Commentary by Dr Kiril Stanilov

The North West Cambridge project sets a historical precedent in the growth of Cambridge by creating a new urban node in the periphery of the city, which will operate with a degree of self-sufficiency in terms of its mix of essential activities (dwelling, studying, work, shopping, recreation). In this, NW Cambridge is unique and quite different from preceding urban expansions to the fabric of the city, which have emphasised a single use, be that residential, institutional, or some limited combination of the two.

The charrette offered a valuable opportunity to assess, test and develop further some of the key ideas embedded in the existing masterplan. Within a very short time, the students participating in this event had to familiarise themselves with a wide range of problems that the existing plan had to address, and to offer new possibilities for the development of the area within the plan’s framework. In my view, the students offered several important contributions that promise to increase the chances of creating a successful new urban place with its own distinct character.

The two most potent ideas that came out of this intense design process and that challenge some of the assumptions of the masterplan are:

- **The proposal to condense public spaces.** The intention of the masterplan is to create a series of small squares anchoring different types of functions (places for public gathering, bicycle thoroughfares, parking courts, recreation, etc). However, the students felt that there is a danger in this approach of diluting the energy of public activities across the project area. In contrast, the students proposed to focus this energy in a single main square. In view of the relatively small size of the proposed development (and particularly of its first phase), it will be of critical importance to create a focal point that will operate as a heart of the new community. In that sense, my instinct is that there is a lot of merit in such a move. In addition, the students’ attempt to slightly realign the series of public spaces in order to preserve and accentuate some of the existing natural features of the site (the row of hedges, the magnificent mature trees, etc.) should be encouraged as a further line of enquiry.

- **The push to increase the overall density.** The students felt that in order to guarantee the project’s future success as a vital urban place, a critical mass of activities needs to be achieved by infusing more dwelling units and non-residential uses in the area. The charrette demonstrated that this could be accomplished in subtle ways, without significant alterations in the spatial framework of the masterplan. Proposed solutions included the infusion of residential or office uses above the supermarket, experimentations with a wider range of residential building types, and the clustering of higher densities around the main square. All of these proposals are very reasonable propositions which deserve to be explored further.

In the course of the charrette, there were a few other interesting suggestions (the adoption of existing building typologies for the design of individual urban blocks, the creation of flexible and adaptive architecture, the adoption of a proactive environmentally sensitive theme guiding the building design), but the main urban design ideas that came through in the course of this experience are worthy of further exploration in terms of the feasibility of the proposed ideas. In this sense, the charrette offered fresh new insights into a range of design possibilities at this stage of the challenging NW Cambridge project.