

Commentary by Diane Haigh: Innovative thinking about the brief

The design charrettes in the Dept of Architecture touched on key areas of briefing that it might be useful to record – not least as the people involved were representative of the target population, being themselves an international set of postgraduate students and postdoctoral staff, some with partners and children. Their feedback, even in the limited time available, raised interesting questions about perceptions and priorities.

Creating a Community

It is enormously important for the University that NW Cambridge quickly coheres into a successful community where their international postgraduates and postdocs will enjoy living. Cambridge needs to continue to attract top talent to keep delivering academic excellence in an internationally competitive market. Rival job offers accompanied by a tempting accommodation package could woo people away from Cambridge. The new housing in NW Cambridge is the University's secret weapon.

We had a lot of discussion about what would enable a successful community to grow here, in contrast to the new housing on the West Cambridge site, where there is no sense of shared facilities. Partners in particular often find life out there very lonely and unconnected to the outside world.

The Colleges are widely seen as a very attractive aspect of academic life in Cambridge. They are a very strong factor in integrating newly arrived staff and students. Establishing a new postgraduate College here might bring the opportunity to rethink the nature and capitalize on the strengths of the institution, to be more unpretentious and outward looking, to allow more informal interchange, attract senior academic members and accommodate families.

The group visited colleagues in graduate accommodation such as the graduate flats in Churchill, Wychfield graduate accommodation for Trinity Hall and existing graduate Colleges such as Wolfson, Darwin and Clare Hall. It was felt that not since Ralph Erskine designed Clare Hall in the 1960's had there been such innovative thinking in how to integrate families, couples and single people. There, the varied grouping of the housing creates outside spaces where people meet one another casually in passing. The informality of the hall and common room spaces still encourages easy mixing. This unpretentious informal atmosphere seemed to offer a strong departure point for thinking about new colleges, whereas the grand traditional courtyard patterns are far less family friendly.

As there will be no existing community to start with, we need to understand how to provide opportunity spaces that are adaptable to different uses over time. It may be that a playgroup is needed to start with, whereas this space could become a drop-in centre or take small businesses providing local employment over time. Adaptable shell spaces facing on to the streets were suggested in several of the housing schemes.

The commitment to make NW Cambridge a low carbon community was seen as a big plus point. The charette scheme suggested moving the energy centre into a prominent central location so that this is signaled and celebrated.

Managing traffic along the cycle routes that pass through the heart of the scheme was a clear priority for pedestrian safety. The discrepancy in expectations between the experienced commuter traveling at speed and young children en route to school needs to be recognized in the design of these routes. Interesting cultural differences emerged about expectations that most people would cycle. It was felt that for some women this would not be an acceptable

assumption. Particularly after dark, many would not want to cross the poorly-lit green space from Storey's Way. With careful detailing of routes and bike parking, NW Cambridge can become a model of urban transport based on cycling.

Exploiting partnerships

The planned town centre will include facilities to be run by commercial partners. How can the University engage with them to get the most out of these new uses? The proposed supermarket, hotel and conference centre, community café etc will all be crucial generators of activity around the new central square. What will draw both locals and visitors and enable the place to thrive commercially? How can this local centre play a distinctive part in the city?

Discussions with the supermarket operator might encourage them to envisage one of their more innovative stores in this location. Increasingly they are willing contemplate bringing their specialist retail elements out of the box to the edges where the dispensary, the bakery, the mobile phone outlet can be accessed as separate elements. The supermarket might front on to a covered market to create further options for cafes and small retail units around the square adjacent to the anchor of the supermarket, whilst also providing a covered space for occasional events, such as farmers' markets, cycling trail meets, art fairs, childrens' activities, outdoor cinema band concerts etc.

Choreographing activities for the central square would be necessary to keep it busy. A positive programme of events and temporary pop-up installations will be needed to attract entrepreneurs who can exploit the space. This was seen as adding to the range of possibilities for Cambridge itself, where most of the public spaces such as the market square are constrained by existing uses.

Process not a product

Masterplanning is not just about defining an end state, a well coordinated physical environment which ticks all the boxes and looks good. It also needs to be able to track a process of growth that will provide a positive place for family life from the first. NW Cambridge cannot afford to spend years as a bleak building site - it will lose its key audience. Community building is a process of evolution, not a product. The University may need to factor in a positive process of consultation with its existing post-graduate population to really understand their needs and priorities, before it can spell out the new possibilities imaginative provision that will truly bring this place to life.