The Oxford Station Area Design Ideas Competition is a unique opportunity for transformational change in Oxford. There exists the potential for a holistic design approach that will not only achieve the project mission statement “to develop a rail hub and interchange for Oxford, reflecting its status as a world class city and a global centre for innovation and learning, and responding to its internationally recognised heritage assets”, but to:

- unlock the development potential of the site and be a catalyst for wider regeneration in the area.
- facilitate a world class railway station and transport hub, and increase its capacity in line with predicted future demand.
- provide a worthy gateway into the city of Oxford.

Having familiarised ourselves with the content of the masterplan document, we have carried out a careful analysis of the available information and data. We appreciate the ambition of the vision and objectives outlined and believe that our proposals develop and build upon the foundation that the masterplan provides.
A Key Principles of the Concept

Our proposals seek to build upon the principles of the masterplan to provide a new multimodal transport interchange that will also establish a major commuter hub and a gateway to the City of Oxford. The upgrade of Oxford Station will facilitate the future increase in capacity that the Great Western Mainline and East-West Rail upgrades will bring. In refining the masterplan, we have developed the following key principles which:

- Allow the new station to be constructed offline to ensure operational continuity throughout construction.
- Integrate intuitive wayfinding and orientation spaces to promote high quality and efficient modal interchange.
- Allow for bridge links to the potential future platforms shown in the masterplan.
- Frame vistas towards the city centre to help orientate passengers and create an arrival experience that is distinctive to Oxford.
- Add to and complement the Oxford skyline by respecting key views back towards the city centre while providing some variation and relief to the generally uniform horizontality of the built form and massing in the immediate station environs.
- Provide new public spaces to enhance the setting of both new and existing buildings, and connect with other urban realm initiatives such as the redevelopment of Frideswide Square.
- Integrate public links across the railway to improve east-west connections.
- Propose a mix of potential masterplan uses which are appropriate for the location, ensuring each use has its own street presence and identity.
- Develop an approach to the architectural language of the masterplan which is in keeping with the existing urban grain, being both sympathetic and complementary to the quality of architecture in the wider Oxford context.
- Maximise active frontages, particularly along Becket Street, in order to promote footfall southwards and encourage links to and from the future Oxpens development.

We have focused on developing designs for the station building, transport interchange and masterplan to maximise the commercial potential of the site whilst ensuring that the resulting townscape, architecture and urban realm can be developed to reflect and exemplify the high quality buildings and places that typify Oxford.

Station Proposals

The station building is provided over three storeys. The main east entrance is located at ground level with automated ticketing machines provided along with direct access for passengers and cyclists to Platform 1, via an entrance controlled by a gateline. The operation of this gateline could be managed at peak travel times to provide a more direct route for the majority of commuters leaving Oxford.

Escalators and stairs lead to the main railway concourse overbridge on the second floor and provide access to a staffed ticket office, first class lounge and remaining platforms on the paid side. A new (unpaid) public route is also provided across the overbridge linking the east and west sides. A second escalator bank leads to the first floor where food and beverage facilities as well as a direct link into an adjacent retail mall set over three stories. Escalators at the west entrance link the ground level directly to the concourse level. The station operations buildings are located on the western side of the railway, with a bridge link to further office facilities.

The overbridge has been designed to allow views to the south by removing the proposed retail spaces shown in the original masterplan. This also allows for future additional links to the potential platforms indicated in the preferred masterplan Option 3. This approach provides more direct access for passengers and minimises potential crowding that might occur if passengers were required to walk along extended platforms. This would require simple removal of a number of cladding panels to facilitate the installation of link
escalators and stairs while the existing lifts should still be able to serve the new platforms. The overbridge is a key architectural space, acting as an arrival and orientation space. The stone blade walls with slot windows between have been orchestrated to focus the views towards the city and its spires. This effect is enhanced by the gentle curves in both plan and section which help break up the mass of the building.

The station building is expressed as a gateway and is given prominence on the main pedestrian axis of Frideswide Square. This gives arriving passengers views into the city and helps to orientate them before they leave the station. Conversely, the station becomes a landmark and destination in a new landscaped setting which terminates the vista from the city centre to the west along Frideswide Square. The new public realm created in the former station has been designed to provide a more prominent pedestrian forecourt between the station and the Saïd Business School. We have proposed that the taxi drop-off pedestrian forecourt between the station and the Saïd Business School’s loading bay. The new public realm created in the former station has been designed to provide a more prominent pedestrian forecourt between the station and the Saïd Business School. We have proposed that the taxi drop-off pedestrian forecourt between the station and the Saïd Business School’s loading bay.

Our proposals retain the proposed location of the bus station and car park to the south, linked by a new pedestrian bridge directly from the station building and via a public galleria. The car park sits directly over the bus station, thus minimising the building footprint given to transport infrastructure and giving rise to opportunities for active frontages along Becket Street which help to generate footfall between the station and the future Oxpens development. This is complemented by a commercial building on the Frideswide Square corner, and a residential development at the southern end of the site. Our initial ideas also propose to rebuild the Osney Lane footbridge with ramped access, terminating on the eastern side of the railway through a landscaped courtyard adjacent to the new residential development.

An 18-bay bus station is provided on Becket Street with a 563-space multi-storey car park above it. This provides 480 long stay, 43 short stay and 50 staff parking spaces. The access and egress arrangements for the bus station and multi-storey car park have been designed so as not to restrict each other’s operation or the operation of the wider highway network. Pedestrians will have direct interchange between the railway station and the bus station via a new footbridge over Botley Road.

There is a further opportunity to review the design of the bus station by making use of the latest traffic management technologies such as real time location information and dynamic stand allocation to allow more efficient use of the stands. This would allow more buses to use a smaller number of stands which in turn means that we may be able to reconfigure the layout of the bus station to allow all buses to drive in and out of the stands in forward gear (i.e. no reversing out of bays). This would further improve operational efficiency and safety within the bus station, and also release more space for commercial opportunities and active frontage.

Residential and commercial development will generally be car free as excellent access is provided to other transport alternatives and there is also good access to local shops and services without the use of a private car.
B Materials and Colour Palette

Oxford has a vibrant mix of architectural styles and later interventions, such as Butterfield’s Victorian Keble College and Gilbert Scott’s New Bodleian Library sit comfortably with the more traditional stone spires and Gothic architecture of the central city. One of the principal challenges in the design of the new station is how to develop an appropriate architectural expression for the building while still respecting its historic urban context.

Our proposals begin to suggest a strategy for creating this architectural expression. The materiality and colour palette would need to be developed in consultation with key stakeholders but we have proposed the use of masonry as the principal facade material for the majority of the buildings to respect and relate to the solidity and materiality of the Oxford vernacular. The stone types selected would be similar in texture and colour to the limestones that are prevalent in Oxford, such as Headington or Clipsham stone. We would encourage the use of local materials where appropriate.

The use of stone would be offset with considered use of glass to provide views and natural light where beneficial and appropriate. Glazing will generally be in the form of fenestration, utilising high quality metal frames, most likely in bronze to complement the stonework.

Within the station building, materials will be selected that are high quality, self-finished and robust in order to minimise maintenance requirements for the operators during the life cycle of the building. Hard wearing stone floors are proposed, with matwells and anti-slip treatments where required. The internal cladding of the main walls could continue the stone language to extend the monumentality of the external appearance.

Our initial thoughts are to utilise natural materials to provide warmth to the interiors, for example slatted timber soffits to the ceilings, whilst integrating acoustic and lighting requirements as part of the design.

For the urban realm, we would be guided by the Oxford City Centre Street Scene Manual. This would typically include the specification of street furniture and the material palette for hard surfaces in order to provide high quality finishes of different textures and colours to distinguish the various public spaces proposed. This approach would also create a public realm design that is seamlessly linked to the redeveloped Frideswide Square external realm while tree and other planting will also be selected to complement the size and variety of species planted adjacent.
C Skyline and View Cones

The current Local Plan 2001-2016 has two policies that are specifically pertinent to height and view cones, with the purpose of protecting the character of the skyline, namely HE.9 - High Building Area and HE.10 - View Cones of Oxford. The skyline’s importance is also recognised in the adopted Core Strategy Policy CS18, which states that: “Views of the skyline of the historic centre will be protected,” and Policy WE10 of the West End Area Action Plan, which states that development should be designed with “an understanding of the area’s heritage, street patterns, views, skyline and important buildings.” Oxford City Council, Oxford Preservation Trust and English Heritage have collaborated to produce an assessment of the Oxford View Cones, in a report title ‘Oxford Views Study 2015’.

Our development, being within the 1,200 metre radius of the Carfax tower, respects the requirement that its height should not exceed “18.2 m (60 ft) in height or ordnance datum (height above sea level) 79.3 m (260 ft) (whichever is the lower) except for minor elements of no great bulk.” Likewise, our proposals are of a height, form and appearance which “will not detract from the views of Oxford,” particularly those “which are of special importance.”

One result of the height limitation, as noted in the Views Study, is a levelling off and uniform horizontality of aggregated built form and massing in certain key views to the City, such as in the Botley area, which is a visual detractor.

The Oxford rail station development presents a particular challenge in that it will include, necessarily, linear horizontal built forms. We have therefore articulated the built form such that its appearance and profile, where visible in a View Cone, and/or as part of the ‘dreaming spires’ City skyline viewed from elsewhere, complements and enhances that skyline by carefully and intentionally designed interventions.

“of no great bulk.” These interventions are of a scale and proportion that relates to and respects their immediate and wider context in the city and the skyline, and are attractive in their own right creating an elegant visual character for the station.

Of equal importance, in terms of views within the city and outwards from it, is the contribution that the development will make to the enhancement of the Frideswide Square gateway. This is achieved through the resolution of the building’s urban form and the sense of place it creates through its appearance and the design of its surrounding external public realm.

In summary our ideas seek to:

- Respect and meet the requirements of the Core Strategy and Saved Local Plan policies, and the guidance given in the Oxford Views Study;
- Ensure that the building elevations, their aggregated mass, form and profile do not detract in those external views from outside of and within the City;
- Through excellent design and positive interventions in the cityscape, complement and enhance the valued historic character of the skyline of Oxford;
- Ensure that such interventions, where they occur, are of appropriate form, scale and appearance, relating well to those buildings of merit which include those forming the ‘dreaming spires’ of the City;
- Help resolve the spatial design of the emerging Frideswide Square, and continue the enhancement of its external public realm, to reinforce the sense of place of this important gateway.
Building around and over major rail infrastructure brings significant challenges, which are amplified by the need to maintain the operation of the existing Station until the new station can be brought online. This requirement is critical to the design and implementation of the masterplan, and has informed the ideas put forward in our proposals.

The scheme also seeks to minimise the amount of construction required over the live railway. In developing the station design, we have sought to minimise its footprint by relocating non-station elements, such as retail, to either side of the tracks. The ambition is to provide a bridge structure which can be constructed to the side of the tracks before being installed in a single lift during an overnight possession, a technique that was used for the Pier 6 Connector at Gatwick Airport.

Offsite manufacture should be considered in order to minimise site storage and construction time. Our design assumes that key elements, such as the stone blade walls of the station overbridge, can be precast elements with a facing stone, which is a technology which we have utilised for other projects in Oxford. Similarly, the glazing could be a unitised system that could be installed from the inside of the station concourse to reduce scaffolding requirements over the railway.

The wider masterplan has been developed to minimise the overlap of distinct elements and uses, in order to allow flexibility in phasing and delivery. The phasing should allow construction compounds to be largely kept within the site boundary, minimising disruption to the immediate context.

One key opportunity that is not part of the scope of this study which we have looked at briefly is the proposed widening and realignment of Botley Road in order to accommodate new track and passive provision for future platforms to the south. The masterplan identifies that Botley Road is to be widened in order to mitigate and minimise disruption caused by the Botley Bridge widening to the west, with the ambition to add an additional city centre bound lane, provide cycle lanes and pathways to both sides as well as upgrade the existing flood alleviation pumping station. These works would also include the proposed lowering of Botley Road to allow conventional double decker buses and coaches to pass under Botley Bridge with a minimum headroom of 4.8m. This part of the project carries a significant cost and disruption – it is likely that utilities diversions will also be required as a result of these works.

Detailed studies of the road levels and gradients in conjunction with the final widened Botley Bridge are required to validate the proposals. A better understanding of the existing bridge spans and support locations would allow further analysis of options which would minimise the temporary works and road closures associated with these works. This study should also factor in the sensitivities of locating track and Signals & Controls to minimise future operational maintenance requirements.