider that the arrangement of the rooftop plant justifies – nor should be considered as – a tower. Oxford’s towers are distinct not only through their height but through their whole design – including the rhythm of their elevation – and by their function. If the design team consider the ‘tower’ a key part of the design narrative, they should commit to this through one tower that is articulated as such through its architecture – as with the Cheng Yu Tung Building at Jesus College – rather than by adding height. Otherwise, the height of the plant should be kept to a minimum and it should be recessed into the centre of the roof to reduce its visual impact on high level views.
- 2.2. The design team has worked hard on the articulation of the elevation, and we consider that the gables are particularly effective in creating depth and rhythm when viewed from the street; however, the impact of this is diluted by the ‘chimneys’ between. It would be better to have the dormer windows pushed back to create more depth to the elevation. This would further articulate the elevation in a more balanced way, rather than adding further complexity to the façade.
- 2.3. In the drawings, the elevations are striated, busy and rather heavy, appearing to mimic an older building; however, they appear more successful in the flythrough video, where the building is gradually revealed as it would be experienced when moving down George Street. The flythrough view reveals the richness and rhythm of the façade whilst also appearing to simplify it into a more monolithic expression of brick. Rather than losing these qualities, the design team should explore how the façade could be simplified through the choice of materials to create something more fitting for this important corner plot. This approach should be applied to all facades of the proposed building, with particular attention being paid to the refinement of the architecture when viewed from the south-east and north-east.
- 2.4. Using datums drawn across from the Old Fire Station to establish the composition of the proposed façade has created a ground floor that appears compressed, particularly towards the east as George Street slopes upward. Given the length of the elevation, a better option may be to divide the building and step up with the street, so that the façade appears less like a uniform ‘wraparound’.
- 2.5. Whilst we understand the desire to draw a common identity between the aparthotel and community space, the ground floor language and use of grey inset panels creates an impression of a retail environment which fails to celebrate the building’s exciting mix of uses.

- 2.6. Most of the presentation centred on the building's relationship to George Street; however, Gloucester Green is an important public square that offers something different from many other places in Oxford which largely cater to tourists and students. The design team should recognise the opportunity to celebrate and enhance this through their proposal.
- 2.7. 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.

3. Ground floor, access, and public realm

- 3.1. The restricted curtilage means that the proposal must reach out to the wider network of public space to give context to the building and to clarify its role in the existing urban framework. The narrow footpath to the south of the building makes this difficult, and whilst the possible future pedestrianisation of George Street would expand the sense of public space here, we question whether this will be sufficient to root the building in its context without a wider strategy of public realm improvements.
- 3.2. The nature of the entrance to the community space and its relationship to the urban environment immediately outside the building should be a high priority as the element that will cement the quality of this project as a consolidation of civic and community space. As this is key to the success of the building, the budget for this could come from the building budget, rather than only from the landscape budget.

- 3.3. The design team should explore how they might better articulate the ground floor and building entrances so that the public realm flows through the community space and so that people are drawn to meander through the building – rather than through the adjacent taxi rank – on their way to the market. The community space could then become an intrinsic part of the market, contrasting sharply with the existing condition, wherein the market turns its back on the blank elevation of the ODEON building. Being limited to only two points of access, the ground floor is not yet permeable enough to achieve this. We suggest that opening apertures are considered along the community space’s southern and eastern facades, and to the corner between St. George’s Place and Gloucester Green. This would create a more fluid relationship between inside and outside and would allow the community space frontage to appear less like a formal rhythm of shopfronts.
- 3.4. We understand that the existing level change presents a challenge in accessing the ground floor community space; however, we do not support the proposed configuration, wherein a building user is greeted by stairs and a ramp immediately upon entering through the front door. This does not provide sufficient space for someone to orient themselves and filter through the space. It could also make the community space appear somewhat private and inaccessible.
- 3.5. The design team should explore whether entering further west along the Gloucester Green frontage could allow for a more level access to the community space. This would allow area used for the ramp to be given back as internal floorspace and would significantly improve the relationship to the square by making the community space appear more publicly accessible. Likewise, creating level access to St. George’s Place would allow the community space to benefit from being able to spill out onto this public space. Whilst this might negate level access to George Street, a sense of connection could be made through openable windows with low sills at floor level.
- 3.6. There is a poor relationship between the north elevation of the existing building and Gloucester Green due to its back-of-house nature, including the existence of the substation and fire escape. We are concerned that the proposal does not go far enough to improve upon this. We suggest that the community space is brought further along the northern elevation to provide more active frontage that can engage positively with the square, and to create movement along this diagonal desire line from George Street.

- 3.7. It is unfortunate that the existing taxi rank limits the success of St. George's Place as a public space, given that this part of the square benefits from morning sunlight. Removing the taxis would create a safer urban environment for pedestrians and would create an opportunity to engage with the community space – perhaps accommodating café spill out – to activate the gateway to Gloucester Green.
- 3.8. The design team should explore whether the future pedestrianisation of George Street could allow the building to be serviced from the south, so that the Gloucester Green elevation could engage more effectively with the square and the market.
- 3.9. Whilst we appreciate that it is beyond the direct responsibility of the client, it would be exciting if this redevelopment project could be a catalyst to inspire a reimagining of Gloucester Green, which appears somewhat utilitarian in its design language.
- 3.10. Whilst we do not support the inclusion of cycle parking within the community space, we would encourage the addition of more cycle spaces within the scheme's curtilage – particularly given the potential future plans to pedestrianise George Street.

4. Internal layout

- 4.1. It is reassuring to hear that the community space has a 40-year lease, and we are pleased that MakeSpace have been embedded in the process so far. Although MakeSpace will not occupy the community space until 2027, how it might operate – in terms of security, the relationship between the general public's use and users attending programmed activities, and the variety of different specific room settings – should be considered as the space is being designed now so that it is successful to use, adaptable for specific purposes, and creates opportunities for overlap between the community space and the hotel. Whilst a 40-year lease is positive, third sector uses can be challenging to sustain, and without consideration at this stage, use of the space could be constrained by factors such as the position of columns, the level change and ramp, internal cycle parking, and a limited presence on the street.
- 4.2. Whilst we understand that the presented drawings do not accurately portray the proposed floor to ceiling height of the community space, we suggest that increasing this, if possible, would benefit the space by increasing its flexibility. Lowering the parapet at the top of the building might allow the height of the building to be raised by approximately 300mm, which could be allocated to the ground floor. Having the photovoltaic (PV) panels in a butterfly arrangement is likely to have only limited visibility in the view from Castle Mound, although this should be tested.

- 4.3. It is disappointing that many of the hotel rooms will only be served by a small internal lightwell which will deliver negligible daylight and no meaningful outlook, especially at lower levels in the building. Whilst we understand the commercial argument for this design decision, we do not support it. Given that these rooms will not be sufficiently lit by natural light and given the expense of constructing the glazed lightwells as fire compartments, it may be better to have these as fully internal rooms, and instead design them to offer impressive and interesting interiors.
- 4.4. If redesigning the roofscape to provide an architecturally distinct tower, the design team should consider whether the roof might be accessed and used to give panoramic views over the city, as well as to connect with a special space inside the tower.

5. Sustainable design

- 5.1. Whilst it is positive for the applicant team to feed back on the performance of the building, Oxford City Council, in their capacity as client, should articulate the sustainability targets of the project much more strongly to act as an exemplar for others. Clarity should be given on how carbon off-setting is achieved, as the quality of this can vary significantly; how net-zero in operation is defined in this instance; how embodied carbon is measured; and how the project compares to LETI and RIBA targets.
- 5.2. The design team should use a tight structural grid with reduced spans and thin slabs to create a carbon-efficient building, and this should form part of the sustainability strategy for the project. However, if exceptionally moving some columns off the structural grid would allow for a more flexible and usable community space, we would consider the carbon cost of this to be justified by the resulting benefit to the community.
- 5.3. It is positive that a pre-demolition audit will be undertaken to identify any materials that may be re-used. It could be interesting to utilise large panels of the existing walls as a design feature within the reception or community space. Whilst the argument for demolition is reasonable, demonstrating an appreciation of the existing building's embodied carbon in this way will further strengthen the applicant's case.

- 5.4. Given the plans to pedestrianise George Street, we can anticipate significant improvements in air quality that would make a much more openable ground floor attractive to building users. Enabling cooling through natural ventilation, rather than relying on mechanical systems year-round, would generate a much lower cooling load for the building, as well as allowing people to connect with the outside to increase their enjoyment of the space.
- 5.5. The design of the building façade should form part of a comprehensive carbon and climate response narrative. It is vital that the articulation of the southern façade should contribute effective shading.
- 5.6. A shower wastewater heat recovery system should be explored. This can recover up to 50% of heat produced by showers in the hotel, significantly reducing the boiler capacity, hot water storage required, and energy and carbon emissions.
- 5.7. Whilst rainwater harvesting is useful, water cannot be collected during dry spells. Greywater recycling should also be considered, as this provides a more predictable water supply and takes less plant space.
- 5.8. 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.

Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	2139/180424
Date	18 th April 2024
Meeting location	Old Fire Station, 40 George Street, Oxford, OX1 2AQ
Panel members attending	Joanna van Heyningen (Chair), architecture and public realm Fenella Griffin, landscape architecture and public realm Dan Jones, architecture and community engagement Charlotte Robinson, architecture and historic environment Jonathan Ward, low carbon design and sustainability
Panel manager	Helen Quinn, Design South East
Presenting team	Andrew Heselton, Marick Real Estate Mark Wood, Studio Moren Mike Martin, Turkington Martin Andy Edwards, MakeSpace
Other attendees	Rosa Appleby-Alis, Oxford City Council Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council Emma Winder, Oxford City Council Paddy Maguire, Asset Heritage Thomas Hyem, Bidwells Jonathan Bainbridge, Bidwells Richard Brown, Hoare Lea Carri Unwin, OCC Property Anuj Narula, Studio Moren
Site visit	A site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the review.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this review was not restricted.
Panel interests	Panel members did not indicate any conflicts of interest.

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 38-40 George Street, Oxford, OX1 2BL

Site details The site is located in the heart of the city centre within the Central Conservation Area and is surrounded by numerous listed buildings. It comprises an existing cinema building and substation, with a total site area of 0.105 hectares. The site is surrounded by theatres, cafes, and restaurants. Oxford bus station is located immediately west of the Square, a number of bus stops are dotted along George Street, and the train station is located 0.4 miles to the west.

The existing cinema fronts St George's Place, George Street and Gloucester Green – an important public square which is home to a number of markets throughout the week. Gloucester Green is largely hard landscaped with 26no. category B and C trees which all sit beyond the application site boundary. A row of bollards is located in front of the building and beyond to segregate taxis and pedestrians.

The existing cinema building dates to 1936. It is brick built and of comparable height to four-storey buildings in the surrounding area. The north and south elevations of the building are devoid of windows and form a blank frontage to George Street and Gloucester Green. 1no. tree sits to the front but looks to be in poor condition as it is surrounded by hard landscaping.

The Grade II listed former City of Oxford High School for Boys (now the University's Faculty of History) sits directly opposite the application site.

Proposal Demolition of existing cinema and erection of a five-storey aparthotel with community space and café at ground floor. Associated public realm improvements around the perimeter of the site.

Planning stage Pre-application, with planning submission proposed for June 2024. The pre-application process commenced in December 2023, with meetings taking place each month since.

Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	<p>The principle of losing the cinema is supportable in accordance with policy V7 of the Oxford Local Plan, given that there are several alternative cinemas available within Oxford. Further, the proposal would provide 428sqm of community space at ground floor level and therefore a community facility would be offered in place of the cinema. Robust justification would need to be formally submitted with the application to support the proposal.</p> <p>In accordance with policy V5, a new hotel would be appropriate in this City centre location.</p> <p>In terms of the principle of demolition, the adopted Local Plan does not contain a policy regarding embodied carbon. Whilst emerging policy R2 of the Local Plan 2040 (submitted on 28th March) requires that “re-use of any existing buildings on a site has been robustly explored and demonstrated to be unfeasible before resorting to demolition”, this policy currently carries little weight and as the Local Plan examination is anticipated for late Autumn, it will still carry little weight by the time the application is determined at Committee in September.</p> <p>The site sits within the heart of the Central Conservation Area and is surrounded by many listed buildings. The interrelation and intrinsic connection of Oxford’s historic development to its landscape setting is fundamental to the significance of the city’s Central Conservation Area and can be appreciated from a number of views, both from viewpoints outside of the city looking in (view cones) and from high level viewpoints within the city looking out.</p>
Planning history	<p>The existing cinema, designed by Robert Cromie, was constructed in 1935-36 as a single auditorium. It has since been converted to three, and then six screens. ODEON acquired the site in 2000.</p> <p>All approved planning applications on the premises of site are minor predominantly consisting of signage/poster panels.</p> <p>In 1999 an application was withdrawn for the erection of a new multiplex cinema (99/01189/NFZ) alongside a conservation area consent for the demolition of the cinema (99/01188/LH).</p>

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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