

The Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel



St John's College, Mount Pleasant, Cambridge

27th April 2023

Confidential

The [Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth](#) sets out the core principles for the level of quality to be expected in new development across Cambridgeshire. The [Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel](#) provides independent, expert advice to developers and local planning authorities against the four core principles of the Charter: connectivity, character, climate, and community.

Attendees

Panel Members:

Russell Brown (Chair), Founding Partner of Hawkins\Brown Architects

Anne Cooper (Character, Architecture/Conservation), Director at AC Architects

Parthena (Nopi) Exizidou (Character, Climate), Net Zero Transition Lead for the British Antarctic Survey

Angela Koch (Character, Community), Founder, Imagine Places

Dave Murphy (Character, Connectivity), Transport Consultant, Associate at Momentum

Fiona Heron (Character, Landscape), Founder of Fiona Heron Limited

Applicant Team:

Dr Jon Burgess, Director, Head of Cambridge, Turley

Jessica Tearney-Pearce, Capital Projects-Co-ordinator, St John's College

Adrian Nicholas, BB&C Architects

Keir Dixon, Savills

Robert Myers, RMA

Oliver Cooper, Max Fordham

LPA Officers:

Joanne Preston, Principal Urban Designer/Panel Manager

Katie Roberts, Panel Support Officer

Tom Chenery, Senior Planning Officer

Gail Broom, Principal Conservation Officer

Leonie Walker, Urban Designer

Helen Sayers, Landscape Architect

Scheme Description and Background

Site

The site comprises 4 residential villas situated on the south-eastern side of Mount Pleasant, Cambridge. The site is approximately 160m in length and bounds the junctions of Lady Margaret Road and Northampton Street to the south. The 4 Villas are known as Whinside, The Knott, Fossdene and The Gables.

The site is within the West Cambridge Conservation Area and it also bounds the Castle and Victoria Road Conservation Area to the northwest. The West Cambridge Conservation Appraisal identifies the buildings as positive unlisted buildings. A number of trees on the site benefit from TPOs but all trees are afforded blanket protection as a result of their location in the Conservation Area. The site is bound by student accommodation to the north, northeast and southeast.

The 4 villas were historically independent residential properties but presently they are owned by St John's College and are used as student accommodation by Lucy Cavendish College.

Planning History

There is limited planning history on the site although there is history of developments on nearby sites.

- Fossdene benefitted from planning permission in 1994 for the change of the use of the garage at to a 1-bedroom flat.
- Whinside gained planning permission in 1990 for the change of use from the dwellinghouse to multiple student occupation of 16 students.

There are no other documented planning applications for development at the relevant properties.

Planning permission was granted in 2020 (application reference 20/03342/FUL) at the adjacent site to the southwest (Lucy Cavendish College) for the demolition of a

building and the erection of a four-storey building providing student accommodation, a college café and social learning space.

In 2018 planning permission was granted for extension to the Norfolk Building which is part of St Edmund's College to the North of the site which erected 16 student rooms, offices and research space and 6 family accommodation units.

Proposal

The proposal seeks redevelopment of the site for the following:

- Demolition of the existing villa Fossdene and the erection of a student accommodation block (AC1)
- Demolition of the existing villa Whinside and the erection of a student accommodation block (AC2)
- Demolition of the existing villa The Gables and the erection of a student accommodation block (AC3)
- Erection of a two-storey extension to the northern western elevation of The Knott.
- Erection of 2 student accommodation blocks (AC4 and AC5) in the rear portion of the site bounding the private entrance track to Lucy Cavendish College to the southwest.
- Erection of associated landscaping and structures which would accommodate cycle parking.

Officers have conducted 3 pre-application meetings with the applicants to date as well as a focused workshop on design/conservation and a separate focused workshop on trees/landscape.

Declarations of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

Previous Panel Reviews

This is the first time the scheme has been reviewed by the Panel.

Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel Views

Summary

After the site visit, the panel took a different view of the character of this site, and how it contributes to the West Cambridge Conservation Area, than the conservation officers.

They accept the case for the demolition of the three villas, (Whinside, Fossdene and The Gables) and see the logic in retaining the best parts of The Knott and extending this, given its prominence on the corner of Mount Pleasant and Lady Margaret Road. There is also a logic to bringing a new pedestrian route by the side of The Knott, to clarify and strengthen the links back to the main College campus.

The panel appreciated the long engagement of the design team with the project, their careful analysis of the site and commitment to make this new residential campus a viable asset for St John's College. The amount of information available for the DRP bore witness to all this hard work.

The panel accepted that the options for retention of all the buildings had been investigated with an open mind, and in sufficient detail to make a clear case for partial demolition. The panel welcomes the proposal to build to fully certified Passivhaus standards and the comprehensive sustainability matrix developed by Max Fordham (and their attendance at the presentation). They also welcomed the initiative to try to reuse 25% of the existing building fabric (mainly bricks and roof slates), gained from careful demolition.

The panel believes that the massing on the sites of the three demolished villas could increase to 3 or 4 stories, under the huge trees, without unduly impacting on the Conservation Area. This may allow the scheme more flexibility, to provide the target for accommodation, without introducing two new blocks into the existing gardens. A number of suggestions were made as to how the new villa floor plans could become more individual and distinctive, responding more creatively to the surrounding garden landscape, offering different types of accommodation, or by

adding a level of detail to the floor plans to respond to the provision of daylight, specific views, informal seating in corridors or the addition of building elements outside the Passivhaus form.

The landscape proposals suffered from the need to introduce two new villas in the existing gardens, and the introduction of a paved, central quadrangle that seemed alien to the historic nature of the site. In the discussion, it was agreed that at the next level of design, the garden spaces could become more particular to the buildings and offer a range of experiences and a stronger relationship between outside and in e.g., seating outside related to the ground tower kitchens.

The huge existing trees have a significant impact on the wider context and the specific layout of the new buildings. The documentation needs to be clearer; as to which trees are to be retained and removed, and if new trees are proposed can they be of significant scale?

The panel accepted the need for car parking on the site (13 spaces reduced from 20 currently) but recommended that the 'second street', running parallel to Mount Pleasant, is broken up into courtyards potentially with different materials, or a range of enclosures, so that it reads less as a traffic route.

Finally, if the scheme comes back to the DRP, it would be good to see a more developed management plan that could address issues of distance to bins and cycle store (maybe relocated to help integrate villa massing with the gardens), security (limiting number of ways into the site), management of the split between the main College campus and this site, managing deliveries and taxi/uber drop offs etc.

Detailed Comments

Climate

The panel welcomes that the building will be to certified Passivhaus standards and had asked what other sustainability targets had been set for the project. Max

Fordham's explained that they had developed a sustainability matrix that included: soft landings, thermal comfort, daylight, air quality, acoustic privacy, biodiversity, operational and construction embodied carbon etc.

The design team are also contributing to the circular economy by targeting 25% re-use of the building materials reclaimed from the demolished villas. The embodied carbon is being monitored at initial stage and then at RIBA Stage 3 (planning submission).

As a measure of the success of the sustainable initiatives; no additional electricity loading is anticipated while increasing the site use from 37 to 103 bedrooms. This is a measure of the impact of the Passivhaus standards combined with the use of domestic scale air- sourced heat pumps.

The provision for renewable sources of energy has been tested but photo-voltaic panels have little impact due to the extensive tree canopy (future adaptation will be safeguarded). The panel welcomed the comprehensive sustainability strategy and all of the panel's usual requests has been thoroughly addressed. The case for demolition has been thoroughly researched.

Architectural Character

The site visit was very helpful in understanding the contribution the buildings and trees make to the Conservation Area. Beyond the first, highly visible buildings at The Knott, the boundary with Mount Pleasant Road is unremarkable and marred by a dilapidated fence. In the panels view none of the partial views of the villas really contribute to the wider Conservation Area, and the elevations are mostly in poor condition. The pedestrian experience of Mount Pleasant is further compromised by the steep slope across the road. In this context, the scale and experience of the site is set more by the tall trees than the existing buildings.

The panel agreed that the scheme represented a 'tug of war' between the need to provide high quality, efficient and attractive accommodation for the College and the constraints of the Conservation Area. The panel accepts the rationale for the

demolition of the three existing villas (retaining and extending The Knott), accepting the need to provide buildings that reflect the aspirations of the College, and are fully accessible and rigorously sustainable, in a way that will attract postgraduates to St John's College.

The symmetrical layout of the four new villas around a quadrangle does seem alien to the language of the existing villas, and to the current informal garden landscapes under a dominant tree canopy. In thinking through the pedestrian cycle routes and wayfinding around the site, establishing a clearer hierarchy of a main pedestrian route (well-lit and monitored from The Knott), rambling through the centre of the combined site, but recognising the garden boundaries, could help achieve the masterplan strategy set out in the presentation. This might also help clarify the purpose and nature of the security arrangements at the boundaries to Mount Pleasant and Lucy Cavendish College's service road and carpark.

There was a concern that the CGI's of the proposals did not have the quality of the precedents of details and use of materials included in the presentation. Again, as more detail emerges the elevational drawings could better capture this quality of material choice and invention of detail.

If there is a cleared site, behind The Knott, and the retained circular, garden space; could the design team look at more massing options, including looking at three larger buildings, with more varied forms. These could still be set away from the taller buildings on the Lucy Cavendish College site.

The panel understand the constraints of Passivhaus but more varied forms, could embrace the landscape more directly. This might be achieved by adding winter gardens, green houses, balconies, outbuildings, cycle stores etc to enrich the basic forms. This could also help create a range of gardens or courtyards between the buildings and interacting with the Mount Pleasant boundary.

This variety of forms and massing could include taller buildings, or parts of buildings, up to 3 or 4 stories. If there still need to be accommodation in the gardens, then

these buildings could be more 'subservient' following the hierarchies of the current site.

Landscape Character

The designers need to further explore the character of villas, and how they interact with their large gardens. Each of the existing villas are different and create different relationships with their gardens and external spaces. The panel understand that the restrictions of the 'form factor' lead to rectangular forms, but could cycle stores, garden buildings, rental stores, walls/fences and planning help create a variety of landscape spaces around the buildings. Can the external spaces have stronger links to the kitchen/communal spaces. Can the buildings have a less formal relationship to each other, and the surrounding landscape?

The panel are not convinced of the grouping of buildings 3 and 5 (and their mirrored forms), and see the proposed quadrangle is alien to the villa garden pattern. The circular space to the rear of the Knott is successful in striking a romantic note. Could a vision statement of how each building frames the spaces around a new footprint be useful to develop the next stage of detail? It would help clarify the discussion to establish a clear tree strategy, being definitive about what trees are retained or removed, and what are the qualities of these huge, individual trees. Where new trees are introduced, the importance of large trees was emphasized to maintain the character of the site and how they interrupt the skyline above the buildings.

The landscape strategy, as presented, showed the four existing gardens with their historic landscape divisions retained, whereas the proposed scheme links the two central gardens around a hard landscape 'quadrangle'. If the nature of large individual villas, in separate garden settings, is to be retained then each villa needs to be different and to address the immediate outside spaces in a more direct, and distinct manner.

The panel understand the logic for keeping the minimum parking to the boundary with Mount Pleasant but raised concerns about the "second road", which could be broken up by a number of means such as changes in surface materials, creating

courtyard areas around the villas and avoiding an expanse of tarmac. The screening of the cars, creating a new boundary with Mount Pleasant, needs to be imaginatively handled using railings, hedges etc to create different settings for each building. This can provide passive surveillance, activity and lighting along what is currently a poor boundary condition.

Community

The client explained that the focus of the new campus will be single, or postgraduate students, family accommodation is provided elsewhere in the College. Around half of the students will come from abroad, often coming from living in student halls of residence. It is important that they live in supportive household groups, from 1 to 4 years.

In order to help avoid isolation, and engender a sense of community, the kitchens are large with areas of soft seating in a multi-purpose space, in line with the brief from the user group of college students. The panel suggested that, as the designs develop, there could be more variety introduced into the internal layouts (including entrance halls, corridors with seating, window seats, inside/outside spaces, balconies, glazed bays etc). Can the relationship between the landscape, and the other buildings and the internal spaces be more clearly characterized?

There remains a concern that the different means of accessing the new buildings by vehicles or as pedestrians or cyclists, and particularly at night could be confusing. Could the current proposals be reconsidered and wayfinding and the sense of arrival improved?

Connectivity

Cycling and walking

Specific provision is welcomed, although the locations could be better integrated to relevant living blocks for better proximity to each living space for more ownership and integration with its users, particularly those blocks located adjacent to Mount Pleasant.

This provision should also ensure flexibility and space to accommodate future trends such as e-bikes and scooters and larger bikes in a secure facility. To support reduced need for deliveries and car use, a hub of some form for cargo cycle hire would be worth considering which could also accommodate basic cycle maintenance facilities.

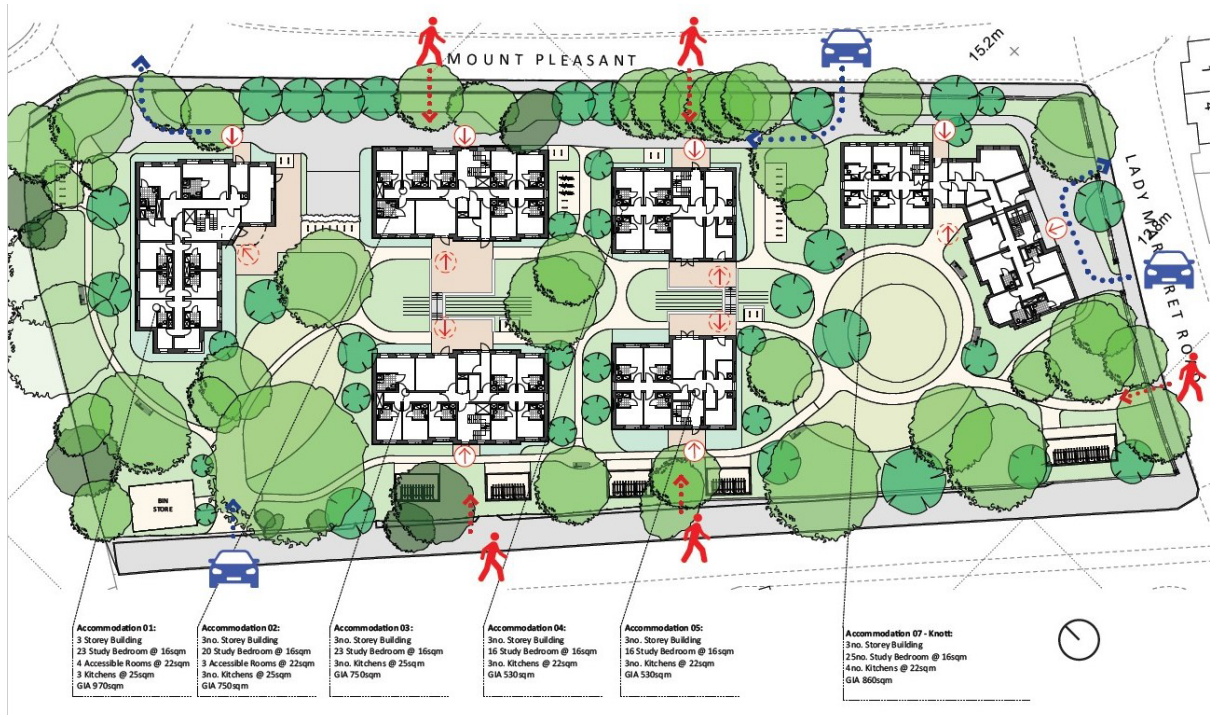
Car parking

A minimum level of parking provision is indicated and would be supportive of the well-connected location and promotion of walking and cycling, acknowledging that some provision is required for specific students and for Blue Badge provision. The internal vehicle link adjacent to Mount Pleasant accommodate the majority of the parking provision although the current layout lends itself to a linear car park that may dominate this section. Breaking up of this provision and/or using appropriate screenings on the northern boundary may help with this.

Servicing

It is understood that there is no Facilities Management provision or presence on the site. The intention for all deliveries to be undertaken from a focused entrance on Lady Margaret Road and the rationale is understood, however the practicality of this accommodating all deliveries including online shopping, takeaway deliveries would need specific management process, noting the distance of the delivery point from the majority of the residential blocks. This should be supported by a well-considered and practical process (which is understood to be used on other sites / colleges), although an alternative that allows for such deliveries to be made within a reasonable proximity to each block would benefit students for the transfer of heavy / bulky shopping for example.

Notwithstanding Facilities Management will not be present on site, it is understood that they would undertake waste collection and transfer from each block to the Bin Store in the north-west corner, this is some distance and does not allow easy flexibility for students to deposit their own refuse. This would need to be supported by appropriate strategy and equipment (powered pullers/carts which would need their own storage, suitable routing and timing).



Proposed site plan taken from the applicant's presentation

The above comments represent the views of the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel and are made without prejudice to the determination of any planning application should one be submitted. Furthermore, the views expressed will not bind the decision of Elected Members, should a planning application be submitted, nor prejudice the formal decision making process of the council.

Contact Details

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