

**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Report of the RIBA Visiting Board  
to Sheffield Hallam University**

Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee 6 July 2009

**Architecture Subject Group  
Division of Built Environment  
Faculty of Development and Society**

**BSc (Hons) Architecture and  
Environmental Design**

Date of Visiting Board: 13/14 November 2008

**1. Information About the Courses**

**1.1 Courses offered for revalidation:**

BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental design, Part One, Three years full time

**1.2 Address of the Institution where the courses are delivered**

Faculty of Development and Society  
Sheffield Hallam University,  
City Campus  
Howard Street  
Sheffield  
S1 1WB

T: 0114 225 5555  
F: 0114 225 4449  
W: <http://www.shu.ac.uk/>

**1.2 Name of Awarding Body**  
Sheffield Hallam University

**1.3 Name of Head of Subject Group**  
Norman Wienand

**2. Membership of the Visiting Board**

**2.1** The members of the RIBA Visiting Board for the visit on 13/14 November 2008 were:

Kathy Gal (Chair)  
Derek Cottrell  
Roosje Barr  
Stewart Dodd  
David Simister (Regional Nominee)  
Hilary Holloway (Non-Architect Member)  
Mark Physsas (Graduate/Student Member)

Sarah Bedding (RIBA) was in attendance as Secretary to the Board.

Peter Westland was in attendance as institutional facilitator

**3. Procedures & 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 July 2003, effective from September 2003 and 'Tomorrow's Architect,' published March 2003, effective from September 2003 in the UK. For more information see [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com).

**4. Recommendations of the Visiting Board Confirmed by the Royal Institute of British Architects Education Committee 6 July 2009**

4.1 At its meeting on 6 July 2009, the RIBA Education Committee confirmed Continued Validation of:  
**BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design**  
Part 1, three years full-time

4.2 The next Visiting Board will take place in 2012.

**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 continues with their accreditation of the Part 1 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 ARB that the Part 1 course 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 course 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 course 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 School has made considerable progress since the last Visiting Board.

10.2 The School's strengths include:

- An innovative and advanced approach to course structure and design
- A strongly integrated studio culture
- A committed and enthusiastic staff team
- Strong support from the university
- A positive and integrated approach to IT teaching
- Laudable approach to widening access
- Constructive engagement with local practice
- Excellent physical resources, including impressive library provision
- Cross disciplinary working with Architectural Technology students

10.3 Recommendations

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.

There were no recommendations.

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:

- In the context of ongoing changes to the profession and industry the subject group is advised to continue to review the effectiveness of the programme in meeting its aims in Technology and Environment.

## 11. Summary of Previous Visiting Board Reports

11.1 The last RIBA Visiting Board to Sheffield Hallam University took place on the 4-5 November 2004. The Board recommended that Continued Validation be granted for:

**BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design**  
Part 1, three years full-time

11.2 “The BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design is based in a large Division of the Built Environment, under the umbrella of a wider Faculty of Development and Society, which provides great potential for cross-disciplinary activity whilst maintaining its distinctive character. The Subject Group is working well, is self-critical and self-reflective and producing good product, demonstrating significant improvement in areas of concern to the previous Visiting Board. The Board supports the continuing development of Architecture at Sheffield Hallam and looks forward to the appointment of

the new full-time lecturer and the continued contribution of the Design Champion.

The Board considered that Sheffield Hallam had succeeded in establishing a charming and delightful School of Architecture and applauded its achievements in melding its strong environmental mission within a very satisfactory delivery of the wider curriculum. The environmental design focus of the course is innovative and attractive to students, being strengthened by the staff's experience in commercial practice and research interests, and the Subject Group's proactive participation in regional regeneration schemes in Sheffield and South Yorkshire. A lively studio culture has developed, assisted by good staff support. Facilities are excellent and stand to improve further once currently projected developments take place"

## 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 Self-Appraisal and Developments since the last visit

The Board found it rather difficult to get a flavour of the School from the Critical Self Appraisal. It would have been useful to have provided a mission statement of the School's position, and on the position of the School within the context of the University. It was also difficult to establish what contribution the staff and students had made to the preparation of the CSA.

Since the last visit the Subject Group has made the following changes:

- The weighting of the final year studio has been increased, whilst that for Management, Practice and Law has been reduced. The final year Cultural Context module is now examined by extended essay only
- All final year portfolios are now examined rather than a representative sample only
- Four new staff members have been appointed, whilst visiting critics are employed more frequently
- Timetable refinements now offer permanent and exclusive accommodation for the Architecture Group

### 13.2 Documentation and Arrangements for the Visit

The arrangements for the visit were very good and all aspects of the visit ran smoothly. The Board was ably assisted by the institutional facilitator. The base room worked well, and despite degree ceremonies going on outside the room, the Board was comfortable for the duration of their visit. The rooms adjacent to the Base Room were used for the exhibition, the portfolios and the meetings with Staff and Students, and these arrangements worked very well. The exhibition was well organised and the portfolios were easily navigable.

The documentation was very clear and the Board found it easy to gain the information they required from the documents provided. The Subject Group was most cooperative and helpful at all times when additional requests were made.

13.2.1 *Record of Academic Portfolios sampled during the visit*

The Board viewed the three lowest pass portfolios, two middle pass portfolios and two high pass portfolios from years 1, 2 and 3 as at summer 2008, from a total undergraduate body of 136 students.

13.3 **Responses made to the previous Visiting Board report (and to reports of any revisits) and external examiner comments.**

The Board felt that the School had been responsive to issues raised by the previous Visiting Board and had made considerable progress. The Course has matured dramatically since the previous visit. The Board was impressed with the way the School had responded to the comments of the External Examiners, including the incorporation of their suggestion to examine every portfolio and the adoption of a new spatial planning project.

13.4 **Context of the courses within the wider provision of the school and Faculty.**

The course is delivered by the Architecture Subject Group. The Group is one of three Subject Groups within the Division of Built Environment and the Division is one of three divisions plus research centres that make up the Faculty of Development and Society. The Board was advised by the Vice-Chancellor that the University had re-structured into four faculties in 2004, and that the University intends to undertake a lesser re-modelling in 2009-2010, when the Divisions will be re-structured into

'Departments'. This will see a move from Subject Groups to Departments, Architecture will be joined by Planning, Housing & Sustainable Environments to form a new Department. The Board considered that the current identity of the Architecture 'Subject Group' was not as strong as it might have been, and is interested to see how the change to a Department might strengthen the identity of Architecture within the University.

It was clear that the course is well supported through funding within the University.

13.5 **Detailed Commentary on the Course leading to Part 1 qualification**

13.5.1 Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives

The Board found the course objectives to be clear, valid and being achieved. The course documentation provided was very clear. The Board considered however that in some cases the design process could have been more clearly demonstrated in the portfolios.

13.5.2 Course design and content

The Board considered the course design to be good, and its aims and focus to be very clear. The project briefs were appropriate for the programme, and the Board particularly wished to applaud the second year projects which demonstrated a good process of learning.

13.5.3 Quality and coverage of the syllabus (including balance and integration between design/non-design work)

- *Design*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board was satisfied that all the Part 1 Validation Criteria in the area of design were being met by graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural and Environmental Design award. The Board was impressed with the design progression through the years. The design projects were incremental and well balanced, and of developing scale and complexity.

- *Technology and Environment*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board was satisfied that all the Part 1 Validation Criteria in the area of Technology and Environment were being met by graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural and Environmental Design award. The Board found the implementation of Technology and Environment to be adequate. The Board found in some project work that the outcomes did not achieve the objectives set out by the course design. The Board suggests the Subject Group reviews its approach to Technology and Environment to ensure the environmental thrust of the course is evident in the project work.

- *Cultural Context*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board was satisfied that all the Part 1 Validation Criteria in the area of Cultural Context were being met by graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural and Environmental Design award. The Board considered that the cultural context of the course was adequate and carefully mapped

against the Criteria. The Board welcomed the contribution by specialist staff in this area, for example the lecturer who recently transferred from the Faculty of Arts, Computing, Engineering & Science.

- *Communication*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board was satisfied that all the Part 1 Validation Criteria in the area of Communication were being met by graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural and Environmental Design award. The Board was impressed by the range of presentations used in the design projects and the found the students to be articulate and expressive. The Board also recognised the initiatives that the Subject Group has put in place to improve drawing skills. The Board observed a lack of model-making and considered that the workshop could be used more productively as part of the process of and justification for design.

- *Management Practice and Law*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board was satisfied that all the Part 1 Validation Criteria in the area of Management Practice and Law were being met by graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural and Environmental Design award. The Board applauded the embedding of MPL into the design projects and found the written assignments to be advanced. The Board considered that MPL could have been included from the beginning of the projects; in some cases the process appeared too retrospective.

- *Preparation for Professional Experience, Part 1*

The Board was impressed by the Practice, Law and Legislation module in the BSc (Hons) award. This module is aimed at preparing the student for their first year of professional experience in practice, and focussed primarily on the design process and its relationship with the delivery of a building, together with a study of the basic principles of law and practice procedures. The Board considered that this module equipped students well for the professional world. The Board was pleased to note that the Subject Group utilises its links with local practice well; several employers have strong supportive relationships with the course, acting as part-time tutors and visiting lecturers.

13.5.4 Progression within the course

The Subject Group accepted that progression rates could be improved. The University has a policy of widening access and seeks to attract those from the less well-represented socio-economic and ethnic groups. The progression rate in the final year is typically 90%. The Subject Group considered that the new policy of interviewing all prospective students as part of the admissions process will help to improve retention and increase the perception of 'added value'. There are several well considered pastoral care mechanisms in place to ensure students are well supported. The Board wished to commend the Subject Group for the emphasis it places on widening access and pastoral support. In addition, the External Examiners welcomed the way in which the high level of repeating students has been addressed, in particular the 'tough love' strategy to prevent struggling students from continuing with little prospect of eventual success.

13.5.5 Assessment: methods, content and coverage, relative weightings, standards achieved

The Assessment procedures are clearly set out in the documentation. All design projects are assessed at final presentation by two or more tutors, and each tutor completes a feedback sheet covering the learning outcomes for each project. Second marking and anonymous marking for examinations is standard procedure. No compensation is allowed between modules. All must be passed individually with a minimum of 40%. Compensation is allowed between different components of a module.

Overall the students seemed satisfied with the feedback they received from tutors, and the accessibility to and approachability of the tutors was particularly welcome.

The Subject Group has responded well to the previous comments made by the External Examiners although there is a recommendation that care is maintained to ensure that more ambitious schemes are not more highly marked than restrained but more resolved schemes. Strict rules are consistently imposed regarding the marking procedure.

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

The Faculty's policy on APEL and APCL conforms to that set out in the University's procedures. Beyond entry level, admission is possible at level 5 (second year). Direct entry to this year is possible for students who have successfully completed level 4 on a professionally

accredited Architecture course. Direct entry at level 6 (third year) of the Course is also subject to these conditions but will also require the specific agreement of the RIBA in accordance with their conditions for accreditation.

### 13.8 External examining arrangements

The Board met two External Examiners. The External Examiners praised the cohesive and responsive course team in the Subject Group. They described how the course has continuously developed throughout its first cycle of validation and how ready the Subject Group has been to address any issues which have arisen. The External Examiners were pleased that a spatial planning project had been introduced after their specific comments regarding the understanding of this topic. The External Examiners considered that the environmental focus in the work is interesting and a distinctive feature of the Sheffield Hallam course, although they recognised that this approach has now become more ‘main stream’. While there is a good balance between the theory of design and the environmental outcomes of design, the External Examiners suggested there more attention could be paid to the consequences of environmental design. The emphasis on the analytical side is welcomed but there could be more on environmental outcomes, perhaps through a specific piece of written work on technology and environment.

The External Examiners consider all of the portfolios and praised the Subject Group’s exemplary organisation of this process. However the External Examiners have the opportunity to meet only a small group of representative students.

The External Examiners have encouraged the strengthening of clarity, objectivity and transparency in the assessment process. Previously, if the examiners had felt that one student had been marked too highly, the marks for the whole group were decreased, and it had been felt that this penalised all students. This procedure has now been amended and grade bands remain unaltered even if individual marks are adjusted.

Whilst the examiners supported the University’s approach to widening participation, they were pleased that the course leaders have begun to strengthen and increase the quality of the cohort group through a number of measures, including raising the intake grade requirements from 230 to 280, and by addressing the issue of the higher number of repeating students. They noted that it was intended that portfolios would be submitted at intake in the future as part of the admissions procedures. The examiners considered that literacy levels could be improved further, but welcomed the introduction into the course of related non-core modules, such as life drawing, which they felt enhanced the overall quality of the learning experience.

### 13.9 Arrangements for Monitoring Professional Experience

The Board found that students were well supported by the Subject Group during their year of professional experience (Stage 1 practical training experience). Students were provided with a guide to the year, which covered preparing for job applications and the requirements for recording professional experience through the PEDR. They were provided with application and portfolio advice on request.

A recall day is arranged in early spring each year which allows students on their year out to return to give presentations of their experience to the current final year students. The proportion of students who generally register for the PEDR is typically 60-70% of the graduate cohort. The Subject Group reported good feedback from employers and considered that the supportive links with practice enhance the students' overall year out experience.

### 13.10 Students

The student meeting was well attended, and the Board wishes to applaud the student body for their engaging and open discussion. The Board was impressed by the articulate presentation of the students' opinions and the enthusiasm for the course which came through the discussion.

The students expressed their appreciation of the inclusive approach to teaching by the staff. The students felt that tutors are approachable and responsive to student concerns and considered that the accessibility of staff helps create a nurturing environment, with the consequence that they feel involved in the evolution of the course. The enthusiasm and the positive attitude of the staff are perceived as an asset to the course. The students also praised the feedback they receive from tutors.

Many students cited the environmental ethos of the course as their reason for choosing Sheffield Hallam.

The students appreciated the Practice, Law and Legislation module and recognised its value in equipping them with the necessary skills for their professional experience year out in practice.

The students pinpointed the exciting studio culture that existed within the Subject Group. Although space can be limited, learning to share and compromise encouraged interaction. It also allows a good relationship with the Architectural Technologists who share the space.

In support of Architecture, the students commented on the following areas that could be improved:

- The administration of the university; course tutors often have to carry out administration duties for students beyond that of the course requirements.
- The students would welcome more whole-division events. This interaction would benefit all years and create a more cohesive student body. The whole-division events which have taken place in the past have been successful.
- In addition, interaction with other Subject Groups within the faculty could be improved. The students enjoyed the existing lectures from the design school but felt that the potential for multi-disciplinary work was at present not fully realised.
- Accessibility to the workshops could be improved. The students praised the helpfulness of the technicians but felt that all students would benefit from some more formal guidance on the workshops and working with hard materials. The Architecture students did not feel that they were able to take full advantage of this space and would like to see this rectified in the future.

**13.11 Staff**

The staff meeting was attended by academic, technical and support staff, both part-time and full-time. The Head of the Subject Group did not attend. The Board noted the staff's commitment to the students and the open dialogue between the two. The Staff/Student ratio is currently 1:23.

The Board felt that the Staff comprised a positive and motivated team, who worked well together to meet the needs of the students. The course team displayed great leadership skills. The breadth of disciplines and the experience within the staff body is a strength of the School. The Board was particularly impressed by the wide variety of experience within the staff body, and the way in which the team worked together, drawing on their various skills to achieve a successful School.

The staff praised the support they had received from the University in terms of staff development. Although teaching is the focus, the promotion of research is important and the quality of teaching will be further improved by the research that is undertaken.

**13.12 Research**

Research activities have declined since the previous Visiting Board. Four years ago the Subject Group had a high research profile but, since then, many research-active staff had left the University. However, the Subject Group intends to broaden the research base with future appointments. They thought that an RAE submission could be made in 2-3 years. The Subject Group felt it

benefited from being released from the pressure which research may bring. Overall the Board was impressed by the way in which research was embedded into the course and was interested to see the outcome of the various opportunities being explored.

**13.13 Equal Opportunities**

The Board observed an improved gender mix amongst the teaching staff in the Subject Group since the previous Visiting Board. The gender ratio amongst the students is approximately 35% female and 65% male over the last three years. The Faculty has a strong initiative in place to encourage women to enter the Course.

The Subject Group provided well for those students with disabilities through the Student Services Centre. The progress of these students is carefully monitored and processes are put in place to ensure the correct support is received by the students.

**13.14 Resourcing and facilities**

- *IT*

The principle provision for computing is provided in the Resources Room and comprises computer workstations for Architecture students and an A0 plotter and laser printers, and is dedicated to students in the faculty and is manned by three full time members of staff. The facility is staffed between 9.00- 5.00, but is accessible 24 hours a day for use of printing and plotting facilities. The Resources Room is located on the same floor as the design studios

and is particularly well-positioned for the Architecture students, although it is available to all students of the Faculty. The students commented they found this provision very useful.

Core software is provided and maintained centrally, and a wireless network is operated across the campus allowing students great flexibility of access to IT services.

The Board was impressed by the Subject Group's commitment to the renewal of computer equipment every four years and the availability of AutoCAD on all computers on the School network.

The Adsetts Centre, which is was extended in 2007/08 and offers students additional learning spaces and now houses 2000-networked PCs.

- *Library*

The Board commends the Library provision on level 5 of the Adsetts Centre, which it considered very impressive.

Following the closure of the Psalter Lane campus in 2008, the entire architecture collection is now housed in the Adsetts Centre, which holds approximately 10,000 titles in Architecture, Fine Art and Design. The Subject Group benefits from a dedicated subject librarian and very helpful staff. The budget for Architecture is generous and the Librarian is able to satisfy the lecturers' requests for new acquisitions.

The Centre has well equipped study spaces, with quiet work areas, both for individuals and groups. The students benefit from 24-hour access to the library and appeared to

use the space enthusiastically, making use of the laptop provision and the relaxation areas including the coffee shop.

Students have access to around 2000 print journals and 700 electronic journals. The University has a programme for increasing the number of electronic book titles and e-journals.

All students receive library induction sessions together with Information Literacy sessions from their subject advisor in using the University's electronic information resources.

- *Studios*

The students had a high regard for the studio provision at the University. Access to the studios is available 24 hours a day including at weekends upon request. Security is controlled by the central University reception. Each year group is allocated two full days of studio time. Students confirmed that there is not always enough space to accommodate all students, but the studio culture is exciting and vibrant. The Course Team is mindful of student numbers increasing and the pressure that would place on studio space.

Owen 437/441 is the larger studio. There are 40 workstations, each with an A1 drawing board and networked computer and desk. PowerPoint, slide projection, OHP, video and wipe boards allow occasional teaching to complement project work. Norfolk 401 and 402 are smaller studios and are timetabled for final year students. These have a total of 27 workstations, each with

a networked computer and desk and central seminar space.

- *Workshops and laboratories*

Laboratories for detailed environmental testing and design development are located on level 2 of the Owen Building. These have been provided specifically for the course as well as for wider environmental research at the university. The laboratories are staffed by a resident technician and are open between 9.00 and 17.00 for open access. The model-making workshop forms part of the environmental laboratories. This workshop provides workspace and heavy duty tools for working in wood, plastics and metals. It is also staffed by resident technicians, and the students commented on the helpfulness of the staff in the workshop. The workshops include an artificial sky, heliodon, spray booths and MinCam and image capturing facilities.

The Board found the workshop provision to be adequate, although this was not a dedicated facility for the Architecture students. Much of the provision appeared to be directed towards Engineering students. The Board considered that the workshops were not used to their full potential and would have liked to see more evidence of architectural model making.

**14. Attachments**

Record of the documentation provided before and during the visit. Course structure diagrams for courses recommended for Validation (as provided by the school prior to the visit).

BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design  
Definitive Document

BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design  
Course Information 2007-08  
BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design  
Questionnaire  
BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design  
Supplementary Information  
Critical Self Appraisal  
Studio floor plans