

## PROJECT APPRAISAL



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| Project Ref/Title:    | <b>ABC 25 – Draft Masterplan Rowett North (AECC)</b>   |
| Workshop Date:        | <b>11<sup>th</sup> June, 2015</b>  |
| Venue:                | <b>A+DS, Bakehouse Close, Edinburgh</b>  |
| Workshop ref/ Series  | <b>Workshop 04 Series 01</b>   |
| Workshop Type:        | <b>Appraisal</b>   |
| Issue Date:           | <b>16<sup>th</sup> July 2015 (Reissued with amended project title)</b>   |
| Planning Authority:   | <b>Aberdeen City Council</b>   |
| Planning Status/ Ref: | <b>Draft Masterplan Rowett North (AECC) and Planning Permission in Principle/Ref. 150826</b>   |
| Client / Developer:   | <b>Aberdeen City Council/Henry Boot Developments</b>   |
| Lead Designer(s):     | <b>Keppie Design</b>   |
| Project/ Category:    | <b>Hotel/Leisure/Arts, Office Public Realm, Infrastructure Masterplan</b>  |
| Location Type:        | <b>Edge of Settlement</b>  |
| Previous Workshops:   | <b>Workshop 01 – 28<sup>th</sup> January 2014</b><br><b>Workshop 02 – 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014</b><br><b>Workshop 03 – 24<sup>th</sup> March 2015</b> |

## **1.0 Introduction**

*(This summarises project status and background information that was indicated to A+DS prior to the workshop or clarified by the parties during the workshop. In the event that any of the statements made in this introduction are considered incorrect A+DS should be advised and the report will be amended.)*

- 1.1 This report forms a Project Appraisal for a Draft Masterplan for Rowett North (Aberdeen Exhibition and Conference Centre) and application for Planning Permission in Principle. The project was referred to A+DS by Aberdeen City Council as a Locally Significant Project. A separate appendix includes the Panel's advice on the AECC building. As the application for the building has not yet been submitted the advice contained in the appendix will not be released into the public domain until the application has been lodged with the Council.
- 1.2 The project was discussed with a Design Forum Panel over a series of workshops beginning with an initial site visit and workshop held in Aberdeen in January 2014. Subsequent workshops were held at A+DS in Glasgow July 2014 and March 2015. The submitted masterplan was presented to an A+DS Panel for consideration on 11th June 2015 at A+DS in Edinburgh.

## **2.0 Workshop Scope**

*(This section of the report sets out the intended purpose of the workshop as agreed prior to the workshop or as adjusted, by common consent, during the course of the workshop.)*

- 2.1 As the final workshop in the series the session offered the opportunity to discuss the developed masterplan designs following on from the previous workshop, and to give A+DS's concluding appraisal of the project as submitted for planning permission in principle.
- 2.2 Proposed topics for discussion were based on the outcomes of the previous interim workshop and including items suggested for discussion by the Council as follows:
  - A Vision/concept
  - B Inter-relationship between landscape and buildings
  - C Central Piazza / subterranean space
  - D Relationship to wider context, connectivity and amenity
  - E Wayfinding, routes and public space
  - F Strathcona House
  - G Development of AECC building *(see Appendix 2.)*

## **3.0 Masterplan Appraisal Outcomes**

*(This section of the workshop note records the advice of A+DS arising from discussion at the workshop and subsequently consolidated in order to provide a clear statement of advice, pertinent to the stage in design development that the project has reached. It begins with a summary of the appraisal by A+DS including the overall rating given for design at the conclusion of the Design Forum process, considering in particular whether buildings and environs have been successfully designed to meet the needs of users and the wider community.)*

### **3.1 Summary**

- 3.1.1 The Panel support the Project Team, Client and Local Authority in their ambition for this significant and exciting new landmark facility for Aberdeen and welcome the

development of a masterplan for the site in principle. The Team are congratulated on the quantity and level of detail of work presented, which allows a clear understanding of the current scheme.

3.1.2 The principle and ambition for the project is supported, it is clear that the proposals are aiming to be more than a series of internalised sheds set in a car park, as has been the case in the past, and this is welcomed. The original concept of ‘ripples in the landscape’ had charm and promise. However, the concept has not been developed through the spatial masterplan at a formative scale, determining the nature of routes, spaces and built forms. Although some of the early concerns over legibility and movement have been partially addressed in the consolidation of the masterplan, significant concerns remain over the nature of routes, connection with wider context and the developing architectural language. The ‘ripples’ are largely applied in small scale landscape treatments and deconstructed into angular building details. This approach is vulnerable to cost pressures as the removal of the proposed pattern language applied to buildings and spaces would, in the absence of large scale framework providing experiential qualities through the nature of routes spaces and views, leave a much reduced proposition. Aspects of quality on the site, such as Strathcona House, have been crowded out and at the time of reviewing little of quality or amenity is proposed to replace them.

3.1.3 For these reasons the project is assessed to be category 3 “with potential”, and subject to development to address the issues of ‘further advice’ given below could progress to category 2 “well considered and supported”. The Masterplan needs to be robust in order for others to take forward the developed framework and concept in a coherent manner and to embed the level of articulation to landscape and built form presented, otherwise there is potential for the outcome of the project to be at risk (category 4 unsupported).

#### 3.1.4 Further advice:

- *The project represents a hugely significant endeavor for the City, and development will place big demands on the environment outwith the site beyond the conventional red-line development boundary. The Council has a key responsibility through both spatial planning and role as client to lead and ensure wider connectivity in terms of roads and public transport, and to progress development of visual axes off the site to ensure that the facility has sufficient presence and is well connected if the project is to meet the Council’s expectations and aspirations for a new “world class state of the art facility”.*
- *It is important that the budget is prioritised to ensure that money is channelled towards getting the key experiences of the site and facility right, and that the masterplan is robust enough for others to take forward, so that the intended vision for the project does not become diluted or lost.*

### 3.2 Interrelationship between landscape and buildings

3.2.1 The masterplan proposal is ostensibly generated by an idea of relating new buildings with the landscape and therefore coherence between the two is key. The Team has produced additional information, including a physical model and long landscape sections, which help demonstrate how the masterplan proposals remodel the valley landscape topography producing extended plains which cut into and extend above the natural topography, and built elements placed around those plains. The original concept had fluidity and a seductive feel, with elements of buildings buried within the valley, and with the AECC buildings being seen largely as modified landscape adopting the same fluid forms. While there are sinuous qualities present in the proposed landscape treatment this is not the case in the built forms and there is

fundamental uncertainty as to whether the buildings are intended to be set on - or be part of - the landscape, and to what the extent the two are reinforcing one another.

3.2.2 The Panel were concerned about the impact of cut and fill on the experience of the site, and particularly by impact of the extent of excavation proposed to form the Business Gateway Zone, on the amenity and setting of the development where office blocks are shown with accommodation looking north into steep banks several meters high, impacting light and views. The extent of excavation means that routes would be significantly above or below grade, impacting permeability and connection with the landscape. The Team advised they have explored the proposed levels further in view of the Panel's concerns but that any alteration to the proposed cut in this area would be cost prohibitive. Additional landscape treatment along the edge of the boulevard has been introduced with breaks from the footpath into the Business Gateway to increase pedestrian permeability from the north.

### 3.2.3 Further advice:

- *There needs to be further clarity on the extent to which buildings across the site are intended to be set on, or part of, the landscape.*
- *The level of proposed cut and fill needs to be optimised relative to the existing site topography, particularly in relation to the Business Gateway Zone where issues of concern remain. Although the primary access to the offices is from the south, a more level access from the north would be advantageous and help create a more active frontage to the boulevard.*
- *The landscape exemplars shown by the Team suggest that the rippled landforms would be occupied as habitable spaces, however the current landscape proposals show these acting as buffers alongside and penetrated by routes. The detail design of the landscape should be worked up to provide the amenity being illustrated.*

## 3.3 Strathcona House, landscape amenity & connectivity to adjacent communities

3.3.1 The proposed removal of Strathcona House remains a key issue of concern for the Council. Earlier in the process we encouraged the design of the AECC to be developed to provide a positive relationship between the buildings and adjacent uses, and further evidence was sought to justify the removal of the existing building, and to give the Council comfort that its potential re-use had been fully explored. The Team advise that they have tested various options for retaining and reusing the building but that due to the significant expansion of the original brief / required gross floor area for the AECC and difficulties identifying an operator who would take on a building close to loading areas they have concluded that the existing building no longer plays a viable role in the masterplan. The design decisions to extend the AECC closer to Strathcona House (rather than to the north and west) and to place the service areas of the AECC to the south and east therefore appear to have impacted negatively on the potential conversion and reuse of the House.

3.3.2 Strathcona House is a building of substance and quality and its presence was a key generator for the form of the original masterplan and the AECC building and without it the masterplan concept appears to have less meaning. Notwithstanding, the Panel are sympathetic to difficulties in handling the difference in scale between the existing and proposed buildings. The House occupies a prominent part of the site at a key gateway point from the southeast, if the building is to be removed it is imperative that something of a commensurate quality and amenity take its place.

3.3.3 The proposed incorporation of amenity/recreational space within the masterplan would be beneficial to the neighbouring communities provided it feels accessible and

encourages use. The burn corridor in particular has the potential to become a fantastic resource for the site and the surrounding area. The landscape strategy and detailed landscape design along the corridor has developed positively to be more consistent with the ripple in the landscape concept, through proposed realignment of large sections of the landscape and earth mounding incorporating planting, feature seating, artworks and stone walling to create undulating contours leading down to the burn. However, further work on creating quality of connections is needed to ensure that initial experiences into the site are inviting.

#### 3.3.4 Further advice:

- *The space currently occupied by Strathcona House is at a point of confluence where a number of components in the proposed masterplan are coming together – the rippling landscape forms, the crossing of the burn, the entrance into the site form the A96 and the pinch point of the AECC/hotel. A more dynamic design device should be developed at this point to bring all of these things together, to celebrate and contribute to a greater sense of arrival and departure from the site. (See also point 1.3 in appendix 2 in relation to AECC appraisal.)*
- *There is currently a missed opportunity in making a usable landscape space at the southeast entrance where the existing building currently sits. There could be potential to create a south-facing amphitheatre or break out space to occupy the proposed landforms rather than simply penetrate them with routes. The Panel recommend this be developed further.*
- *The crossing of the burn is important in forming a sense of arrival into the site. The proposed culverting of the burn is demeaning and the Panel recommend that a bridge crossing would create a much more positive experience at this point.*
- *Currently the AECC building presents its back to the space and the associated service area creates an unsatisfactory relationship with the entrance into the site. Further work is necessary to minimise the impact of the loading area to provide more usable space for the landscape at the rear of the hotel/AECC and an improved entrance into the site.*
- *Ongoing discussions with the Council and adjacent communities, including the landowners of the proposed Newhills settlement, are encouraged to help shape the detailed development of the proposed open spaces, coordinated vistas and to ensure quality connections are made between the AECC site and the wider area.*
- *Any scope to move or amend the form of the Energy Centre strip along the southern edge of the AECC building to improve views through from the A96, and particularly the underpass from Newhills, should be taken.*

### 3.4 Wayfinding, routes and vistas

3.4.1 The Team has illustrated a number of key vistas and routes into and across the site including views into the site from the A96, the Main Boulevard entering the site from the west, the main route through the pedestrian zone towards from the north and the pedestrian route past the Hotel Quarter and Boulevard Business Park. These are helpful in understanding the scale and qualities envisaged for these areas. However, it is not clear how important or incidental these vistas have been in generating the spatial plan and organisation of the site layout. Having set up key axes it is important to consider the termination of new vistas being created, so that they are consequently followed through and meaningfully concluded.

3.4.2 The route into the site from the east along the Main Boulevard feels unsatisfactory and ends abruptly in the subterranean building obstructing views into the site. The traffic diagram appears to conflict with the landscape plan, whereby taxis and buses are required to cut across the applied grain of the site to drop off at the AECC.

3.4.3 Views from the A96 into the site were discussed. The Panel recognise that, due to its large scale, it will be hard to appreciate the AECC building as a conventional elevation, therefore it seems appropriate that glimpses of the building will be seen through the trees as proposed, as part of a road experience. Notwithstanding, the proposed vistas from the A96 appear arbitrary and it is not clear how these particular views have been arrived as important views into the site.

#### 3.4.4 Further advice:

- *It would be beneficial to improve the alignment of the access road from the Main Boulevard, so that it follows a more natural route towards the AECC building and strengthens the entrance experience into the site.*
- *The view towards the space at the end of the Hotel Quarter / Boulevard Business Park terminates at a point of confluence where a number of components are coming together. As point 3.4.2, the opportunities to create a more dynamic design device at this pinch point to bring all of these things together should be developed, to celebrate and contribute to a greater sense of arrival and departure from the site.*
- *There is some inconsistency in terms of the information presented in the visualisation. For example on 3D sketches, road junctions where few people would have cause to walk are shown highly populated and buildings are shown with tables and chairs spilling into a public space where the plan describes an underground access ramp. The planning application package should contain a consistent and correct level of information that is a fair representation of the scheme.*
- *It will take time for the proposed landscaping to mature. In assessing the detail of the landscape design it would be helpful to give an impression of what the views might look like at an early stage in the development of the landscape, as well as in the fullness of time.*
- *The framework for Newhills opposite the AECC site is still at an early stage in development. The Council has a key coordinating role in working with the project teams for both developments either side of the A96 to encourage the creation of a joined up landscape strategy along the road.*
- *The potential provision of a new rail halt to serve visitors to the AECC has been discussed previously. The Team advised this was being taken account of within the masterplan along the northern edge of the site should this be developed in the future. This should be worked into the masterplan and demonstrated.*

### 3.5 Central piazza, subterranean space and public art

3.5.1 As noted in the previous workshop the central piazza space appears well defined with the overall masterplan, following the reduction in scale from the original design and concept stage. The use of landscape to create bespoke art features, seating, and way markers to help animate the space, and other public spaces across the site including artworks concluding key axes, is welcomed.

#### 3.5.2 Further advice:

- *As a fulcrum point at the centre of the site the Panel suggest that there could be scope to treat the design in the piazza differently – as a more restful space or eddy into which the flowing landscape forms converge – rather than necessarily continuing the stratification of the landscape into the space.*

3.5.2 As noted at the previous workshop the rationalised subterranean space, now effectively forming an additional exhibition building at the heart of the site, looks more functionally and commercially convincing than in earlier concept designs. However, a

key concern raised in previous workshops still remains that the raised inaccessible landscape atop the subterranean hall in the central area effectively 'sterilises' the public realm. Subsequent development has not lessened these concerns and further information provided only increases concerns about the nature of its perimeter.

3.5.3 The design of the external edges of the building are important in terms of how the exhibition space relates to other buildings and spaces around it, in particular the relationship between the edges of the subterranean building and the main AECC building to the south and piazza space to the east. The proposed rippled roof contours help to tie the subterranean building back into the landscape and to relate to the forms of the AECC. It will be critical that this relationship is developed and maintained through detail design and delivery to ensure continuity and coherence between the building and the surrounding context in line with the overall ribbon concept.

3.5.4 **Further advice:**

- *Any potential for activating the perimeter of the building is encouraged, through for example introduction of commercial activity along its edges if viable, and/or careful articulation of the facades, to help animate the public frontages, in particular towards the central square and linear business park.*

**3.6 Energy strategy**

3.6.1 As discussed at previous workshops the Panel support the Team in their proposed sustainability initiatives for the site, including the development of an Anaerobic Digestion Facility and the potential for energy and heat generated by the facility to be scaled up over time to serve areas outwith the site.