Commentary by Professor Alan Short

Professor John Ellis, as a prominent 'New Urbanist' has given us a tremendous hands-on lesson in practical urban design in considering NW Cambridge. We inspected the first iteration of the alternative masterplan with interest, an heroic effort by our talented and enthusiastic graduates which seemed simply to confirm just how difficult meaningful design at this scale is. However this was not to be John's sole revelation by any means but the start of a truly fascinating process in which on a fortnightly basis the plan became liquid again and its many authors learnt how to broker their various aspirations and architectural preferences within the group.

The lesson for us was the process. The response to the notice inviting interest in the live project was overwhelming. A significant proportion of the world's leading designers, not least landscape designers, responded and it has been a very difficult, painstaking ad scrupulously fair exercise to assemble shortlists out of this response. Will the successful teams be able to achieve the humility, the 'state of grace' our much less experienced graduates started to achieve, to allow their emerging ideas to liquify and condense through a similar iterative process. John has shown us how powerful such a process can be and that the hitherto exemplary management of the selection process should redouble all efforts to achieve this level of transformation in which disparate designs undergo a similar level of transformation. The stakes are of course very high.

Within the University community one detects a certain scepticism that a wonderful new place, a real alternative destination, might emerge out of this huge exercise rather than an empty shell reminiscent of the new coagulations of housing one sees en route to London. The ancient centre of Cambridge sets an appalling challenge, the physical consequence of an almost infinite number of heartfelt decisions, disagreements, even calculated insults toward neighbouring institutions in the distant past, every square metre precious and loaded with associations, personal and public. What new architectural arrangements are going to provide the infrastructure for a myriad new associations and memories in NW Cambridge? That is the not inconsiderable challenge to the small army of international class designers to be selected.

It is not unsurprising that Ralph Erskine's Clare Hall captured the attention of our graduates. Here Erskine stepped around the natural tendency to revive the college quad form, as many other did in post war Cambridge, to invent a wholly new and persuasive close configuration of type buildings for their new purposes, courtyard houses for visiting academics with young families, heaven forbid, apartments for graduate students on their way to post doctoral posts, an extraordinary unified common room opening onto a non hierarchical dining hall and a courtyard for scholarly work, it is still slightly shocking but now filled with associations and the memories of a large and loyal alumni. So a contemporary authenticity is achievable. Very happily the University has set up the NW Cambridge project imaginatively enough to have a real chance of delivering against this challenge.