

Report Title: Kings Buildings Draft Planning Framework
Issue Date: 18 December 2008
Client/Developer: The University of Edinburgh
Lead Designer: RMJM
Local Authority: City of Edinburgh Council
Location: Edinburgh
Planning Ref:
Details: Draft Planning Framework prepared by the University of Edinburgh, and approved by the City of Edinburgh Council for public consultation with a view to the final document being adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance



Architecture+DesignScotland
Aithearachd is Dealbhadh na h-Alba

Introduction

This report relates to a Draft Planning Framework prepared by the University of Edinburgh, and approved by the City of Edinburgh Council for public consultation with a view to the final document being adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance. The project was presented to an A+DS Design Review panel on Tuesday 02 December 2008 in Edinburgh.

The project was presented by representatives of RMJM and of the University of Edinburgh.

The meeting was also attended by representatives of the City of Edinburgh Council.

A+DS Views

1. General

We commend the University of Edinburgh for commissioning a framework of this kind, and for the way in which they are working with the City of Edinburgh Council to develop it. We are generally supportive of the way in which the Framework attempts to improve on the quality of space between buildings, and addresses the difficult issue of planning out the development of a complicated group of uses over a number of years, on a congested site. We have some concerns relating to the vision and detail in the proposed framework, and some suggestions of areas in which the Framework could be strengthened.

2.0 Vision and Scope of Framework

2.1 We commend the intention to organise and improve on what is currently a very piecemeal built environment with little public outdoor space of any quality. We believe that the measures proposed are practical and sustainable in that they do not propose wholesale reconstruction, but rather selective replacement of ad-hoc structures and the use of local interventions to give form and character to existing routes and places.

2.2 We note that the decision making around the retention of buildings appears to be based on whether they are Listed or not, or relatively new. We suggest that a more robust analysis of the buildings on the site is required, which assesses them both in relation to their functional use, and how they contribute to the current aspirations and new plans for improving the general environment and public spaces of the campus.

2.3 We commend the intention to extend life on the campus to more than the daytime 9 to 5 period. However, we question whether the Framework will achieve the radical shift in usage within, and perception of, the Campus that is required. The introduction of new facilities, that can attract students who do not normally use Kings Buildings, while retaining those already on the site, may assist.

2.4 The University of Edinburgh has a long tradition of procuring high-quality buildings, and the development of the Kings Buildings site presents significant opportunities for it to do so in future. We suggest that the Framework should encourage a continuation of this tradition.

3.0 Building Massing and Landscape Strategy

3.1 The only indicators within the Framework of new and existing building heights are plan diagrams. This does not establish a clear massing strategy, but rather relies on setting a maximum datum height on new buildings established by existing building heights. We query whether using a datum like this is too simplistic, and we would encourage a more three dimensional and sectional analysis of the site and the potential future development.

3.2 The Framework appears to lack a Landscape Strategy that addresses and informs how new and existing buildings relate to the public realm, and to the wider landscape and built context. We suggest that such a strategy be prepared, to clarify relationships between buildings and landscape, and inform how the internal spaces within buildings relate to the external spaces and should relate to the three dimensional analysis referred to above. Ground Floor activities are vital to successful places, and new buildings could be organised, sectionally, to exploit this. While many building functions will have highly technical briefs, even working laboratories can make a successful backdrop to animate external space.

3.4 The indicative plans suggest that buildings will generally be formed into quadrangle type arrangements for the different academic disciplines. We note that a quad arrangement could well be suitable in some situations but may not be in others, especially given the character of some of the existing buildings. A three-dimensional Landscape Strategy may assist in developing alternative typologies.

3.5 We commend the strategy of limiting regular car access to the perimeter and clearing out the centre of the site to create a 'Green Heart'. However, it may be necessary to be more prescriptive as to how the landscaped perimeter is formed, so that roads and cars are not over dominant in these areas. These edges form the approaches to the campus and are highlighted as important areas of public realm.

4.0 Sustainability

4.1 We commend the University for its pro-active approach to setting high standards for sustainability in their estate. Given the academic fields involved here, who have much to contribute to the agenda, Kings Buildings could become a real exemplar for a sustainable and low-carbon development. Such an aspiration, and

any strategic measures that will be necessary to support it, should be incorporated into the Framework at this stage.

4.2 We are encouraged by the way in which the University is working with the City Council to develop a public transport strategy for the site. A sustainable travel plan should be incorporated into the Framework, to promote pedestrian and cycle use, and ensure that the Campus is part of a highly integrated public transport system.

5.0 Future Use of the Framework

5.1 We note the funding and usages of future buildings may be unknown. In order that the structure and intention of the Framework does not get lost as individual projects are developed, we encourage the University to take ownership of it, and use it to encourage joined up thinking between the different departments and successful delivery of the vision.

Conclusion

We welcome the University's aspirations for Kings Buildings Campus, and the commissioning of a framework that provides a structure for future development in a way that can adapt to meet uncertain future requirements. We generally support the measures presented as being sensible to promote place making, while working with the buildings and spaces available. However, we feel that there are aspects of the Framework that need to be revisited and developed if the aspiration of the University and the potential of the site are to be realised, and we suggest that the issues highlighted be investigated. It is also crucial that the University review and clarify how the Framework is to be delivered. We look forward to seeing how these proposals are developed.

Report issued: 18 December 2008