

## **Commentary by Jonathan Rose & Rosanna Law, AECOM**

As Masterplanners for the North West Cambridge project, we were delighted to participate in the three stage urban design charrette and to be able to contribute both to the briefing and to the review process. At the outset, we were able to provide the charrette with the illustrative masterplan developed for the purposes of the Outline Planning Application and a preliminary draft of the Detail Masterplan for Phase 1.

Importantly, these documents set out the broad principles of the University's development proposals but are not a finite, closed set of design solutions. Rather, the aim has been to secure as much flexibility as possible for the University through the planning process, by establishing outline parameters for development only at this stage. In due course, architects will be appointed to develop site specific solutions in response to the University's brief and detailed design guidance, prepared by the masterplan team. Neither the briefs nor any design guidance for Phase 1 was available at the time of the charrette.

It was exciting to witness the charrette moving from first principles through an iterative three stage design process. At first, teams grappled in isolation with the functionality of plot specific requirements and as initial solutions were brought together, they were confronted with a totality that appeared disjointed and unresolved in many areas. The need to work together closely in relation to each other's developing proposals was absorbed and a guiding plan was advanced towards an alternative synthesis. By the third iteration, a clearer urban structure was established to coordinate all proposals, including stronger hierarchy to the open space and movement network, distribution of uses, massing and an ambition to provide visual coherence through unity of materials.

In a condensed way, the charrette has followed a path anticipated when architects are appointed by the University and as such, many of the findings and recommendations are consistent with the design guidance and the reference plan to be provided to architects in due course. However, a number of interesting ideas and critical reflections were raised through the charrette process, which will add value to the evolving masterplan and the University, beyond the learning experience for the teams involved.

While there are several suggestions which may or may not be valid when tested in detail, the goal to establish a singular focal point for welcoming new students and postdocs is particularly important. In the third iteration, this is manifest in both the 'single square concept' and the idea of a campanile to mark the entrance to a new collegiate cluster. Throughout the masterplan process, the single square concept has been studied, debated and eliminated on the basis that a single space would be too large and weakly defined to hold the proposed density of uses with any intensity of urban experience. The direction promoted by the masterplan is by contrast, to create two distinct but connected spaces within a network of streets and squares defining the local centre, either with a commercial or a community or a collegiate focus.

The charrette team's proposal to create a strong arrival signifier, integrating porters lodge, bus stops and cycle parking is welcomed and should be taken forward in the context of placing greater emphasis on the importance of Ridgeway Place to the arrival experience and the identity of North West Cambridge to the University overall. This should include creating

a strong setting for the new collegiate cluster to the west of the Local Centre, where Ridgeway Place itself may provide the threshold and address for a new collegiate development. Also, the image of a campanile marking North West Cambridge is beguiling, the efficacy of which will be discussed with the appointed architects and the University's development team amongst other suggestions, in due course.

Otherwise, it is very encouraging that many of the high level findings of the charrette team include aspirations and ambitions embodied within the Masterplan and held by the University's project team. The charrette has been an exciting foretaste of the design development process ahead and points to the many ongoing learning and research opportunities for the University provided by this ambitious and influential long term project.