

Oxford City Council Consultation on the North Oxford Victorian Suburb Conservation Area Appraisal

Comments by Oxford Civic Society Planning Group

Format & presentation:

1. As it stands, this document is inadequate and disappointing for the reasons set out below. It is in serious need of revision before it could become the basis for any City Council planning decisions. The actual purpose of the Appraisal does not actually seem to be defined, neither is the purpose of the Conservation Area (CA) reiterated. We believe these are significant omissions, highly relevant to any critique of the appraisal carried out.
2. We consider that the report “An assessment of the effects of conservation areas on value” (London School of Economics, 2012) provides a helpful guide to the social attitudes associated with the purpose of Conservation Areas, and the value of their characters
3. It is unhelpful that since no captions to photographs are supplied, it is not always clear just what point, if any, is being conveyed by the photographs included.
4. The City Council publishes a ‘Character Assessment Toolkit’ which it has recommended to Neighbourhood Forums as an appropriate methodology; it is not clear if the consultants in this case were so instructed, and the manner of compilation of this report seems not entirely consistent with the Toolkit format.
5. As a general observation, the appraisal appears to focus closely on the 19th and early 20th century buildings of the CA (perhaps excepting Wolfson College), and be much less considerate, if not dismissive of all later developments. However, these form an important element of the current character of the CA (many are Listed) and it is unsatisfactory that they appear to have not been given the same detailed consideration as the older buildings.
6. Related to this point, whereas there are references to brick, stucco and tiled roofs as typical materials used in the CA, there is very little mention or discussion of the materials or colour palette used on more modern buildings, including concrete, steel, copper, and glass.
7. It is unhelpful that the map included at Appendix A has no key to the colour-coded sub-areas.

Archaeology, Historical development, Spatial Analysis, Special features of the area:

8. Pages 8 – 33 comprise detailed, but apparently randomly-considered features of elements of the CA, but much of the information here is repeated, rather more understandably in the subsequent sections.
9. It seems questionable whether for the purposes of assessment it is really essential that so much geological, archaeological and historical data on so many individual buildings is recorded here. Whilst undoubtedly interesting, where really relevant to this appraisal it has been repeated in the “Character Areas” section anyway; or, where not, ignored therein.

10. On page 10 there is a reference to the former Acland Hospital site on Parks Road; this is erroneous; the Acland Hospital occupied a site on the west side of Banbury Road.
11. The comment on page 13: *"The scale of these buildings and their encroachment on valuable open space does not always harmonise with the original principles underlying the development of the suburb."* is a subjective judgement on spatial planning or aesthetics, which would be made more appropriately elsewhere than under the heading of "Historical Development".
12. In the "Historical Development" section there is almost nothing on the buildings of the 60s and 70s except about the damage caused by blocks of flats and university accommodation. Yet Wolfson, St Hugh's, St Antony's and St Anne's Colleges all have listed buildings from this period which are representative of the flowering of architectural quality in a contemporary style that may be considered bold, expressive, inclusive and poetic. Together with the buildings of the same era in St Catherine's, Brasenose, Christ Church, St John's, Keble, Somerville and Queens, all of which are also listed, they form a superb collection unrivalled except in Cambridge. The failure of the appraisal to even refer to this phenomenon is a major shortcoming.
13. It does not seem appropriate to the current purpose of this Character appraisal to speculate on what is not, and never has been there, for example (page 14): *"... and St Margaret's might have done the same if its tower had ever been built."* This speculation is repeated on page 16.
14. We would endorse the view expressed on page 15: *"... the Woodstock Road is one of the finest approaches to any world-class city and the character of the Conservation Area plays a major part in maintaining this quality."* We would add that the converse is also true – the characteristics of the Woodstock Road contribute significantly to the character of the CA.
15. In view, particularly of the statement quoted above, it is extraordinary that under the heading of "Character Areas" the Woodstock Road has not been separately identified and, indeed, has very little mention of any kind. This is a significant omission, for which no explanation has been provided.
16. Although the report is well illustrated with photographs (although un-captioned), none is used to illustrate views, where they would be helpful, to augment descriptions.
17. Some of the views referred to are in private areas (for example, St Hugh's College); this should be explained.
18. It is not clear precisely what is meant by a view not being "complemented"; if this is intended to mean that a view in the reciprocal direction is not available, it is untrue in some cases cited, and, for example, at the western edge of the CA, very significant views of, and along the canal are available.
19. We would question whether it is most appropriate to the current exercise to assess buildings entirely from the perspective of their original purpose. Whilst their significance may be due in part to historical usages and associations, these may not have a great deal of relevance to the maintenance or enhancement in the future of the character of the area. The emphasis on original uses suggests an aspiration that future 'enhancement' should perhaps involve regression to an earlier state.

20. The statement: *“The extreme eastern edge of the Conservation Area, backing on to the canal, is characterised by terraced housing ...”* is erroneous; the canal is at the extreme **western** edge of the CA.
21. There are many references to institutional buildings, but little recognition that this category should include language schools and tutorial colleges, in addition to the colleges of the University. In terms of the protection and enhancement of the character of the area, these institutions may be less favourable disposed than those with long-term traditions.
22. The analysis of features of buildings within the CA appears to follow no logical geographic pattern, leaping, for example, from The Anchor pub in Hayfield Road (at the western edge of the CA) to Gees Restaurant on Banbury Road, to the Cherwell Boathouse on the extreme eastern edge of the CA. It is not evident that it is intended to comment on the disposition of eating establishments, and such random distribution of assessments is unhelpful, particularly since it has no consistency with the subsequent appraisal of character by sub-areas. The same criticism might be made for the separate analysis of buildings of colleges of the University; Wolfson College, for example, is remote from the others and occupies a unique context.
23. We would question whether it is necessary or useful here to provide such detailed descriptions of the architects for so many of the buildings within the CA, including the institutional buildings of colleges of the University. It also seems doubtful that it is really necessary to provide such detailed histories of the University colleges in the context of this appraisal.
24. Although the report does not provide an architectural critique on all the buildings in the area, some appear to be singled out for subjective judgement (e.g. “distinguished”), whilst, in general, late-20th century or 21st century buildings seem to be criticized. This seems arbitrary, superficial, subjective, and not necessarily appropriate.
25. We would endorse the view that there are more buildings worthy of listing within the CA, and scope for more consistency in doing so, e.g. at 14 – 16 Bradmore Road.
26. The recording of significant non-Listed buildings is very helpful, as is its classification by street.
27. In the Summary, there is some inconsistency with the body of the text, for example, it is stated that: *“... views are generally confined to streets”*, whilst elsewhere there are references to views to and from the University Parks.

Character Areas:

28. The assessment of Woodstock Road, its relationship to the character of the CA, and vice versa has been almost totally ignored. This is a serious and inexplicable shortcoming, since Woodstock Road is singled out for favourable mention elsewhere, as referred to earlier.
29. The prevalence of mature trees is referred to as a positive feature of much of the CA, and this view is strongly endorsed. The corollary to this, however, is that all such trees should be given protection from unnecessary removal, and consideration should be given to the planting of replacements well before removal becomes necessary (for example, on safety grounds).

30. We would endorse the repeated criticism of the adverse effects of parking, and the consistently poor road and footway surfaces, on the visual character of the CA.
31. The brief mention of traffic and coaches serving schools underplays the significance of this factor, which can be great, particularly in term time.

Kingston Road:

32. It is not explained that the reason front gardens have survived here is because they are too small to be adapted for car parking; this enables them to contribute to "*space in the public domain*", but exacerbates the negative effects of street parking.
33. We would endorse the criticism of inappropriate replacement of windows and of inappropriate extensions. This begs the question of what constitutes reasonable improvement to 21st-century living standards, rather than the transformation of a property from an artisan's family dwelling to an entrepreneur's investment asset.
34. We would endorse the comments on the adverse effects of waste bins and randomly-parked bicycles.

St Margarets Road:

35. We would point out that 'cut-through' traffic is problematic on this road at times, though this has not been identified.

Banbury Road:

36. Although the body text states: "*Motor traffic has a dominant and negative impact on the space ...*" this is not listed as a 'key negative' characteristic of the area. This seems perverse. We would concur that motor traffic is indeed a key negative feature.
37. The "*institutionalisation of large distinguished houses*" is listed as a key negative feature, but it is not explained what the perceived negative impact of institutionalisation actually is. Visually-inappropriate alterations may have taken place, but this is not an inevitable outcome of institutionalisation. Levels of occupation may have changed (with perhaps more students and fewer domestic servants), but it is not clear what detrimental effect this might have brought about or is being complained of. More car traffic and loss of front gardens has occurred, but this has happened at residential properties as well. Inappropriate signage may be detrimental, but this is not an inevitable consequence of institutionalisation. It thus seems simplistic to suggest that the taking over of former large domestic premises by and for institutions (especially of the University) is inherently reprehensible. Institutionalisation, per se, has not necessarily had adverse consequences, and should be considered against the identified 'Key positive' of the quality of the buildings which remain; they do so, probably, because of their successful adaptation to institutional use.

North Parade:

38. The references to the “... *deadening perfection of modern industrially-produced glass* ...” seems nit-picking, not more appropriate or relevant here than elsewhere, and a somewhat pointless comment in view of the impracticability of remedy.
39. The references to institutionalisation are repeated here; the same criticisms of this apply.
40. In this area the views between villas offer tantalising glimpses of greenery and also of contemporary institutional buildings. The appraisal finds the former ‘interesting’ and the latter ‘bland’ and ‘brutal’. This is a subjective assessment not necessarily shared, and not substantiated by argument. Some of the buildings viewed through the gaps are listed – the HKPA buildings in St Antony’s and St Anne’s, for example. The point is missed that in this area the density is greater than further north, with the buildings more densely packed, larger and more institutional. It is thus part of the character of this area that views between buildings are of more buildings; this is an observation of fact which differentiates the area, not a judgement.
41. It is not apparent why the buildings of St Antony’s College are excluded from the area appraisal.

Lathbury / Staverton Roads:

42. Front gardens are cited as a ‘key positive’, yet most are adapted for car parking, as the illustrations show. It is probably more accurate to say that the size of the front gardens has enabled adaptation for car parking whilst leaving room for peripheral planting. This enhances the environment and aesthetics of the area by providing foliage, but also by removing the need to park in the street. The listing of “*Loss of front gardens to gravel and hard standing*” is hardly justified as a ‘key negative’ here.

Opportunities for enhancement and change:

43. We would endorse the view that other streets could be brought into CA protection, but would query the identification of particular roads, for which it is not apparent that any, even preliminary appraisal has been done.
44. It is evident that there is considerable variation in character across the CA; indeed, this appraisal is sub-divided for this reason, so differences in character of streets appears not to be a reason for not including them within the same CA.
45. We would endorse the view that there are many more buildings worthy of Listing, as identified.
46. Regarding the institutionalisation of buildings, we would concur with the final recommendation that specific elements of adaptation, signage, extension, use and management of garden areas, bin and cycle storage etc. should be addressed by appropriate development control. However, we consider it unhelpful that the report repeatedly refers to institutionalisation in terms suggesting that this is universally regrettable.
47. We would concur with a view that the further development of sites within the CA for institutional use should be considered carefully; more recent such development has been more orientated towards establishment of a ‘campus’ (for example, by University College at the site behind 115 Banbury Road), rather than the change of use of individual buildings.

48. Thus 'institutionalisation' has a variety of 'faces'. The specific circumstances of particular proposals require careful consideration of the social, as well as the environmental (aesthetic) consequences for the character of the area.
49. The appraisal makes some very reasonable recommendations to preserve and enhance the visual appearance of the North Oxford Suburb. Less attention is given to the effect of these recommendations on who will actually live there. The suburb was originally intended for those who lived and worked in the City of Oxford but there is increasing evidence of the acquisition of large properties by wealthy absentee owners; it is important that the CA does not become a deserted museum for occasional occupancy by international billionaires.
50. Given the desperate need for residential accommodation in Oxford, insistence on the retention of large gardens and simultaneous resistance to multi-occupancy (for example by subdivision into apartments more suited to modern family occupation) would not only be illogical, but would risk the creation of individual properties affordable only by those working and/or living elsewhere, acquired only for their investment value. The trend for this is already apparent in certain roads, already showing signs of becoming areas of lifeless desert, but the appraisal fails to recognise this.
51. The recommendations made in the appraisal should thus only be accepted with the proviso that sensitive multi-occupancy of these large houses should not only be permitted but encouraged, where appropriate. More occupation of buildings in some parts of the CA could be beneficial to the character and could ensure that this large area within the highly constrained city boundary makes its proper contribution to housing the many people who are unable currently to live there, or who may wish to 'downsize' and thus release less suitable accommodation elsewhere in the city.