High Quality Design in Oxford SPD – Scoping Stage Consultation Report

High Quality Design in Oxford SPD
Respecting Heritage and Achieving Local Distinctiveness
Scoping Stage Consultation Report

Part A - Design and access statements

New developments of all types and sizes should demonstrate some design rationale.

| Strongly Agree | 91% (10) |
| Agree          | 0% (0)   |
| Neutral        | 0% (0)   |
| Disagree       | 9% (1)   |
| Strongly Disagree | 0% (0) |

Design and access statements need to be consistent in their detail and quality. Design and access statement templates included in the SPD would help developers explain their design rationale.

| Strongly Agree | 73% (8) |
| Agree          | 27% (3) |
| Neutral        | 0% (0)  |
| Disagree       | 0% (0)  |
| Strongly Disagree | 0% (0) |

There should be different design and access statement templates for the different sizes of development, e.g. small residential extensions and large developments.

| Strongly Agree | 45% (5) |
| Agree          | 36% (4) |
| Neutral        | 9% (1)  |
| Disagree       | 6% (0)  |
| Strongly Disagree | 9% (1) |

Comments relating to Part A of the questionnaire:

- There should be different design and access statement templates for different types of development e.g. small residential extensions and large scale developments.
- The content of the Design and Access Statements (DAS) should be proportionate and specific to the purpose of explaining the development proposed. The SPD ought not to be seeking to elevate the requirement for a DAS where there is currently no statutory requirement as this may have the effect of down grading their importance and causing confusion as to what is required to validate an application.
- The templates need to cover alterations to existing buildings as well as new developments - and not just in the case of household extensions.
Design and access statements should be consistent in their detail and quality for the same types and scales of development, not for all developments regardless of their type and scale. The statements should be proportionate to the type and scale of development.

Be careful not to keep adding additional requirements on to a planning application. It is already very expensive and time consuming to prepare an application in certain conservation areas of Oxford. It is unfair to expect a householder or small developer to pay up front architectural fees to prepare very detailed designs and lengthy DAS reports for something that is at risk of refusal. It could result in extensions and alterations of properties becoming the preserve of the very wealthy and further separating the communities to those that can afford to do things and those that can't.

Part B - Identifying Local Distinctiveness and Heritage Significance

Understanding key features of the local area and responding to them is the starting point of good design.

Key positive features of local character, potential threats to these, and opportunities for enhancement should be identified.

Oxford can be divided into distinct character areas (for example in the ways suggested in the supporting paper).
Character descriptions of different areas of Oxford should be available in the SPD as a starting point for developers.

An appraisal of the immediate surroundings of a development site (maybe through use of the City Council’s existing Character Assessment Toolkit), carried out before design commences, would help to ensure good design.

It is sensible to consider whether there is any local heritage interest that may be affected by the development before beginning to design.

More accessible guidance and information is needed on how to identify and respond to heritage significance.

The SPD should include guidance and a clear explanation as to how and when to use the View Cones Study.
Part C - Responding to local context

Understanding and responding to local character does not mean that new design needs to be copy of existing design (even where the overall existing design is positive).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45% (5)</td>
<td>27% (3)</td>
<td>18% (2)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information on how important views should be identified and responded to in the design of a new scheme should be included in the SPD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60% (6)</td>
<td>30% (3)</td>
<td>10% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information on how design of larger schemes should respond to identified street-layouts and other large-scale design characteristics in an area should be included in the SPD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36% (4)</td>
<td>45% (5)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The SPD should include information on how design should respond to key characteristic small-scale features of the surrounding area, such as gaps between buildings, boundary treatments, windows and other architectural detailing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55% (6)</td>
<td>36% (4)</td>
<td>9% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comments relating to Part A of the questionnaire:

- Good quality character appraisals would naturally include important views as part of the process.
- It is difficult to generalise about projects and to be specific about the amount of information required because projects are so diverse in their scale and complexity.
- General guidance is useful. Though Oxford may end up so uniform and prescribed by planning guidance notes that it loses all interest and diversity in architecture.
- I cannot emphasise strongly enough that whatever is decided on the SPD it is essential that the council has the qualified staff in place who can assess - before registering it - whether or not an application contains the necessary material on which an informed decision can be made. The failure to do this on the Roger Dudman Way flats is the most recent high profile example. The inadequacy of historic building appraisals is a further example of this - almost every alteration to a building in Oxford involves loss of historic fabric or underground archaeology yet potentially valuable information is being lost all the time. The SPD must therefore contain a requirement to prepare a proper appraisal including a statement of significance of any fabric to be altered or removed.
- The SPD should also provide good and bad examples in existing developments, for the different character areas. To lead by example is many times the best option.

Part D - Ideas for extra guidance on specific topics

Detailed matters of design (e.g. bin/bike stores, materials, landscaping, boundary treatments, and sustainable drainage) should be considered from the beginning of a project design to avoid retrofitting which often leads to poor design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>82% (9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>18% (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments relating to Part D of the questionnaire:

- The detailed design matters of a development are often the key to a high quality rather than mediocre scheme. It is therefore important to highlight the need for and encourage attention to such details and the potential general guidance the Council may produce would be very useful in that highlighting and encouragement.
- The positioning of dishes and air con units can be of especial concern to residents and some guidance might be useful.
- Arrangements for the continuing management of planting post-construction could be addressed specifically.
- Landscaping etc: where a development involves the demolition of parts of the historic environment the developer should be required to include some reminders of the lost fabric.
such as by pavement markings indicating lost boundaries, 'industrial' surfaces where workshops have been demolished, and so on.

- Stratford-on-Avon has been particularly successful in ensuring that 'corporate' shop-front designs are modified to suit the historic environment.

- The suggested level of information sought at the beginning of a project is too detailed for the two stage design and build process in which the University generally brings projects forward. There is little logic in requiring detailed design work (which is an activity of RIBA Stage 4) to be taken out of sequence to the “beginning of a project”. Even if this may be appropriate on small scale projects and proposals, there would be no scope for changes without having to return with a formal application to amend in some way. The process needs to remain flexible to change particularly for large projects which build into the programme scope for detailed design changes to be ‘worked up’ during the stages that the application is being considered in principle. The attention to detail with regard to the design remains important throughout but to seek to prevent change at the beginning of a project would, it is feared, be unworkable. It should be noted that all our designs adhere to our building philosophy documents so that provision of adequate bicycle parking, for example, is inherent in our designs from the outset, although the exact design for them will not be crystallized until the appropriate point in the process. We believe that this approach provides better assurance of high quality design than out-of-sequence detailing.

- As a councillor, I am much exercised by the positioning of A boards and other advertising clutter. Please can this work ensure it is tied in with the work being done on establishing a code of conduct for letting boards and for sale boards following the motion I proposed at Full Council last year?

General Question 1: Do you have any comments of Parts A, B, C, or D, or feel that anything has been missed?

9 comments made in agreement with the approach set out in Parts A, B, C and D.

General Question 2: Do you agree that the SPD should apply across the whole of Oxford? If not, what area(s) of the city do you think the SPD should focus on?

A few comments suggested that areas outside of the city centre tend to receive less attention in terms of design, meaning there is a need for this SPD to raise the quality of design more widely across the city.

One comment suggested that, given the potential scale of the project, it would be better to focus on the particularly sensitive areas (such as conservation areas and the main population centres such as Summertown), before extending elsewhere in the city.

General Question 3: Do you agree that the SPD should be relevant to all sizes and types of development? If not, what size or type of development should it focus on?

9 comments in agreement, one comment being that this is important because small developments are typically the ones that lack the resources to implement high quality designs. One commenter was in agreement to a certain extent because there is a certain amount of overlap of design principles relevant for all sizes and types of development, but they also expressed concern that the
project will be difficult to contain unless certain parameters are set, so thought the focus should be on larger developments. Another commenter thought the SPD should definitely focus only on larger development.

General Question 4: Do you have any examples of modern buildings in the city that are successfully designed to take account of their location in Oxford and that you think we should refer to in the SPD as good examples? (In the main documents, appendices or a Technical Advice Note?)

- JHB building at Brookes has a good reputation.
- Apart from a large number of modern college buildings, the following 'townscape' buildings are notable:
  - The former Blackwell's music shop in Holywell Street (1970)
  - Wolfson Building, Somerville College (1968)
  - St Aldates police HQ (1991)
  - Christian Science church, St Giles 1996, 2004
  - Castle heritage centre (2006)
- Merton TS Elliot extension
- The final design for St Clements car park student units.
- Pembroke footbridge
- Magdalen College Grove Auditorium and Ashmolean Museum / library extension.
- The "New Biochemistry" building in Sherrington Road (2 comments).
- Saïd Business School (noted by 2) and the glass building in Hythe Bridge Street.
- Debenhams department store (preservation of the old facade).
- Ashmolean, Oxford Castle, quite a lot of Oxford college buildings, Oxford University Club. I'm sure that Zaha’s will be good when it is revealed and fun to see something different.
- The Earth Sciences Building, South Parks Road
- Law Library

General Question 5: In what ways do you consider modern new buildings can successfully achieve harmony with existing surrounding development? If you can, please explain using examples. Do you have examples of successful design that achieves harmony with its surroundings without obviously copying the style of surrounding buildings?

Use of existing colour palettes and materials in the locality. Developments in All Saints Road and in Old Road near Rock Edge are quite attractive?

It is important to remember that there is an almost continuous strand of Gothic style buildings in Oxford, and that the skills are available in the city building firms to continue this tradition - they are needed of course to effect repairs and replacements for earlier fabric. Properly designed and appropriate to the site, modern Gothic can thus play a part.

Most early buildings in the city centre have strong verticals. The horizontality introduced in the 1960s (Clarendon Centre, Cornmarket Street, Sadler Building, Longwall Street) destroyed that, and as time has shown, they are almost universally disliked. This seems to be the key to modern designs fitting in with the earlier ones.

Where a building is set back from the street and the surrounding buildings have a strong presence, one can be more adventurous - the Kendrew Quad at St John's is another example.

If 'harmony' were the over-riding goal of the SPD, then the Blavatnik building would not have been approved. At the time of writing it is too soon to assess the impact of this completely alien structure, but it may need to be highlighted in future guidance as to why it was/was not successful. Already it can be seen towering over the adjacent buildings from points on the east side of Walton Street.
approaching from the south. This view needs to be compared with the ‘visualisations’ supplied by the developers in order to compare intention with reality.

Because of Oxford’s distinctive character and the city centre’s primarily stone construction, it is almost impossible for ‘modernist’-style buildings to ever achieve harmony with their surroundings. Recent disasters include the Blavatnik building opposite OUP in Walton Street and the University’s new buildings facing Woodstock Road. New building should accept the City's fundamental character and work with it, not against it.

I believe that new buildings can achieve harmony recreating a design vocabulary and by creating a contrast that enhances existing buildings. For instance, the St. Thomas Church in Birmingham has a very pronounced texture due to the rounded stones, and at its side there is a very modern building (Selfridge's) with a metallic mesh that has very much the same design vocabulary, in a modern setting, and taking advantage of new materials that allow for a greater degree of freedom and allow for new designs to be created.

The Keble College development on Museum/Blackhall Road is very good. A counter-example is the more recent development by the same college on Keble Road, which is very poor.

I strongly agree that quality of design needs to be at the forefront and I don’t know how you legislate for this. However you cannot create beautiful buildings by tick boxing a long list of do and don't and heritage assessment tools. You have to allow for a bit of freedom or everything will be sanitised and mediocre.

Modern buildings can respect the essential characteristics of existing surrounding development, such as heights, roof form, fenestration without slavishly copying every detail.

Successful modern buildings are those which are designed with an understanding of place and this will influence the choice of materials, proportions and setting. The examples of buildings which we have given above, demonstrate this in their use of local materials such as limestone, in the quality of their landscaped settings and use of articulation, through fins or contrasting cladding finishes, to break up the massing of the buildings and provide a human scale.

**General comments received on the approach and scope of the SPD:**

Assurance is sought that there would be no inference that the SPD would seek to replace the need for your professional staff to be available as the technical expertise to support the review of projects and proposals submitted to the City.

Construction access is a frequent concern but I’m not sure it comes under the purview of this document.

The guidance should provide high quality design guidance and an overall design language that is typically beyond the reach of small developers, but common in high end commercial developments. Materials: the developer should be required to state the precise way in which the materials are to be used - thus if brick, not only the type and colour but also the bond and the colour of the mortar to be used; if concrete whether smooth or timber-shuttered, and if stone the source and colour. The use of glass must be critically examined - as can be seen at the Andrew Wiles building on the Radcliffe Infirmary site it is not transparent, and much of the impact of the ‘glass gap’ between the two part (intended to show off the Observatory) is lost due to the reflectivity of the glass. The answers will also show up the degree to which the developer has understood the context in which he is building and the extent of his likely attention to detail when the building is built.
Development, and preservation, policies cannot be separated from road infrastructure, access and parking r public transport provisions.

I'd like to see more emphasis on the importance of the SETTING.

It is our view that the CAAs are a more important element of ensuring high quality design in Oxford and whilst we support the emerging SPD we consider that the other work commenced on the CAAs should be completed and endorsed before embarking on other more ambitious projects. We also seek assurance that there will be professional staff available to assist in ensuring that the policies contained within the documents will be applied flexibly to respond to the particular challenges presented by individual development proposals.