

Royal Institute of British Architects

**Draft Report of the RIBA Visiting
Board to the Robert Gordon
University, Aberdeen**

**Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee
29 November 2006**

**The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture
and Built Environment
Faculty of Design and Technology**

**MArch Architecture Part Two
PgDip/MSc Advanced Architectural
Studies Part Two**

Date of Revisiting Board: 9 June 2006

**This Report should be read in conjunction with the RIBA
Visiting Board Report to the Scott Sutherland School of
27/28 October 2005**

Information About the Courses

1.1 Courses offered for revalidation:

M.Arch Architecture Part Two
PgDip/MSc Advanced Architectural Studies

1.2 Address of the Institution where the courses are delivered

The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture
The Robert Gordon University
Garthdee Road
Aberdeen
AB10 7QB

T: 01224 263700

F: 01224 263777

W: www.rgu.ac.uk

1.3 Name of Awarding Body

The Robert Gordon University

1.4 Name of Head of School

David McClean

1. Membership of the Visiting Board

2.1 The members of the RIBA Revisiting Board for the visit on 9 June 2006 were:

Professor George Henderson (Chair)

Mr Aaron Evans

Professor David Dernie

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk (RIBA) was in attendance as Secretary to the Board.

Professor Henderson and Mr Evans provided continuity with the Full Visiting Board of October 2005.

3. Procedures & Criteria for the Visit

3.1 The Revisiting Board was carried out under the 'RIBA Procedures for the Validation of UK Courses and Examinations in Architecture,' published July 2003, effective from September 2003, and 'Tomorrow's Architect,' published March 2003, effective from September 2003. For more information see www.architecture.com.

4. Recommendations of the Visiting Board Confirmed by the Royal Institute of British Architects Education Committee on 29 November 2006

4.1 At its meeting on 29 November 2006, the RIBA Education Committee confirmed:

Continued Validation of:

M.Arch Architecture Part Two
PgDip/MSc Advanced Architectural Studies

4.2 The next full Visiting Board will take place in 2009.

5. Recommendation of the Visiting Board to the Commonwealth Association of Architects and the Construction Industry Council & EU Directive

- 5.1 The Visiting Board recommends to the Commonwealth Association of Architects that the CAA continue with their accreditation of the Part Two qualification.
- 5.2 The Visiting Board recommends to ARB that the Part 1 & 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 4.1 above satisfied all the Criteria for Validation (which are 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 4.1 was inspected during the visit and was found to meet the required standards.

8. Conditions of Validation

- 8.1 There were no conditions attached to the courses listed in 4.1.

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 & Commentary Contained in the Full Report

- 10.1 The last RIBA Visiting Board to the Robert Gordon University took place on the 27/28 October 2005. At its meeting on 30 November 2005 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed **Continued Validation** of:

BSc (Hons) Architecture Part One, 4 years full time
 BSc (Hons) Architecture (European Practice) Part One, 4 years full time
 BSc (Hons) Interior Architecture Part One, 4 years full time

Continued Validation with Conditions of:
 M.Arch Architecture Part Two
 PgDip/MSc Advanced Architectural Studies

The full report of the October 2005 full Visiting Board can be downloaded from www.architecture.com. It is strongly recommended that this report is read in conjunction with the October 2005 Report.

The Revisit was convened to establish how well the mechanisms proposed by the School to meet the conditions placed on Part Two were working in practice. The Board would like to thank the staff of the Scott Sutherland School for their hospitality during the visit and their willingness to provide additional information when requested.

The Board appreciates that the School has recently undergone a protracted period of change and uncertainty, with which it has appeared to cope admirably. The Board believes that the School will benefit greatly from a period of stability and consolidation, enabling it to build on its undoubted strengths which are outlined in the October 2005 Visiting Board report. The School has diligently fulfilled its obligations as regards mechanisms to address the concerns of the 2005 Visiting Board. The Board acknowledges that the School is aware of the issues arising from the present structure and has taken steps to address them. However, the Revisiting Board has concerns about the operation of these arrangements, in particular with diagnosing the adequacy of technology and environment and the accommodation of weaker students.

10.3 Recommendations

10.3.1 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.

10.3.2 The structure of the course creates some problems which the School has tried to address. However, the Board would note that it is challenging for weaker students to meet the technology and environment criteria at Part Two in the Honours year. The Board recommends that the School consider mechanisms for weaker students to do work in the fifth year which will strengthen them in these and any other area of diagnosed weakness.

10.3.3 Although threshold standards were not compromised in the portfolios examined, the Revisiting Board strongly recommends to the School that they carefully monitor the degree of resolution of construction and structures at lowest pass level at Part 2 (Final Honours Year) in future years. The Board recommends that these issues be a focus of the staff team's considerations at the annual review.

10.3.4 Although threshold standards were not compromised in the portfolios examined, the Revisiting Board strongly recommends to the School that they carefully monitor the integration of passive technologies and environmental strategies at lowest pass level at Part 2 Level (Final Honours Year) in future years. The Board recommends that these issues be a focus of the staff team's considerations at the annual review.

10.4 Advice

10.4.1 The Visiting Board offers the following advice to the Institution on desirable, but not essential improvements,

which it is felt would assist course development and/or raise standards;

10.4.2 There was no additional advice.

11. Summary of Previous Visiting Board Reports

11.1 The last RIBA Visiting Board to the Robert Gordon University took place on the 27/28 October 2005. At its meeting on 30 November 2005 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed that

Continued Validation of:

BSc (Hons) Architecture Part One, 4 years full time
 BSc (Hons) Architecture (European Practice) Part One, 4 years full time
 BSc (Hons) Interior Architecture Part One, 4 years full time

Continued Validation with Conditions of:

M.Arch Architecture Part Two
 PgDip/MSc Advanced Architectural Studies

Overall the October 2005 Visiting Board concluded that the School's strengths included:

- Its clear identity and individuality as the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture, one of the oldest Schools of Architecture in the United Kingdom, and which is a nationally and internationally recognised name.

- A palpable energy and excitement in the School which suggest great potential to be exploited. This is fostered by the new school leadership, which brings strong links with practice and the contribution of high-calibre guest speakers and lecturers.
- An excellent and committed staff body.
- The clarity of academic focus.
- Good rapport between staff and students. The students find the staff approachable; the relatively small size of the School fosters a friendly and collaborative atmosphere.
- A vibrant studio culture.
- A strong student-led lecture society.
- Excellent facilities at the Garthdee Campus. The projected refurbishment and new buildings, if carried out as planned, stand to create outstanding provision.
- Superb model-making expertise.
- The Interior Architecture Part One, is a unique selling point of the Scott Sutherland School, not only because it provides the potential to specialise to a degree at Part One level, but also because it attracts students to architecture who may not otherwise have considered it as a career.
- The potential for interdisciplinarity and cross-fertilisation with subject areas in Art and Design. Of note is the Gray's School of Art which is an established school of art, providing excellent facilities.
- Established links with Built Environment disciplines at the University, which Architecture staff are keen to preserve.
- Links with overseas schools.
- A clear commitment to Architecture from University Senior Management.
- Its location within the UK, described as a 'rich geographic laboratory' by staff.

- A number of ambitious research objectives supported by University funding, which stand to have positive impact on the student experience and raise the School's profile.

The full report can be downloaded from www.architecture.com.

- 11.2 The October 2005 Visiting Board placed the following conditions on the M.Arch Architecture (Part Two), and PgDip/MSc Advanced Architectural Studies
- i. That a report defining mechanisms to ensure that all students graduating from Part Two course are meeting all Validation Criteria (with regard particularly to the Technology and Environment Criteria) be received at the RIBA by 16 December 2005. This report was duly received and considered by the October 2005 Board members and the RIBA Validation Committee.
 - ii. A revisit by a sub-group, consisting of three members plus Secretary and providing continuity with the present Board will take place to co-incide with the external examination of the present academic year (2005/2006). The sub-group would ascertain whether the implemented mechanisms to be outlined in the report ensured that all Part Two graduates met all Part Two criteria.

12. Details of the Conditions in Item 8.

- 12.1 There were no conditions attached to the courses listed in 4.1.

13. Commentary

13.1 Developments since the last visit

In recent years the School and courses have undergone extensive restructuring, latterly whilst under the leadership of an Acting Head of School.

At the time of the October 2005 visit, the School had just been repositioned into the School of Art, Architecture and Design (incorporating the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture and the Gray's School of Art). It thus joined the School of Engineering and Built Environment and School of Computing to form the Faculty of Design and Technology. In its report of the October 2005 visit, the Board expressed the hope that the School would be allowed a period of stability to allow architecture to consolidate its present position.

However, following the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor in September 2005, further restructuring has taken place. The School has been returned to its former composition as the School of Architecture and Built Environment. Other senior management positions remain to be filled; an Acting Dean is currently in post, pending a permanent appointment, and as at June 2006 two new Vice-Principal posts were being advertised.

The Head of School was confirmed in post in June 2006, having been Acting Head for almost two years, which in itself will remove a layer of uncertainty.

These developments have guided, to some extent, what has happened in the School since October 2005. Furthermore, although the School still intends to carry out an evaluation of moving to a different course structure, in

the light of the wider national debate about the future structure and content of UK architectural education in general will not make any premature decisions in the near future that may involve unnecessary change.

The Revisiting Board appreciates that the School is still in a state of transition due to the repeated changes imposed upon it by the University. The Revisiting Board also recognises that one academic year is a relatively short time in which to address the conditions of the October 2005 Visiting Board. The Board hopes that stability at management level, continued vigilance with regard to standards and assessment, refinement of the mechanisms implemented for the 2006 examination diet and consideration of the recommendations and advice contained in this report will help the School to strengthen its present position and provide a sound basis for future development.

13.2 Documentation and Arrangements for the Visit

All arrangements for the visit were excellent. The bulk of the documentation for the visit was identical to that provided for the full Visit in October 2005; the Board is grateful to the School for providing additional copies. The Revisiting Board was also provided with the School's Response to the October 2005 report, and specially-prepared School Context and Project documentation to bring them up to date with developments at School and Faculty level since October 2005.

The Revisit took place at the time of the School's End of Year Exhibition. All student work identified as the sample for the purposes of the Revisit was clearly highlighted. The School was also happy to provide additional information on request.

The Visit also coincided with the visit of the External Examiners. The Board was able to discuss in person with the External Examiners the School's response to the condition, the working of the new mechanisms in practice and the general level of attainment and compliance with the criteria across all levels.

13.2.1 Record of Academic Portfolios sampled during the visit

From the 2005/2006 Part Two graduating cohort, the School provided:

The 3 lowest pass portfolios (including Stage 4 and Stage 5 work);

Two middle pass portfolios (including Stage 4 and Stage 5 work)

Two high pass portfolios (including Stage 4 and Stage 5 work).

From a cohort size of 62 at Stage 4 and 32 at Stage 5.

13.3 Responses to the Visiting Board Report of October 2005 and external examiner comments.

Compliance with the Part Two Technology and Environment criteria are intended to be demonstrated in the final year (Stage 4) of the BSc (Hons) Architecture, BSc (Hons) Interior Architecture and BSc (Hons) European Practice courses. If a student does not meet the Part Two criteria at this point, the BSc (Hons) award is not made. Further advanced work in these areas may be undertaken at Stage 5 but it is not a pre-requisite. This is intended to make Stage 5 a more explorative and investigative year. Whilst the October 2005 Visiting Board was comfortable with standards set for Part One compliance in Technology and Environment, it was not satisfied that all students met the Part Two criteria at this

point. The diet of design work in the M.Arch (Stage 5) did not always allow sufficient exploration of criteria in technology and environment to make good any shortfall.

As requested in the Condition, the School provided a detailed response to the Condition by December 2005. This was circulated to the October 2005 Board members for their comments, which then informed the RIBA Validation Committee's discussion of the report in February 2006.

The chief provisions in the Response were:

i. Revised assessment matrices for the major design studios for both Architecture and Interior Architecture which are the key modules intended to be assessed for the final satisfaction of Technology and Environment criteria for both Part One and Part Two. The School confirmed in correspondence that the assessment templates would be completed and issued to each student for each module to demonstrate compliance.

ii. The School intended to give these matrices to all Stage 4 students and use them as a directional tool in interim reviews. They would also be used as final assessment records of performance.

iii. At Stage 5, the Assessment Matrix for the Semester 2 MArch and PGDip Advanced Architectural Studies Studio modules were amended to make explicit that students are expected to develop their project holistically, including technological aspects as appropriate.

iv. The School undertook a triangulation exercise demonstrating the alignment between the RIBA/ARB

Criteria, Learning Outcomes and Project Assessment Criteria/Matrices, with the aim of clarifying to staff and students the intention that the Stage 4 studio modules adequately address the Technology and Environment Criteria at Part Two level.

v. In agreement with the University Vice-Principal for Quality Assurance, it was agreed that the responsibilities of the External Examiners would be formally extended to require that those for Stages 1-4 would state their confidence that all students passing the BSc (Hons) courses had met the criteria for Part One and the Technology and Environment criteria for Part Two. The Stage 5 External Examiners would be asked state their confidence that all other Part Two criteria had been met at the conclusion of that stage.

vi. The School proposed placing the mapping document on the University's Virtual Campus to ensure that all students were aware of the course structure and at which point it was intended that specific criteria be met. They also intended to hold discussions as appropriate to clarify this.

14. Commentary

14.1 The Board was encouraged that the External Examiners were confident that the criteria were covered and baseline standards were appropriate. The External Examiners and the Board are supportive of the School's intention to preserve and enhance this.

14.2 The structure of the course creates some problems which the School has tried to address. However, the Board would note that it is challenging for weaker students to

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- meet the technology and environment criteria at Part Two in the Honours year. The Board recommends that the School consider mechanisms for weaker students to do work in the fifth year which will strengthen them in these areas. This might involve offering them either remedial work or a different diet of work, appropriate to their level of attainment or any identified shortcomings in their work. The Board noted that the School has improved its communication with the students, holding regular meetings and periodic reviews. The matrices are the main tool for interaction with the students, allowing space for free text to make note of good work and shortcomings. Students also receive verbal feedback, formative feedback and a summative assessment at the end of the year. The Board considered that the adoption of a Personal Development Plan, as presently being piloted by the University, would be a useful tracking tool in this respect.
- 14.3 The Board noted that the School is due to receive a mid-term monitoring visit in 2007 as part of the normal cycle of visits. These visits are typically carried out by the Chair of Vice-Chair of the previous full Visiting Board. The mid-term visitors will wish to see next year's graduate student work (i.e. that of the 2006/2007 graduating cohort) in terms of the fourth and fifth year and the lowest pass. The Revisiting Board would wish the mid-term visit to see how they evaluate technology at Part Two and there to be some supportive remedial mechanism for less able students.
- 14.4 Although threshold standards were not compromised in the portfolios examined, the Revisiting Board strongly recommends to the School that they carefully monitor the degree of resolution of construction and structures at lowest pass level at Part 2 (Final Honours Year) in future years. The Board recommends that these issues be a focus of the staff team's considerations at the annual review.
- 14.5 Although threshold standards were not compromised in the portfolios examined, the Revisiting Board strongly recommends to the School that they carefully monitor the integration of passive technologies and environmental strategies at lowest pass level at Part 2 Level (Final Honours Year) in future years. The Board recommends that these issues be a focus of the staff team's considerations at the annual review.
- 14.6 The Revisiting Board had concerns about the depth and quality of design at the threshold level at Part Two (Stage 5).
- 14.7 With a view to enhancing the quality of technical work, the Board considered the current structure constrained students to more predictable and repetitive solutions, due to the limited amount of time available by having to meet these requirements in the Honours year.
- 14.8 The School believes that covering technology and environment in Stage 4 enhances Stage 5 as it allows a broader scope of academic inquiry and investigation, integrating technology and environment and cultural context within the context of the developed brief. However, there was some concern among the Board about the mechanics of judging technology and environment at Part Two in the Honours year (in the context of a design at Part 1 level), and likewise judging only Part 2 level design at Stage 5 (separately from an assessment of environment, construction and structures at the same level). In terms of design, the Board was not

entirely satisfied that students were sufficiently challenged in all cases by the fifth year programme.

- 14.9 In general, the Board questioned the principle of removing technology and environment from design and whether this administrative distinction was helping the School's overall aims and identity. However, the School considered there to be a culmination of achievement, rather than a simple divorcing of different elements. In the Honours year the programme is aimed at a detailed comprehension of a complex building, whereas the fifth year is intended to allow a broader agenda. The fifth year is underpinned by the structure of the previous four years.

15. External examining arrangements

The 2005 Visiting Board members who reviewed the written response to the Condition considered that it would simplify matters if the Part Two examiners had sight of the students' Stage 4 and Stage 5 work, even if they were only officially examining Stage 5. The School responded that the prime responsibility of its External Examiners was to assure the University of its quality procedures with respect to the named awards, hence having separate groups of examiners for the different awards accorded with best practice. Their obligation to confirm whether the criteria were met is important, but secondary, and the School was confident that the mechanism proposed would avoid any conflict between their dual responsibilities. It would also be inappropriate effectively to re-examine work which had already been examined.

The Board met four external examiners attached to the Part One and Part Two awards. In accordance with University policy, at present separate examiners are appointed for specific awards and there is no cross-over

between Part One and Part Two. The External Examiners had seen all students; previously they had been restricted to sampling but in 2005 the University re-instated interviewing of all students.

The External Examiners commented that they had experienced difficulties in previous years understanding the split between Part One and Part Two as described in the course documentation at the time, but it had been evident in the work. The External Examiners confirmed that the School had modified its documentation to ensure that it corresponded to what happened in practice. The Externals believed that absences and deficiencies have been effectively addressed. This year, they had found a marked improvement on the previous year and were confident in stating that the students had met the criteria as outlined in the matrices. They believed that the students were now quite clear about the system and requirements, and that in the work these are being explicitly addressed. Noting that the fourth year project is not purely a vehicle for satisfaction of these criteria, the students appeared more aware this year that they had to make appropriate consideration of environment and technology. The Externals believed that better explanations from the School had contributed to this. Many of the referrals were related to deficiencies in the technological elements, which demonstrated that the system was picking them up. They felt that the course was sufficiently well-structured not to overstretch the less able student; overall it was managed well, but there was a certain lack of design freedom.

The MArch and PgDip/MSc examiners are not permitted to re-assess the Honours year. When asked, they considered that it might be possible to ask to see the Honours year work of a particular student if they were

really concerned; however, the student would already have had their Honours degree awarded on the basis of compliance with the criteria mapped against that stage. The external examiners did comment that questions would be raised if there was an obvious lack of technical knowledge displayed in the project. This would indicate a deficiency in the Honours year.

The Externals understood the School's intentions for the fifth year, but observed that although the fifth year is a specialisation, there tends to be less energy compared with the Honours year. They believed that the staff were alert to the possibility that the final year could or should be different and had more potential that could be explored.

Overall, the External Examiners were supportive of the School, finding that it had a pleasant atmosphere and some interesting work was being produced. They were confident that establishment of the Head of School and the Head of Architecture Discipline in post would advance the changes that were already taking place.

16. Documentation Provided

Record of the documentation provided before and during the visit.

The documentation was identical to that provided for the October 2005 full visit (details can be found in the Visiting Board Report of October 2005).

In addition, the Board was provided with:

The School's Response to the Visiting Board report,
December 2005