

Consultation on the Central Oxford (City and University) Conservation Area Draft Management Plan and Design Guidance

Oxford Civic Society Response

Introduction

We welcome the progress of work on the Central Oxford (City and University) Conservation Area Appraisal.

The draft Management Plan and Design Guidance are generally clearly written and commendably brief, but they need to be the basis for more detailed implementation plan if they are to be effective. Evidence of the need for a rigorous approach is to be seen in the disappointing condition of much of this Conservation Area compared to other historic city centres.

We have limited our comments to those parts which we felt had significant impact on the outcome for conserving and enhancing the quality of the city centre.

7 Management Plan.

7.2 Streets, public space etc.

As streets are public spaces, we would replace the first two paragraphs with the following:-

The particular character and strength of the Conservation Area is the inheritance of the Saxon and mediaeval street form and layout. The streets of the commercial part of the central area can now be heavily congested with large numbers of people and vehicles reflecting the popularity of the city and the policy and practice in public realm design.

The Conservation Area has a number of contributory green spaces, the majority of which are owned and managed privately with limited public access. Blue spaces (The Rivers Thames and Cherwell and the Canal), often less visually and physically accessible, have played and continue to play an important role in the history and development of the City.

Key issues

Comment We have rewritten these to be concise yet hopefully without losing meaning:

- Comfortable walking in the city centre is constrained by large numbers of people at certain times of the day and week. This situation is exacerbated by the large numbers of summer tourists.
- Safe walking is constrained by narrow and cluttered pavements.
- There is conflict between vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians.

- Lack of care of the public realm by those responsible for its design and maintenance (particularly the County and City Councils) has resulted in a poor everyday experience of the commercial core.
- There is a shortage of public resting places.
- There is a low consideration for design and thought for quality in selection of materials, street surfacing, and furniture.
- Set higher standards for the repair of roadways and pavements in the historic area so that the disgraceful disfigurement places like Merton Street by crude tarmac repairs is prevented.
- Set standards for the permanent upkeep of greenery, whether in planters or in the ground. The deterioration of “Broad Street Meadow” through lack of maintenance should be an object lesson.
- Safeguarding existing trees (where the standards of protection and replacement seem to have slipped) as well as encouraging the planting of new trees.
- Action on advertising and shopfronts. (We commend Windsor’s approach).

Recommendations

Comment We have attempted to relate the above with recommendations.

1. Identify and make links between streets.
2. Prioritise the avoidance of conflict between vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians by increasing pedestrianisation of public space and footpaths and giving priority to cyclists and pedestrians over vehicles.
3. Identify and make safe pedestrian and cycling routes that connect the streets in the city centre.
4. Prioritise the enhancement of streets by decluttering and introducing a design and maintenance regime of high quality, robust surfacing materials.
5. Design and publish guidance on the design of good public space including street furniture, materials and lighting.
6. Place emphasis on the coordination and management of the public realm.
7. Introduce effective enforcement of public realm management to ensure its successful outcome.

7.3 Transport

No comment on the introduction.

Key issues

On the third point, amend to :- *parking can conflict with the use and experience of public spaces in the city centre such as Broad Street and St. Giles*

Comment

Whilst the car has brought benefits to a wide range of people and, it is said, the availability of parking has benefits for commercial viability in city centres, and brings income to the city purse, choices have to be made if congestion and pollution are to be reduced.

On the fifth point:- Delivery of goods into and around the centre adds to congestion, pollution and unsafe streets. New modes employing electric vehicles and pedal delivery bikes for the final mile need to be encouraged.

7.4 Uses

- Attempting to retain retail within the historic area may be unrealistic, given the dominance of the Westgate Centre and the shift to online shopping. Creative uses for buildings in the commercial core should be pursued instead, especially residential use for vacant upper floors and possibly ground floors also. This is preferable to student use which is likely to be the main alternative but does not normally have active frontages. Permanent residents are likely to keep the centre lively.
- If it is necessary to designate “an Area of Special Control of Advertisements” to control the appearance of shops then we would strongly support this.

7.5 Setting and views

- The “Oxford High Buildings Technical Advice Note” is described as containing “a robust methodology, clear design guidance ...” This may be true but it has not been wholly effective in the City Centre. Every new development proposed is for a building higher than that which it replaces usually with a predominantly flat roof, resulting in a steady increase in buildings in the centre with a uniform height of 20m or more. Every exception allowed then provides a precedent for other buildings which stretch the rules.

7.7 Opportunity sites

Comment

- We accept that there are buildings (mostly relatively modern) within Central Oxford which could be lost without harm. However, tight controls must be exercised over their replacement and “opportunity site” should not be just an excuse for a much larger building.
- We do not accept the mantra of providing more publicly accessible open space as a condition of developing opportunity sites. This is not helpful or encouraging to developers. Its provision is unlikely and its viability questionable and not necessarily appropriate in an historic urban setting. We would therefore recommend removing this clause.

Science area

- We welcome the inclusion in the Conservation Area of the University Science Area.

7.8 Implementation

There are one or two drafting points to make. In the second paragraph, the sentence, "There is already considerable cooperation, both formal and informal, which can be built upon to strengthen" needs rewording. In the fourth paragraph, we suggest adding "both social and economic" after "value". In the fifth paragraph, add "s" to "space".

8 Design Guidance

8.1 Purpose and Scope.

Comment

The introduction makes some assertions upon which we offer comment.

We agree with the statement in the fourth and fifth paragraphs which state: "Good design..... creates better places in which to live and work, effects health and well-being and (helps to) promotes community cohesion," and that emerging proposals should have "a deep understanding of the character, history and significance of the place".and show that "development is possible that can enrich the character and appearance of the area".

But we are concerned that "*guidance*" will only be effective if it is accompanied by much more precise and detailed specifications of requirements. Even a well-designed building may well be inappropriate in its proposed setting.

It is claimed that the Conservation Area has "international significance". Should awareness of this significance be promoted when we travel around the city outskirts, travel into the city and visit Oxford? The key considerations are Context, Setting, Experience. Much improvement in design and implementation for these is needed, we would suggest, to make Oxford more than "anywhere".

The guidance which follows in Sections 8.2 to 15 is comprehensive and helpful. We particularly approved of "**grain**" in 8.4; "**respect**" in 8.5; "**active frontages**" in 8.6; "**make a positive, animated and delightful contribution to the sky-line**".

In Section 8.8, under Advice, we would omit the references to "Creation of new public space....." and "green space" together with the clauses "New Green Space" and "New Public Space". This is because the creation of green space contradicts the stated character of Oxford's Central Conservation Area and secondly, the nature of the Saxon and Mediaeval heritage that the Conservation Area Plan seeks to conserve is one of urban form and layout of which its streets **are** public space.

8.7 Height and roofscape

We are not convinced that the vague statement that "The appropriate height for new development should be informed by the prevailing context and a full understanding of the impact on views, roofscape and Oxford's precious skyline" will be respected or enforceable. Developers will always try to push beyond reasonable limits. For example, they tend to regard the height limits as minima not maxima and the current fashion of having large dominating dormers as in the new Jesus College building and the proposed Clarendon Centre development tend to make these high buildings look even higher

8.8 Public and Green Space

Under Advice, we would omit the references to the "Creation of new public space....." and "green space" together with the clauses "New Green Space" and "New Public Space". This is because, as already stated,

the creation of green space contradicts the stated character of Oxford's Central Conservation Area and secondly, the nature of the Saxon and Mediaeval heritage that the Conservation Area Plan seeks to conserve is one of urban form and layout of which its streets **are** public space.

8.10 Materials

A published list of acceptable materials and colours is highly desirable, with some indication of where in the Conservation Area they may be used.

Conclusions

This is an informative document in which history is expansive and character is explained well. The role and importance of good design are clearly made but implementation and enforcement are challenges that remain to be tackled successfully. Time will tell. We are pleased that relevant issues relating to design are noted, such as plots, streets, skyline, and materials. Some are overlooked, notably excessive (and unsightly) traffic control (and directional) signage which is mentioned but measures for their control/reduction to reduce clutter and confusion are absent. The same applies to lack of control over provision for refuse, resulting in bins disfiguring the public domain in several locations.

Cross referencing between subjects and zonal descriptions would have been helpful and references to various arguments and issues could have been supported by referenced illustrations. We have suggested/recommended amendments where felt appropriate and have pointed out one or two errors, which have been very few and very minor. For example fig.139 is we believe Beaumont Place and Fig. 159 we believe is out of date.

It is stated that "many aspects of modern architecture are at odds with the historic character". Examples would be helpful. Perhaps the new building for Jesus College in Cornmarket? It is also stated that "the best examples respond positively to the context". The Queen Street entrance to the Clarendon Centre is hardly exemplary and is part of the development which has done much to set the precedent for the decline in the city centre's character. The other is Worcester College Sainsbury Building by Jameison and Pritchard. A delightful essay in brick, garden pavilion architecture but hardly an exemplar for the city centre. Perhaps this demonstrates the lack of (paucity) good modern architecture in the commercial City Centre. One needs to peer through College gateways to glimpse the possibilities. As is stated "the colleges do indeed contribute more to the exceptional townscape of Oxford than any other single factor".

With regard to transport and its effects on the City Centre, it would be helpful to reference the recent purchase of electric buses for use in Oxford and to developments elsewhere in the use of alternative power sources away from the internal combustion engine as well as smaller vehicles for public transport as used in the recent Olympic Games for example. The document states that the size and colour of buses detract from the character of the setting in the city centre. Examples could be given of small scale buses which house the power unit, which then pick up additional units at peak times.

We disagree with the statement that "there are a wide number of stakeholders responsible for the public realm". This perception is clouding the point which is that the County and City Councils are the key to the responsible use and maintenance of it. A statement could be added to the document

to the effect that they should define and resolve their objectives for the appearance and condition of streets in a clear public design document allied to a time-scale for completion.

We welcome the intention, stated in the Management Plan, to place greater emphasis on the coordination and management of the public realm and street scene.

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