Commentary by Joanna van Heyningen, of van Heyningen and Haward Architects

I felt that the timing this exercise, initiated by the Arthur Marshall Visiting Professor of Sustainable Urban Design at Cambridge School of Architecture, was apt – it could result in being very useful to the University. Its purpose was to test the viability of the Masterplan for the University’s phased development of North West Cambridge, by asking graduate students in the Department of Architecture to design parcels defined by the Master plan. So the exercise was certainly a teaching tool, but it was much more than that: it was a demonstration, in advance of the real thing, of what is thrown up when a group of different architects and designers set to work on developing the Master plan in detail.

It could be the first of several of such informed debates at the Cambridge School of Architecture, undertaken by mature students from different backgrounds (who themselves could be the users of such a development) and it could be an exemplar of how development work should be openly tested now and in the future. It should be of great value to the University and its consultants working on North West Cambridge, the University’s own Department of Architecture is an excellent vehicle for it.

For me, the main lessons of this exercise were:

1. The proposed development at North West Cambridge differs from a normal commercial development. Of course value for money must be achieved, but the University is in a position to prioritise those things which it values highly, such as the quality of the architecture and the building, its longevity, and its flexibility to allow for future change of use. Examples of adaptability that we discussed were:

- the capability of ground floor accommodation to convert eventually to retail or to offices as the development matures
- parcels of student accommodation to convert eventually into a new College, needing its own porter’s lodge, common rooms, perhaps dining hall.

2. The importance of making a Place. North West Cambridge has the mono-culture’s inherent danger of not being as vibrant and interesting (and as good to live in) as a place that has grown up over time and houses a multitude of uses and users. The very recent example of West Cambridge suffers from this problem, among others.

3. However, the supermarket envisaged for the first phase at North West Cambridge represents a terrific opportunity to make a Place right from the start, bringing people from elsewhere in the region into its heart. Attention needs to be paid to how vehicles arrive, and how people get from their cars into the supermarket. The students suggested ways of capitalising on the presence of visitors to the advantage of the life of North West Cambridge and its residents. The University has power here. We know that high-end supermarkets are keen to take this Anchor Store, and we think that they will work with the University to cater for its wider needs, if the University is proactive about demanding this.

4. It is vital that the first phase of the development includes the whole of the new Public Square, with all its sides completed. Again, this might not be what a
commercial developer would do, but the University must put its resources into making a true Centre for North West Cambridge from the outset.

5. The Public Realm at North West Cambridge is arguably the most important thing about it. It should be designed as the context in which the architectural parcels are developed. Again, an opportunity for the University to act as a culturally and environmentally conscious client. The integration of car, public transport, bicycle and pedestrian routes and spaces combined with a thoughtful exploration to fronts, backs and servicing, and commitment to quality in materials and landscaping – these are all at the heart of a successful phased development at North West Cambridge. This exercise at Cambridge’s Department of Architecture has demonstrated exactly how difficult the design of Public Realm is, and how it does not come about by accident. It needs to be adaptable and thoughtful, and it needs to be in place before the architectural lots are set.