

Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA visiting board to
the Birmingham School of Architecture
Birmingham Institute of Art and Design
Birmingham City University**

Confirmed by the RIBA Education Liaison Group on behalf of the
RIBA Education Committee, 10 March 2010.

part 1: BA (Honours) Architecture

(3 years full-time, 4 years part time)

**part 2: Postgraduate Diploma in
Architecture**

(3 year sandwich course, 3 years part time, 2 years full time)

**part 3: Postgraduate Diploma in
Architectural Practice**

(1 year part time)

Date of visiting board: 8-9 October 2009

1. Information about the courses

1.1 Courses offered for revalidation

Part 1: BA(Hons) Architecture (3 years full-time, 4 years part time)

Part 2: Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture (3 year sandwich course, 3 years part time, 2 years full time)

Part 3: Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice (1 year part time)

1.2 Address where the courses are delivered

Birmingham School of Architecture
 Birmingham Institute of Art and Design
 Birmingham City University
 Gosta Green
 Corporation Street
 Birmingham B4 7DX
 T: 0121 331 5800
 F: 0121 331 7814
 W: www.bcu.ac.uk

1.3 Name of awarding body

Birmingham City University

1.4 Name of head of school

Professor Tom Jefferies
tom.jefferies@bcu.ac.uk

2. Membership of the visiting board

2.1 The members of the RIBA Visiting Board for the visit on Thursday 8 and Friday 9 October 2009 were:

Kate Heron (chair)
 Kathy Gal (vice chair)
 Paul Bower (student member)
 Patrick Conaghan (co-professional)

Richard Patterson (academic member)

Anthony Petrilli (practitioner member)

Bob Sheil (academic member)

Ian Standing (regional representative)

David Gloster (RIBA Director of Education) was in attendance as secretary to the board. Lucie Gibson (RIBA Professional Education Co-ordinator) was in attendance as an observer.

3. Procedures and criteria for the visit

3.1 The visiting board was carried out under the *RIBA Procedures for the Validation of UK Courses and Examinations in Architecture* published in and effective from September 2003, *RIBA Criteria for Validation* published March 2002 and effective from September 2003, and *Description and Regulations for the Recognition of Courses, Programmes and Examinations in Professional Practice and Management, (Part 3) in the UK*.

For more information see www.architecture.com.

4. Recommendations of the visiting board confirmed by the Royal Institute of British Architects Education Liaison Group on behalf of RIBA Education Committee 10 March 2010.

4.1 On behalf of RIBA Education Committee, on 10 March 2010 the RIBA Education Liaison Group confirmed:

Continued Validation of:

Part One: BA (Honours) Architecture (three years full-time or four years part-time)

Part Two: Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture (three years sandwich course, three years part-time, two years full-time)

Part Three: Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice (one year part-time)

The next Visiting Board should take place in 2013.

5. Recommendation of the 2009 visiting board to the Commonwealth Association of Architects, the Construction Industry Council, and EU Directive

5.1 The visiting board recommends to the Commonwealth Association of Architects the CAA continue with their accreditation of the part 2 qualification.

5.2 The visiting board was satisfied that the part 1 course met the Construction Industry Council Common Learning Outcomes for Degree Courses in the Built Environment.

5.3 The visiting board recommends to the ARB that the part 1 and part 2 courses met all points of the EU Directive.

6. Criteria for validation

6.1 On the basis of the sample of academic portfolios examined, the visiting board was satisfied that all the students graduating from the courses and examinations listed in 1.1 above satisfied all the criteria for validation held in common by the RIBA for validation and the ARB for prescription.

7. Standards

7.1 On the basis of the sample of academic portfolios examined, the work from previous year of the courses listed in 1.1 was inspected during the visit and was found to meet the required standards.

8. Conditions of validation

8.1 There were no special conditions attached to the courses listed in 1.1.

9. Standard requirements of recognition

9.1 RIBA recognition of all courses/qualifications is dependent upon:

- i. external examiners being appointed for the course;
- ii. any significant changes to the courses and examinations being submitted to the RIBA;
- iii. any change of award title, and the effective date of the change, being reported to the RIBA so that, where appropriate, recognition may formally be transferred to the new title by the RIBA;
- iv. submission to the RIBA of the names of students passing the courses/qualifications listed in 4.

10. Summary of the recommendations, advice, and commentary

10.1 Background

In 2007, the university changed its name from the University of Central England to Birmingham City University.

The board noted that at its centenary in 2008/09 and since the last full RIBA visit, the school had again experienced a number of significant changes, principally with the appointment of a new head of architecture, but also - in the broader university context - a new Vice Chancellor and Executive Dean of the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD). The Executive Dean is actively promoting the principle of improved dialogue between all disciplines within BIAD.

The board also noted that the BA (Hons) Architecture course had been subject to internal university review, and that this review had proposed further interface between architecture and related subjects in the Institute. The board considered that preparations for such reviews should not be underestimated in terms of the time and energy devoted to them by staff.

Additionally, a revised assessment structure (moving from a 12 credit to a 15 credit system) has been introduced in the academic year 2009/10, and a strategic review made of the use of visiting tutors. This is likely to impact on present and future appointments, and reflects a reappraisal of academic objectives in the current financial context. In summary, the board considered that, within a short period of time, the school had undergone further, potentially fundamental, shifts in its culture, structure, and direction – all absorbed with equanimity by those teaching the courses.

- 10.2 Whilst the board believed that the move back to Gosta Green had helped the school to build on its traditional strengths on a central, urban campus, it was also noted

that the current premises were to revert to Aston University in 2013, with the school occupying a new building from September of that year. The current strengths of the school are as follows:

- a new sense of strategic purpose for both the renamed university and BIAD
- a renewed emphasis on the quality of the student experience
- the commitment to the school expressed by the Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean
- a strong position as the only school of architecture in the RIBA West Midlands region
- a cohesive staff team, responsive to occasional periods of crisis management
- the potential for the city of Birmingham to generate a strong context for creative design studio projects
- the integration of the historical and social roots of Birmingham in course material as a source for debate among students
- the diverse background of the student community
- the traditionally strong links the school has developed with local practices
- support for part-time study
- commitment and rigour from external examiners

10.3 **Recommendations: part 1 BA (Hons) Architecture**

The visiting board has made the following recommendations. Action on these recommendations will be reviewed either by the mid term monitoring board, or by such RIBA committees and by such dates as defined in the individual recommendation.

- 10.3.1 Working with the course team, the head of architecture is to clearly remap the current and outgoing BA (Hons) course structure demonstrating how the validation criteria are met; this is to be submitted to the RIBA New Courses and Course Changes Group no later than the first meeting of the first quarter of 2010
- 10.3.2 Working with the course team, the head of architecture is to develop a map of the incoming BA (Hons) course structure demonstrating how the validation criteria are met; this is to be submitted to the RIBA New Courses and Course Changes Group no later than the first meeting of the first quarter of 2010
- 10.3.3 The head of architecture is to submit a clear and detailed academic plan substantiating how the aims and outcomes of the incoming BA (Hons) programme align with proposals for the restructuring of the faculty. Particular attention needs to be paid to the practical implementation of links between other disciplines in BIAD, and that of architecture, mindful of the need to reflect professional validation criteria. This plan is to be submitted to the RIBA New Courses and Course Changes Group no later than the first meeting of the first quarter of 2010. There should be an explanation of how the architecture staff have full involvement in, and ownership of the drafting of the plan, with detailed proposals for the staff role in its future implementation
- 10.3.4 In recognition of design as the key integrative activity, the course team is to review the content, delivery, and assessment of design submissions, particularly at award level, to improve the quality and comprehensive representation of studio design projects
- 10.3.5 In view of the high quality of onsite workshop facilities and other shared resources offered by BIAD, students must be encouraged to routinely use 3D physical modelling, fabrication, and other related techniques to explore strategies for design and construction. Both experimental and normative understandings of materials technologies should be pursued
- 10.4 **Recommendations: part 2 Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture**
The visiting board has made the following recommendations. Action on these recommendations will be reviewed either by the mid term monitoring board, or by such RIBA committees and by such dates as defined in the individual recommendation.
- 10.4.1 working with the course team, the head of architecture is to clearly remap the current Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture course structure demonstrating how the validation criteria are met; this is to be submitted to the RIBA New Courses and Course Changes Group no later than the first meeting of the first quarter of 2010. The remapping of part 2 criteria should be consistent with the approach taken for part 1
- 10.4.2 the head of architecture is to submit a clear and detailed academic plan substantiating how the aims and outcomes of a revised Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture programme will align with proposals for the restructuring of the faculty. Particular attention needs to be paid to the practical implementation of links between other disciplines in BIAD, and that of architecture, mindful of the need to reflect professional

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- validation criteria. This plan is to be submitted to the RIBA New Courses and Course Changes Group. It should include an explanation of how the architecture staff have full involvement in, and ownership of the drafting of the content of the plan, with detailed proposals for the staff role in its future implementation
- 10.4.3 in recognition of design as the key integrative activity, the course team is to review the content, delivery, and assessment of design submissions, particularly at award level to improve the ambition, aspiration, and comprehensive representation of studio design projects
- 10.4.4 in view of the high quality of onsite workshop facilities and other shared resources offered by BIAD, students must be encouraged to routinely use 3D physical modelling, fabrication, and other related techniques to explore strategies for design and construction. Both experimental and normative understandings of materials technologies should be pursued
- 10.5 **Recommendation: part 3 Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice**
The visiting board has made the following recommendation. Action on this recommendation will be reviewed either by the mid term monitoring board, or by such RIBA committees and by such dates as defined in the recommendation.
- 10.5.1 working with the course team, the head of architecture is to clearly remap the current Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice course structure demonstrating how the validation criteria are met; this is to be submitted to the RIBA New Courses and Course Changes Group no later than the first meeting of the first quarter of 2010. The remapping of part 3 criteria should be consistent with the approach taken for parts 1 and 2.
- 10.6 **Advice: part 1 BA (Hons) Architecture**
The visiting board offers the following advice to the institution on desirable, but not essential, improvements which it is felt will assist course development and raise standards.
- 10.6.1 the board advises that the school considers and implements an accommodation strategy that provides dedicated studio space for award level students
- 10.6.2 the board advises that the school reviews the format of external examiners' reports to offer clear and transparent confirmation that they are satisfied all passing students have met all the criteria
- 10.6.3 the board advises that the school develops means to encourage greater dialogue and interaction between part time and full time students
- 10.6.4 the board advises the school to fully articulate proposals for staff development in terms of the leadership required to implement the academic plan for the school within the faculty
- 10.7 **Advice: part 2 Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture**
The visiting board offers the following advice to the institution on desirable, but not essential, improvements which it is felt will assist course development and raise standards.

- 10.7.1 the board advises that the school considers and implements an accommodation strategy that provides dedicated studio space for award level students
- 10.7.2 the board advises that the school reviews the format of external examiners' reports to offer clear and transparent confirmation that they are satisfied all passing students have met all the criteria
- 10.7.3 the board advises that the school develops means to encourage greater dialogue and interaction between part time and full time students
- 10.7.4 the board advises the school to fully articulate proposals for staff development in terms of the leadership required to implement the academic plan for the school within the faculty.

11 Summary of Previous Visiting Board Reports

- 11.1 The last RIBA Visiting Board to the Birmingham School of Architecture and Landscape at the University of Central England took place on the 16-17 June 2005.

A summary of the report, recommendations and advice of the 2005 visiting board can be found at the end of this document in Appendix 1.

12. Commentary

12.1 Critical self-appraisal

The board considered that whilst the critical self-appraisal was reasonably comprehensive, it was difficult to establish a sense of academic identity of the school, and prioritised actions for achieving this. It was also

unclear what the role of the staff, student bodies, or senior management of the university had been in developing the document. The proposed review of the part 2 course was an example of a potentially fundamental change, yet it was unclear what agenda was driving this - and what the desired outcomes were. The board wished to explore how architecture education at BIAD moved beyond training for skills, although few clues offered an answer.

The stress on interdisciplinary synergies in the self-appraisal clearly reflected the ethos of creative collaboration established by the new Executive Dean; it was disappointing therefore that there was no practical explanation in the document of how this would be achieved, with which subject areas creative connections could be made, and what the outcomes in architecture would be.

In addition to being identified in the document as a weakness, external examiners' reports had made a number of references to staffing: student ratios, yet it was unclear what actions had been taken to address such serious issues. Further, although visiting tutors were referred to as an asset in some documents, there was the inference that VTs could not reasonably be expected to take on the same administrative duties as their full time colleagues, and that this increased the administrative burden on the full-time staff.

In the explanation of responses made to the last full visiting board's recommendations, it was suggested in the critical self-appraisal that the issue of students trailing failed modules had only been partially addressed.

Whilst subsequent conversations reassured the board that this was not actually the case, it should be noted all recommendations made by a board must be fully addressed if a condition is not to subsequently be imposed.

12.2 Documentation and arrangements for the visit

Arrangements for the student exhibition and display of folios were exemplary. Folios were clearly labelled, and contained the full spectrum of submissions the cohort had produced over the previous academic year. However, although prepared, the mark sheets were not readily available, although subsequently signalled to the board in the base room.

By contrast, the documentation supplied to the visiting board did not provide many key items of information, including a clear description of curricular structures, the unit syllabi, or the actual briefs handed to the students. Although most of the external examiners' reports were included, two reports were omitted which included information relevant to the visit.

Reflecting recent observations by the RIBA New Courses and Course Changes Group, the board considered that mapping against criteria was generally coherent on a course by course basis. However, there remained a concern that a unified approach to the mapping of the entire programme of three awards was needed to encourage course teams to develop dialogue on academic outcomes, and how best to achieve these.

The board therefore spent time scrutinising documentation in discussion with school staff before some issues could be clarified. Requests for additional information were in some cases met by handwritten annotation on documents in the base room; there was some sense that, in relation to the documentation at least, the preparation for the visit was less than adequate.

The meeting with the head of architecture, primarily intended to focus on matters arising from the critical self-appraisal, did not give the board confidence that there was a clear academic plan in place, nor that there was inclusive and ongoing consultation with the staff to develop fresh educational initiatives responding to the overall strategy for BIAD. Neither could questions about the lack of information on the school finances be answered. The board sought, and received, reassurance from the Executive Dean on the financial position.

Concerns about the opacity of the current academic direction were confirmed in the subsequent external examiners meeting. Whilst there was significant support for the efforts of all the course teams through a period of intense flux, the examiners stated that although recent course changes had generally been notified to them, this had sometimes been at a stage making it difficult for their comments to affect change.

Overall, there was a need for the school to proclaim its academic intentions with greater clarity.

12.2.1 Record of academic portfolios and coursework sampled during the visit

Part 1: BA (Honours) Architecture

Year 1: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle, 2 high
 Year 2: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle, 2 high
 Year 3: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle, 2 high
 (All from cohorts entering in the academic year 2008/09, including both full time and part time students)

NB: year 1 = 63FT and 13PT students
 year 2 = 58FT and 8PT students
 year 3 = 47FT and 9PT students

Part Two: Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture

Year 1: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle, 2 high
 Year 2: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle, 2 high
 (All from cohorts entering in the academic year 2008/09, including both full time and part time students)

NB: year 1 = 9FT and 38PT students
 year 2 = 27FT and 17PT students

Part Three: Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice

Year 1: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle, 2 high
 (All from cohorts entering in the academic year 2008/09)

NB: year 1 = 44FT students

12.3 Responses made to the previous visiting board report (and to reports of any revisits) and external examiner comments

The Board was satisfied that the majority of the issues raised in the 2005 report had been addressed by the school, although it was clear that there remained a

minority of students who took advantage of regulatory structures allowing multiple - although no longer unlimited - resubmissions.

Concerns remained (as noted elsewhere) regarding staff: student ratios, although it was evident to the board that course teams were all accessible to, and closely engaged with, their students.

12.4 Context of the course within the wider provision of the school and BIAD

The Birmingham School of Architecture was established in 1908 gaining RIBA recognition for its part 1 course in 1924, and for parts 2 and 3 in 1932. The school originated in the College of Arts and Crafts, and was subsequently located in Art and Design at Birmingham Polytechnic which was affiliated to Aston University from 1969 to 1974. Somewhat unsuitable (and remote) premises at Perry Barr housed architecture for a number of years.

At the time of the visiting board in 2001 the School of Architecture was part of the Faculty of the Built Environment, together with the Schools of Property and Construction, of Landscape, and of Planning and Housing. As a result of declining student numbers across the Faculty, the Faculty was reorganised in 2002 to create three new Schools: Architecture and Landscape, Planning and Housing and Property and Construction. At the beginning of the 2004/2005 academic year, the University announced it was dissolving the Faculty of the Built Environment and reallocating the existing schools within other Faculties. The Birmingham School of Architecture, incorporating

Landscape Architecture and Urban Design was to be located in the University's Faculty of Art and Design, (BIAD) from July 2005. Located in the city centre, BIAD offered a larger infrastructure to support a number of design disciplines.

This move aimed to create greater stability for the Birmingham School of Architecture, and the 2009 board considered that the physical consolidation of BIAD in the future must consciously minimise disruption to the School of Architecture, if the best academic results are to be anticipated.

In addition to the validated parts 1, 2 and 3 courses the school offers the following degrees:

- BA (Hons) Landscape Architecture
- Graduate Diploma in Landscape Architecture
- Postgraduate Diploma in Landscape Architecture
- MA in Landscape Architecture
- MA in Urban Design
- MPhil and PhD degrees by research.

12.5 **Detailed commentary on the Part One course:**
BA (Hons) Architecture (3 years full time or 4 years part time)

12.5.1 *Clarity, validity, and achievement of course objectives*
In the view of the board, the objectives of the part 1 course were sufficiently clearly stated, appropriate, and were achieved.

12.5.2 *Course design and content*

The course is a credit-based modular programme of study; the cohorts seen by the board were working to a 12 credit system, although this is now superseded by a structure based on 15 credits.

The programme specification states that intellectual rigour, independent judgement, and individual development are the central aims of the first degree. The board considered that whilst these graduate attributes should indeed define the overarching ambitions of the course, there needed to be further reappraisal of both design studio programmes and their creative integration with taught courses before this would be achieved.

The ethos of 'playing with concepts of theory and technology, to challenge the orthodoxies of spatial production; outlined by the Executive Dean recommended itself to the board as an excellent starting point for the course team to debate.

12.5.3 *Quality and coverage of the syllabus*
Design

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Design were being met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture course.

However, the board considered that the theoretical, historical, and cultural associations that the studio design projects were presented as aspiring to were not explicit in the majority of work displayed. Graphic work was competent enough, but lacked any commitment to experimentation. The board considered there was an important distinction between presentation

(more factual in emphasis) and representation, which develops the less tangible aspects of architectural space. There was also some evidence that final design schemes had been edited down to synoptic presentations; schemes generally failed to exploit analytical drawing and modelling as vehicles for design development.

The board was disappointed that with exceptional workshop facilities readily available on campus, there was little 3D modelled work evident. However, irrespective of the quality of on site facilities, the board considered that there needed to be significantly more emphasis on, and evidence of, physical modelling.

The board had concerns that, at threshold pass level, students consciously avoided a deeper engagement with design studio projects. There was evidence in a number of low pass portfolios that subject areas other than design were worked at more enthusiastically as a kind of displacement activity. This had the effect of significantly reducing the percentage of design work presented, in some cases to a low level of visibility. The lowest levels of passing portfolios at award level offered little evidence of students' ability to organise a small or medium sized building. The board considered that assessment requirements at the 40% threshold were reviewed to ensure that all graduates received adequate exposure to projects enhancing their integrative knowledge of design.

Technology and Environment

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Technology and Environment were being

met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture course.

The level of technical integration in design schemes was generally competent, without being exceptional. However, the board sensed that normative technical solutions were preferred to others encouraging students to research more adventurous alternatives. Although design themes such as 'war and peace', and 'sanctuary' were suggestive of exciting possibilities, the use of these as prompts to develop greater technical invention would have been welcome.

The board was surprised that, with exceptional workshop facilities readily available on campus and traditional links between the school and local practice, there was little 3D work exploring technological and constructional problems through the medium of making.

Cultural Context

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Cultural Context were being met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture course.

The board noted that at the time of the 2005 visit there had been an ambition to encourage more exploration of cultural context and theory to enhance design outcomes. The field trips currently undertaken were clearly valuable to students, although more explicit evidence of the relationship between the trip and submitted work would have been desirable.

Given the rich industrial/archaeological background of Birmingham and the Black Country, the board considered that students could benefit from a greater engagement with sites and that sense of place unique to the west Midlands. Whilst there was evidence that this was thematically apparent in courses supporting the design studios, it was the integration of all subject inputs that required further attention. Finally, the external examiners suggested to the board that the part 1 course was not directed by a strong theoretical agenda to support the implicit emphasis on technical resolution and normative solutions. The board would encourage the course team to consider how existing course strengths can be further enhanced by a new resolution to approach some of the less traditional skills than those currently associated with the school.

Communication

The Board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Communication were being met by all graduates from the BA (Honours) Architecture course. Like their 2005 counterparts, the board still considered that more could be done to improve the sophisticated contextual and volumetric assessment of design studio projects; for the latter, greater reliance has to be developed on the routine use of workshop facilities to enhance this aspect of students' communication skills.

Comments on drawing skills are to be found in the commentary under part 1: Design.

Written work was variable in standard, but demonstrated that students generally persevered with their assignments to beneficial effect.

Management Practice and Law

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Management Practice and Law were being met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture course.

The Professional Practice Studies module provides students with a grounding in professional issues connecting design studio practice, cultural context, and technology. The module investigates the pre and post contract phases of a construction project, statutory and non-statutory controls, and the contractual frameworks referred to in the process.

The transfer of this module from the award year to BA2 has been a welcome revision, allowing students to be introduced to this important curricular area earlier in the course.

Preparation for professional experience

In the Professional Practice Studies module in BA year 2, subjects within the management, practice, and law framework are offered as a lecture series to both full time and part time students. Alongside this lecture series, and as part of the assessment procedures for this module, students may undertake a series of practice visits. These allow students to experience the dynamics of different forms of, and approaches to, practice.

The rationale for the Professional Experience and Development Record (PEDR) is introduced and explained during the lecture series. Before graduation, meetings prepare students for their practical training year and explain requirements for the PEDR to those studying part time. The Professional Studies Advisor is available to assist individual students in finding suitable practice placements, or give advice on alternatives in recession.

The students were appreciative of these measures, and considered themselves well prepared for the first stage of practical training.

12.5.4 *Progression within the course*

Poor progression rates remain a problem, although the board acknowledged important improvements in this area. The school is nevertheless advised to continue to monitor and review progression rates, reviewing actions as appropriate.

12.5.5 *Assessment*

With the elimination of the option to retake modules an apparently unlimited number of times, there are no obvious anomalies in assessment procedures; these are now broadly comparable in their scope and application to other UK universities;. The board welcomed the change to limit resit opportunities for failing students, and urged the school to apply this with vigour.

Overall, therefore, the board concluded that the course structure for part 1 had appropriate assessment procedures and weighting.

12.5.6 *Admissions and arrangements for direct entry at a stage other than the start of the course*

The school has external transfer and APCL/APEL policies facilitating direct entry to the course for students from other schools.

The school is historically committed to widening participation and encouraging diversity, and this is reflected in the range of academic qualifications and broad cultural demographic of the part 1 student community.

12.6 **Detailed commentary on the part 2 course:**

Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture 3 years sandwich course, 2 years part time, 2 years full time)

12.6.1 *Clarity, validity, and achievement of course objectives*

The stated aims of the part 2 course are to provide more specialised fields of study than the first degree, and enable students to define a personal career path marked by originality and new insights. The head of architecture stated that, in future, he wished students to develop greater research capabilities, with a possible view to undertaking doctoral studies

The board found the strategic objectives of the part 2 course to be comprehensible and valid, and for the most part were being achieved..

12.6.2 *Course design and content*

The course is structured as a 15 credit based modular programme; each module may be studied and passed independently. An MA award is available for successful part 2 graduates; this involves a further 60 credit

dissertation or major project, supported by a 15 credit research methods module.

12.6.3 *Quality and coverage of the syllabus*

Design

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Design were being met by all graduates from the Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture course.

The board considered that in the best examples of work there was vitality, enthusiasm, and the desire to invent; at the award level students were producing interesting design schemes (as in the Sandbanks project). The opportunity to define a personal brief was clearly welcome to students, and reflected the aims of the course.

However, the board considered that there could be better investigation, analysis, and representation of context in design projects, together with an enhanced integration of histories and theories of architecture to enrich design development. Drawing was not generally seen as an investigative, developmental tool; rather, it was used solely as means to present work.

Whilst it was understood that the school perhaps saw itself primarily as providing the skills to engage with practice, the board considered that in the interests of growing the appeal and profile of the postgraduate course, it was important to develop both the normative and speculative strands of the design course offer.

As with the part 1 course, the board had concerns that, at threshold pass level, students were not adequately engaged with design studio projects. The displacement

noted in the BA(Hons) course was also evident at part 2; the board considered that although it was encouraging that all students seemed to be able identify elements of the course with which they could engage, there was evidence in low pass portfolios that the percentage of design work presented was at a low level of visibility.

Again, as with part 1, the board was disappointed that with exceptional workshop facilities readily available on campus, there was little 3D modelled work evident. However, irrespective of the quality of on site facilities, the board considered that there needed to be significantly more emphasis on, and evidence of, physical modelling. The school should be mindful of the introduction of the new validation criteria in autumn 2011, particularly the increased aspirations for part 2 courses, and plan accordingly.

The external examiners explained to the board that they were supportive of the part 2 course leader, and clearly considered his inputs to be very effective. Standards were considered to have risen over recent years; the examiners praised the courage and resolution of the staff in facing difficult issues sustained over a period of years.

Technology and Environment

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Technology and Environment were being met by all graduates from the Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture course, but would wish to encourage more investigation of technologies as an enhancement of the design process.

There was an evident need to produce more reference to precedents and directed research in this area, rather than an acceptance of standard solutions. In the more ambitious design projects, the board considered that there was a need to develop greater technical curiosity, perhaps using making as the means to explore different approaches to construction and environment.

Although the board was generally satisfied that work undertaken on structure and construction was adequate, it was felt that the school should further develop students' appreciation of the potential of materials, innovative construction, and contemporary environmental systems. The routine use of the BIAD workshops would offer significant opportunities to progress these elements of the curriculum.

Cultural Context

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Cultural Context were being met by all graduates from the Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture course.

However, the board saw few examples of student work which demonstrated a detailed understanding of how histories and theories of architecture and urban design and the history of ideas informed design studio projects.

Echoing the observations of the 2005 board, the school is advised to further strengthen support for cultural context, ensuring its integration with design studio activities. The school should be mindful of the introduction of the new validation criteria in autumn

2011, particularly the increased aspirations for part 2 courses, and plan accordingly

Communication

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Communication were being met by all graduates from the Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture course.

The board's comments regarding drawing, modelling, and making are noted under the Design commentary.

Written work was generally conscientiously produced, with decent standards of presentation achieved; there was good integration of text and visual material in the best work, and cross referencing of sources was technically correct in most cases. However, the board reiterated its concerns about the importance of cultural issues informing design sensibility.

Management Practice and Law

The board was satisfied that all the validation criteria in the area of Management Practice and Law were being met by all graduates from the Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture course.

The Management, Practice and Law module in Year 2 supports and prepares for the second period of practical training.

The course provides a full explanation of, and exposure to, the professional context of architectural practice. It is intended to encourage students to understand the relationships between design work and all aspects of

management and law, making linkages to the professional studies undertaken on the BA course.

Because it occurs in the incoming year of the postgraduate diploma course, it is further enhanced by reference back to the experience gained during the first practical training year. Underpinning the module are core lectures where contemporary professional issues take priority, with a range of other teaching and learning methods involved, including:

- case studies, particularly in terms of offering advice in the current economic climate of strategies for identifying suitable vehicles for this
- seminars
- scenarios simulating professional life
- group work
- visiting practitioner speakers
- directed reading and study
- assessed work
- independent, self directed study

12.6.4 *Progression within the course*

The school provided cohort progression statistics for parts 1, 2, and 3. In discussion with the board, the school acknowledged that poor progression rates remain in evidence, although course teams were clear that this situation was continuing to improve.

The school is advised by the board to continue to monitor and review progression rates, taking action as appropriate and, most importantly, to form a clearly defined view of where its academic standards are to be

set for the next five years. Should this appear under Advice above?

12.6.5 *Assessment*

As with the part 1 course, the elimination of the option to retake modules an apparently unlimited number of times, means that there are no apparent anomalies in current assessment procedures;. These are now broadly comparable in their scope and application to other UK universities.

Overall, therefore, the board concluded that the course structure for part 2 had appropriate assessment procedures and weighting.

12.6.6 *Admissions and arrangements for direct entry at a stage other than the start of the course*

There are arrangements for direct entry to the course, including the usual credit transfer and experiential prior learning protocols in place.

The school requires evidence of RIBA/ARB part 1 exemption for applicants to the part 2 course, although acknowledges that recent statements by the ARB regarding access to education throughout the EU mean that entrance to the part 2 course by students not holding a prescribed qualification is entirely possible.

Entrance to the school involves a mandatory interview to ensure that all enrolling students are suited to the course, and are prepared for study at postgraduate level. Students are entitled to a maximum of two interviews to gain admission to the part 2 course (the opportunity for

a second interview is at the request of the course director).

12.7 **Detailed commentary on the part 3 course:**
Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice (1 year part-time)

The Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice is a formal award of Birmingham City University, and concludes the 7 year full time sandwich course (8 years part time). The award is subject to normal university external examining, quality assurance, validation, and appeals procedures.

12.7.1 *Clarity, validity, and achievement of course objectives*

The objectives of the course are for candidates to:

- develop a competent understanding of the professional duties, responsibilities and obligations that society and the law place upon the architect in practice
- possess sufficient skill and awareness so as to be able to negotiate effectively with potential clients and industry personnel in all stages of the development of a project
- have competent working knowledge of the standard forms of JCT Contracts in current use, and to have such knowledge of current related case-law so as to be able to take informed decisions and offer sound advice in normal contract situations; to recognise their own limitations and know when to seek further advice
- have an understanding of the key areas of management necessary within a practice
- develop an ability to learn from the practical experience of the work of practice and project management, in order to deal effectively with both the routine and

unexpected decisions that compromise an architect's workload

The school had mapped the course onto only part of the RIBA validation criteria. Mapping covering *Management of Construction* and *Practice Management and Business Administration* was not however provided; the board also noted that the form of mapping was different to that for the parts 1 and 2 courses.

Notwithstanding the partial mapping, which was considered by the board to be an issue of incomplete documentation rather than incomplete course provision, the course was found to be academically rigorous, well structured, and well administered.

The board had some minor concerns regarding the accuracy of the documentation presented; e.g. the title of the awarding institution being incorrect. However, the objectives of the part 3 course were clearly stated and appropriate, and for the most part were being achieved. The content of the course was comprehensive and generally current. The board was satisfied that all the part 3 criteria were being met by all passing candidates undertaking the Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture Practice.

12.7.2 *Course design and content*

The course is a 15 credit based modular programme of study undertaken over one year, in part time mode only. The modules are:

- Context for Practice
- Practice Management

- Construction Management
- Records of Experience
- Case Studies
- Professional Practice Oral Examination

The course director emphasised that key skills candidates developed through the course were critical analysis, self appraisal, an understanding of the value agenda, and business management

The course is provided through eight days of lectures and seminars arranged in two sessions of three days, and one session of two days. The school provided illustrations of the course structure, as well as copies of lecture notes and course information. Lectures and seminars are provided by members of the course team, as well as experienced invited speakers.

Individual tutorials are provided either at the school, or by e-mail throughout the year. There are two intakes to the part 3 each year, with final examinations taking place in June and December.

12.7.3 *Assessment*

Assessment is carried out through regular reviews of students' practical training records throughout the year, and a final summative assessment at the end of the year. The course team sets the assignments and written examination. The practice based examiners and external examiner may review both the assignments and examination paper. Papers are always double marked. The final examination is assessed by:

- documentary submissions, comprising case study, records of professional practical training, CV, and career appraisal
- written assignment on the Context for Practice
- a office-based written examination on Practice Management and Business Administration undertaken in the student's own time over 4 weeks
- school-based 3.5 hour written examination on Construction Management
- oral examination

With the exception of the oral examination, which is assessed as either pass or fail, the minimum pass mark for modules is 40%. Students must pass all modules to achieve the award and part 3 professional qualification.

The board considered that the examination and assessment process was rigorous, fair, and transparent; students were provided with constructive and relevant feedback. The board saw 3 low, 2 middle, and 2 high pass submissions, together with clear and comprehensive copies of relevant mark sheets.

These sheets included details of a re-sitting candidate who had recently passed but whose marks, in accordance with university regulations, had been capped at 40%. The candidate's submissions were not provided as the majority of these were subject to a different, earlier examination. As this particular example would have been the lowest pass, and although it was accepted that the candidate was the lowest by virtue of capping, the board would have welcomed more clarity about the composition of the cohort and their submissions.

The board noted that a number of students' practical training records had not been signed by the school. Whilst the board recognised that students may not submit their records on time, the school should be encouraged to make explicit the consequences of students not submitting their records in accordance with the relevant guidance.

All students are provided with written feedback on their written submissions, and on their oral. Students provide feedback on the course after each session during the year, with the results used by the course director to inform and influence the course arrangements as appropriate.

The university has maintained the appointment of an external examiner; practice-based examiners appointed by the university also participate in the final assessment of students' submissions, and conduct the Professional Practice Oral Examination.

The board considered that the course provided students with a combination of mechanisms through which they could demonstrate their knowledge, application of knowledge, and professional judgement. The opportunity for students to engage in and respond to the course as it took place was seen by the board as positive and constructive.

12.7.4 *Admissions*

Students accepted on to the course are required to demonstrate both that they have successfully met the RIBA criteria for parts 1 and 2, and comply with

RIBA/ARB requirements for practical training.

The part 3 course welcomes graduates both from its own part 2 course as well as graduates from other schools. The school is pleased that the appeal of the course extends beyond its own graduates.

12.8 **External examining arrangements**

The board met the majority of appointed external examiners, and noted that the school had assembled an experienced team of examiners, drawn from education and practice.

The university induction course for external examiners was not, in the opinion of the examining team, especially helpful in defining their role. It was also stated that the university does not ask the examiners to confirm whether all the validation criteria are being met by all passing students.

The board noted that, whilst all the examiners were aware of the potential synergies available between related subject areas on the BIAD campus, there remained practical obstacles to the realisation of this. This was considered to be a factor of individual departments being prepared to endorse the agenda for interdisciplinarity.

The examiners endorsed the view that these linkages were currently absent from the students' work. The external examining team considered standards to have steadily risen, with recent high quality staff appointments - and that the school should be commended on the efforts made towards recovery from

a very low position. However, it was agreed that the area of cultural context remained contested - and required further support.

Whilst the idea of an exclusively urban focus for the activity of the school was cautiously welcomed, the examiners expressed the view that the ethos of the school should be maintained, with sensitively handled incremental change rather than an entirely new trajectory.

The examiners reiterated the view that there needed to be clear academic leadership and direction offered by the head of architecture, and that course changes needed to be carefully interrogated by all academic staff to ensure their viability.

Finally, the board noted that the external examiner appointed in 2008 was a part 3 subject specialist, experienced in both academia and practice; this examiner expressed support for the course, confirming that the school responded promptly and appropriately to issues raised in their report.

12.9 **Arrangements for monitoring professional experience**

During the first practical training year, the school holds two recall days to enable full time part 1 graduates to reflect on and appraise the experience they have gained. The Professional Studies Advisor is available on both days for individual meetings to help resolve difficulties arising among students undertaking their professional experience.

As part of the entry requirements to part 2, students complete a self-appraisal paper focussing on their year out. Students retain this paper in their logbook or PEDR. At the end of the part 2 course, a review of each student's PEDR is made, and an introduction made to the part 3 course requirements.

12.10 **Students**

The board met a group of around 50 students representing all years of the courses together with three part 3 candidates. It was unclear whether students had contributed to the critical self appraisal or had produced a separate report; the board was however pleased to note that both the student journal (SOAP) and student society (SAS) were active, and developed through collective initiatives across all years.

At the meeting the students were supportive of the school, and generally positive about their experience on the course. Particularly positive comments focused on:

- effective online backup from studio tutors
- the good mix of established staff and visiting tutors
- a sense of creative empowerment
- structured yet flexible course objectives
- the availability of part time study
- inspiration from the histories of cities lectures
- the safer premises at Gosta Green representing a considerable improvement on Perry Barr
- Birmingham as a valued historical and urban reference
- outside speakers raising themes that helpfully contextualised studio work

Specific concerns raised by the students included:

- an occasional lack of clarity regarding the intended outcomes of projects
- the early closure of the workshops, library, and computer suites; the latter work only 9.00am-5.00pm, which was considered particularly inadequate
- the need to book computers in advance
- the lack of pan-campus wi-fi
- the absence of local area networks that allowed students to share information, and understand the context of their work through an archiving of school projects
- the *ad hoc* provision of CAD (and other related) programmes across the university
- the dearth of formal links between other related subject areas within BIAD
- a pronounced need for dedicated studio accommodation, particularly at the two award levels
- the need for improved communication between the full and part time modes of study
- uncertainty as to how links with other schools of architecture can be made to develop information sharing and social/professional networks

12.11 Staff

The board met a good cross section of architecture and other BIAD staff; the atmosphere in the meeting was suggestive of a cohesive and committed team. Key strengths of the teaching team were seen to be:

- durability and optimism in the face of sustained disruption and uncertainty

- the contribution of visiting tutors to the practicable realisation of design studio projects
- valuing BSA students for their very positive qualities
- the willingness to review the agenda of the school, and accept a change in academic culture
- defining the academic theme of the bespoke vs. mass production
- sustaining linkages with local practice (and the loyalty of those practices to the school)

Specific concerns raised by the staff included:

- the excessive administrative load on full time members of staff
- a lack of clarity and empowerment regarding future planning
- unease about the practical implementation (and outcomes) of interdisciplinary synergies

12.12 Research

The board was informed by the head of architecture that the school's research profile was a renewed priority; submitted documentation suggested a focus on:

- the impact of sustainable thinking on urban regeneration (funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Sustainable Urban Environments programme)
- well being and the architectural environment (funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council)
- environmental perception (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Collaborative Doctoral Award scheme)

- environmental change (university funded)

Whilst there was information in the base room describing the school's philosophy regarding research (and examples of the integration between this and teaching), the board was still unclear where responsibilities for the research agenda of the school lay, and would have welcomed clearer information about this aspect of academic activity.

12.13 **Equal opportunities**

It was clear from documentary evidence and the broad cross section of the student population that both the university and school embraced equal opportunities. The school's percentage of female students is close to the national norm, although it has a higher proportion of students from minority ethnic groups. This has occasionally created problems with students who had difficulties with English language, particularly in relation to written submissions. It was felt that this factor had aggravated progression and retention issues. University policy clearly states English language requirements, although the board considered that these might be set at too low a level.

The board advises the university to continue to monitor closely students' standard of English and strengthen student support systems where necessary.

12.14 **Resourcing and facilities**

General

The board found the Vice Chancellor to be highly supportive of the school as it re-establishes its position on the Gosta Green Campus.

There was an evident sense of shared commitment and partnership between the V-C and Executive Dean likely to cascade down positively into architecture. The board sought reassurance that this commitment also extended to matters of investment in staff development and leadership, as well as physical resources.

Studios

Studios are adequate at the volumetric level, although the plan of the building means that rooms are extended along a long central spine.

The board was sharply critical of the hot desking room booking system which meant that studios fulfilled several disparate functions during the working week. This necessitates moving furniture before some sessions can begin. The absence of dedicated space for award level students in particular was not considered by the board to engender group cohesion at these critical times in students' academic development.

IT

The quality of IT provision within BIAD is good, although in terms of the numbers of machines *per capita* of the student population, the board had some reservations which were confirmed by students' comments.

There are 5 suites of computers, each with around 40 machines (both PC and Mac). The suites are only open from 9.00am to 5.00pm, meaning that with a student population not all of whom have access to laptops or pan-campus wi-fi, there is a practical shortfall in

provision. Only 10% of computers in each suite are dedicated to architecture's specific needs. However, there are 6 large format printers available, a scanner, and smaller format printers. Prices were considered by the board to be rather high in relation to national norms.

Due to a recent arrangement with Canon, students can now access printing facilities through the Uniflo system from any photocopier in the university. Access to film facilities in BIAD is also good, and the board understood that this area of collaboration seemed to have the potential for expansion.

There is a plan under discussion to equip all students with iPhones to enable easier access to university timetables and course information; this is intended to tie in with plans to improve the experience of students needing to work remotely.

Although the campus provided access to MS Office 2007, CS3, ArchiCad 12, AutoCad 2008, Rhino 4, 3D Max 2009, and SketchUp Pro 7 the board considered that there could be more exploration by students of the possibilities inherent in these, and other powerful digital tools.

Workshops

The board considered the workshops at BIAD to be remarkably well equipped, and staffed by knowledgeable, enthusiastic supervising technicians. Although shared with other BIAD students, arrangements for access seemed comparable to that in other institutions - although equipment levels were

considerably above the national norm, suggesting remarkable opportunities for students of architecture.

The board wishes to reiterate its enthusiasm for the integration of workshop practice into architecture's curricula. The workshops should form a means to reconcile traditional schisms between design and technology, use making as a means to explore and speculate on design development, and facilitate students' understanding of advances in digitally derived fabrication

Library

With the school's relocation back to the city centre, the architecture and landscape book stock is once more concentrated in BIAD's library at Gosta Green, although there remains a large book stock of related titles at Perry Barr. There is an effective system for inter library transfers.

Architecture as a subject area has a dedicated librarian, and there is a useful leaflet introducing students to the range of services and stock the library offers. Because of its position in BIAD, the library includes sections on Art, Design, Media Studies, Fashion, Textiles, Graphics and Jewellery as well as Architecture.

The board noted that, whilst reasonably comprehensive, titles in the library did not reflect all aspect of contemporary architecture.

13. Attachments

13.1 Prior to the visit, the board was provided by the school with the following documentation:

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- questionnaire (including course details, programme specifications, course structures, mapping criteria, admissions policies, cohort analysis, staff list, and equal opportunities policies)
 - supplementary information (including details of teaching and learning, assessment, arrangements for professional experience, research activities, staff development, QA procedures, physical and financial resources, and external visitors)
 - external examiner reports 2005-09
 - external examiners' CVs
 - additional responses to external examiners' reports
- 13.2 The board was provided with the following additional documents during the visit:
- module descriptors
 - design studio briefs
 - mark sheets for part 1, part 2, and part 3 examinations
 - missing external examiner reports for 2008/09
- 14 Appendix 1**
- 14.1 The Board conducted its visit at a time of great flux in the life of the Birmingham School of Architecture as it prepared to relocate from the University of Central England's Faculty of the Built Environment to the University's Faculty of Art and Design, the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design. Both staff and students welcome the move and the opportunities this will bring, including:
- Refurbished purpose-built accommodation on the Gosta Green Campus.
 - A location closer to Birmingham City centre.
 - Synergy with other design programmes.
 - New workshops for students.
 - An improved environment for students and staff.
 - Strengthened links with an established research community.
- 14.2 The Board believes that the move to Gosta Green will also help the School to build on its existing strengths, which include:
- Its unique position as the only School of Architecture in the RIBA West Midlands region.
 - The strong commitment to the School expressed by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor on behalf of the University.
 - A strong head and cohesive staff team.
 - Student exposure to a combination of architecture, landscape architecture and urban design teaching.
 - The use made of the city of Birmingham as a fertile site for student design projects.
 - The diverse background of its student population.
 - The early introduction to practice in the Part One course, exploiting the rich links the School has forged with local practices.
 - The strategy of using visiting tutors from local practices to ensure the currency of teaching.
 - A well-established and well-regarded Part Three course.
- 14.3 **Recommendations of the 2005 Visiting Board**

The Visiting Board has made the following recommendations. The RIBA expects the Institution to report on action taken or planned as a result of the recommendations in the annual monitoring returns submitted by the School and in the mid term review. Failure by an Institution to act on recommendations may result in a course being conditioned by a future Visiting Board.

- 14.3.1 In the opinion of the Board, University regulations, which allow Part One students an unlimited number of resit attempts to pass a failed module within a ten-year registration period, have led to a very high number of referrals within the course. The Board understands that since 1998 University regulations made in respect of the Part Two course have limited students to two resit attempts only to pass a failed module. The Board was advised that the University's Senate had commissioned a review of the standard Undergraduate Assessment Regulations and that changes were approved that will limit the number of times a student may retake failed modules. The Board hopes that these changes, agreed in February 2005 and due for implementation in the 2005/06 academic year, will bring uniformity to both the Part One and Part Two courses in terms of the number of resit attempts allowed. The Board recommends that these changes proceed without delay.
- 14.3.2 The Board was concerned about the impact of University regulations that permit students to trail failed modules from one year of the course to the next. Some students admitted deliberately trailing modules in order to concentrate on other matters, knowing that they would have other opportunities to resit the failed

module later in the course. In conjunction with the recommendation made in section 10.3.1 above, the Board further recommends that an additional amendment be made to University regulations to limit the extent to which students can trail failed modules.

- 14.3.3 The Board was concerned about potential under-resourcing of the full-time staff team. The Board recommends that the Institution looks carefully at staffing levels and considers whether these need to be strengthened in the light of the move to BIAD and the possibility of an increase in student numbers.
- 14.4 **Advice of the 2005 visiting board**
- 14.4.1 External examiners' comments provide an important feedback loop to the School. The Board advises that, in future, the School includes details of action taken in response to External Examiners' reports in its advance documentation for Visiting Boards and in future annual monitoring submissions.
- 14.4.2 The Board noted that the Part One course was still in flux but advised that more experimentation might be introduced in Year 1 (this appears to be limited to the Year 2 and 3 projects at the moment) and more variety of project sites in Year 2 (these appear to be too similar to those identified in Year 3).
- 14.4.3 The Board thought more could be done to improve volumetric and contextual assessment of projects in the Part One course and advises the School to use the enhanced model-making facilities now available in this context.

- 14.4.4 In general the Board considered that the structure of the Part Two course was too heavily controlled and prescribed. The Board advises the School to look again at this matter and review the structure of the Part Two course to introduce more consolidation and less fragmentation of the syllabus.
- 14.4.5 The Board encountered limited examples of student work in the Part Two course which demonstrated a detailed understanding of the histories and theories of architecture and urban design and the history of ideas. It also concluded that more sensitivity could have been brought to bear by students in relation to the spatial, aesthetic, technical and social qualities of design within a wider cultural context. The Board advises the School to consider introducing into the course a more positive interaction with specialist staff supporting the cultural context areas.
- 14.4.6 The Board was generally satisfied with work being undertaken on structure, construction and environmental technology in the Part Two course but advises the School to further develop the potential in the course for exploration of materials and innovative construction.
- 14.4.7 Poor progression rates remain a problem in both the Part One and Part Two courses. The School is advised to continue to monitor and review progression rates, taking action as appropriate.
- 14.4.8 Published University policy states that it had clear English language requirements for overseas students and in fact re-tested all international students' written,

oral and listening skills on arrival. The Board supported the concerns raised by some members of staff in their discussions with the Board that these systems might not be as effective as claimed and that, despite the additional university language skills provision, some overseas and home students still have weaknesses in this area. The Board advises the University to continue to monitor closely students' standard of English and to strengthen additional support systems where necessary.