

Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA Visiting Board
to the Birmingham School of
Architecture and Landscape,
University of Central England**

Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee 30.11.05

Part One: BA (Honours) Architecture

**Part Two: Postgraduate Diploma in
Architecture**

**Part Three: Postgraduate Diploma in
Architectural Practice**

Date of Visiting Board: 16-17 June 2005

1. Information About the Courses

1.1 Courses offered for revalidation:

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)

1.2 Address of the Institution where the courses are delivered

Birmingham School of Architecture
 Birmingham Institute of Art and Design
 University of Central England
 Gosta Green
 Corporation Street
 Birmingham B4 7DX

T: 0121 331 5110

F: 0121 331 5131

W: www.biad.uce.ac.uk/architecture
www.birminghamschoolofarchitecture.co.uk

1.3 Name of Awarding Body

University of Central England

1.4 Name of Head of School

Professor Jim Low

2. Membership of the Visiting Board

2.1 The members of the RIBA Visiting Board for the visit on Thursday 16 and Friday 17 June 2005 were:

James Soane	(Chair)
Tony Watson	(Vice Chair)
Bob Giddings	
Sheila Ryding	(Non-Architect Member)
Tony Lloyd	(Regional Nominee)
Peter Williams	(Graduate/Student Member)

Kevin Harte (Validation Co-ordinator at RIBA) was in attendance as Secretary to the Board.

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 in September 2003, effective from September 2003, 'RIBA Criteria for Validation' published March 2002, effective from September 2003, and 'Description & 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 Committee 30 November 2005**

4.1 The RIBA Education Committee at its meeting on 30 November 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 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 was satisfied that the Part One courses 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 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 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 special 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 and Commentary Contained in the Full Report

10.1 Background

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.

10.2 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.

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.

10.3.1 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.

- 10.3.2 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.
- 10.3.3 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.

10.4 **Advice**

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:

- 10.4.1 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.
- 10.4.2 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).
- 10.4.3 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.
- 10.4.4 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.
- 10.4.5 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.

- 10.4.6 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.
- 10.4.7 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.
- 10.4.8 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.

11. Summary of Previous Visiting Board Reports

UCE Confirmed Report 30.11.05

- 11.1 The last RIBA ARB Visiting Board to the Birmingham School of Architecture and Landscape at the University of Central England took place on the 22 and 23 March 2001. The 2001 Visiting Board recommended **Continued Validation** of:

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

Part Three: Examination in Professional Practice Course with Diploma in Professional Studies (one or two years part-time)

The 2001 Visiting Board recommended **Conditional Continued Validation** of:

Part Two: Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture [until June 2003 the eight term sandwich course (three terms in practice followed by five full-time terms) or three years part-time and from June 2003 the six term full-time course (stand alone year out in practice followed by six full-time terms) or three years part-time].

The Visiting Board imposed the following condition on the course:

- i. A revisit in June 2003 by a sub-group of the Visiting Board (three members) to examine the standard of the portfolio of work at the lowest pass level and to monitor the output of the Part Two course.

11.2 Summary of the 2001 Visiting Board report

“The Department’s strengths included a highly committed and supportive staff and a lively and enthusiastic student body. The School benefits from some good facilities. Since the last visit, a new Head of School had been appointed from within their staff. In addition a new subject leader in the field of history and theory had been appointed. Richard Feilden from Feilden Clegg was appointed in 1999 as a visiting professor to advise the school on their strategic directions and in relation to issues such as sustainability. Since the last visit the School has placed a renewed emphasis on design as a core activity rather than the school’s previous emphasis on multi-disciplinary work. The Board would advise the school to continue to develop and deepen its approach to design from the conceptual through to the fully explored final proposal working to achieve the fullest integration of theoretical and technical issues.

The Board noted that the Part One course met the appropriate Criteria for Validation. The Board found that the School provided students with a good range of design projects throughout the course and that the best work was of a reasonable standard. The Board found that the lowest pass portfolios were of an adequate standard but would caution the School to ensure that these standards are not lowered any further. The Board recommended that the School may wish to consider further ways of encouraging students, particularly the weaker students, to demonstrate their knowledge of site, context and architectural technologies through their design work.

The Board had concerns regarding the Part Two course. The School states that its aim is to be a test bed for architectural education and to provide excellent design education. The Diploma School needs to develop work

that responds more fully to that aim. Although the best work was of a satisfactory order, the Board had concerns that the lowest pass portfolios and the standards at the threshold level were not appropriate and must be raised. The Board noted that the School was in the process of adjusting the full-time mode of the course from five-terms to six-terms. The Board recognised that this could contribute to improving the standards at the lowest level and would provide students with further opportunities to develop their projects. The Board encouraged the School in this initiative. As a result of the concerns, the Board recommended that a revisit should take place in June 2003, in order to reassure the Board that the standards at the lowest pass level had been improved. The Board also recommended that the School should consider methods of encouraging students to demonstrate further their knowledge of environmental design, construction and architectural technologies in the design work. The course would benefit from strengthening its links with history and theory and the research activities of the School. Much of the Diploma work emphasised the large independent thesis project where work, particularly at the lowest pass levels, did not always integrate a theoretical and cultural approach to architecture.

The Board found that the Part Three course/examination met the appropriate Part Three criteria. The Board was pleased to find that the Examination in Professional Practice with Diploma in Professional Studies was fully integrated into the University Quality Assurance process and that the School had appointed an external examiner to provide an overview of the course/examination each year. The Board found that the course was a particular strength within the School and commended the School on the

thorough preparation provided for students undertaking this course.”

11.3 **Revisit to Part Two in 2003**

The RIBA approved the recommendations which were contained in the 2001 Visiting Board report, but subsequently expressed support for the ARB proposal that the revisit be undertaken by a new fully constituted Board rather than a subgroup of the previous Board.

In accordance with the decisions made by ARB Board and the RIBA, the Board was a freshly constituted full visiting board and there was therefore no continuity between the 2003 and the 2001 Visiting Boards. The 2003 Re-Visiting Board was a one-day revisit to determine only whether or not the School has addressed the concerns raised by the 2001 Visiting Board in relation to the Part 2 course.

The Revisiting Board recommended **Continued Validation** of:

- Part Two: Diploma in Architecture (two years full-time)
- Diploma in Architecture (three years part-time)

11.4 **Summary of the 2003 Revisiting Report**

“The Board was pleased to find that the School had taken immediate and direct action to ensure that the concerns were addressed for the existing course/examination and that some significant changes to the course content and structure were underway as a result of the recommendations of the March 2001 Visiting Board. Through its examination of the portfolios, the Board was reassured and had confidence that the lowest pass standard was being drawn at an appropriate level. The

Board was satisfied that the School had put in place mechanisms to ensure that the lowest pass standards were maintained in the long term. In addition, the Board was able to confirm that the course was covering the appropriate criteria for Validation and was complying with the European Union Council’s Architects Directive. As a result, the Board recommended that the next full visit to examine the Part 2 courses should take place in 2005/2006, in line with the next quinquennial visit.”

12. Commentary

12.1 **Self-Appraisal and Developments since the last visit**

It was the Board’s opinion that the Critical Self-Appraisal provided by the School lacked critical awareness and contained many impressionistic statements unsupported by factual information. As a result the Board had to request additional information from the School which helped them to obtain a clearer picture of key details, such as the School’s aspirations and philosophy, and staffing.

Undoubtedly one of the major developments since the last full Visiting Board in 2001 has been the threat of closure of the School by University authorities following the exceptional failure rates in the Part One examinations (93%) in June 2004. Although the decision was taken not to recruit to the BA (Honours) Architecture course in September 2004, the Part One course remained active for those currently enrolled on the degree and the Part Two course was not affected by the suspension. The threat of closure was lifted and the future of the School secured following strong support from the Vice Chancellor of the

University and from local practitioners and students and the RIBA. The School, which has recruited for a 2005 entry to the undergraduate and postgraduate courses, will be relocated to the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (a Faculty of the University of Central England) in Birmingham City Centre in summer 2005.

Other changes since the 2001 Visiting Board have included:

- Revision of the curriculum to take account of new RIBA ARB criteria.
- Redesign of the Part One course to focus more on design.
- Updating of the Part One and Two courses and assessments to match the University's expectations in terms of module descriptors, level descriptors, learning outcomes and assessment load and criteria.
- The first level of Part One to be undertaken in common with BA (Honours) Landscape Architecture and BA (Honours) Garden Design.
- The appointment of the former Dean of the Faculty as Head of School in October 2004.
- The appointment of a new Course Director for Part Two in September 2003.
- The full-time Diploma course has been extended from five to six terms (though it is now predominantly part-time).
- Studio teaching is provided separately for part-time and full-time students (following feedback from part-time students).

12.2 Documentation and Arrangements for the Visit

The documentation originally supplied to the Visiting Board did not provide in an easily accessible manner some

key information, such as a clear description of the curriculum and syllabus. The Board spent considerable time scrutinising existing and additional documentation (which was promptly supplied by the School) and in discussion with School staff before it could fully satisfy itself on these issues.

The Board was disappointed to find that some of the arrangements did not take place as agreed in the preliminary meeting with the School. While the Board enjoyed the exhibition of student work, effort was needed to assemble a full design and academic portfolio for Part One and Two students. The Board had to reschedule its timetable in order to see the full range of aggregate marks for Part Two students and the full range of lowest pass portfolios required for the Part Two 2004/05 cohort. This was because the External Examiners' meeting for Part Two was taking place at that time. The School should take care in future to ensure that it does not invite a Visiting Board to attend until decisions have been formally confirmed by the External Examiners.

12.2.1 Record of Academic Portfolios sampled during the Visit

Part One: BA (Honours) Architecture

Year one: No intake autumn 2004

Year two: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle and two high from a cohort of 44

Year three: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle and two high from a cohort of 41

(All from the cohort entering the year in question in 2004 and including both full-time and part-time students. There are also 18 students in Year Four – part-time route)

Part Two: Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture

Year one: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle and two high from a cohort of 22

Year two: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle and two high from a cohort of 26 – there are also 7 students in Year 3 on the part-time route.

(All from the cohort entering the year in question in 2004 and including both full-time and part-time students)

Part Three: Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice

For Part Three the Board examined the complete assessed work of the three lowest pass, two middle pass and two high pass candidates from the cohort examined in 2004 which numbered 36 candidates.

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 last full Visiting Board report in 2001 and in the Revisiting Board report of 2003 had been addressed by the School. The 2001 Visiting Board had invited the School to consider methods of encouraging students to demonstrate further their knowledge of environmental design, construction and architectural technologies in the design work. In the view of the 2005 Visiting Board, although progress has been made, further work was still required to strengthen these particular areas. Many of the major changes which have taken place in the School since these Boards reported are listed in 12.1. In addition the Board was pleased to learn of the efforts made by the School to reinvigorate studio culture in the Part One course and to make greater use of Birmingham city sites for Part Two project briefs, following suggestions made in the 2003 report.

The External Examiners confirmed that the School responded to comments and suggestions made in their reports, and that they did see changes as a result of their comments. For example in response to concerns voiced by External Examiners about the inordinate number of opportunities available to students on the Part Two course to resit a failed module (an unlimited number of attempts within a ten-year registration period) the School has persuaded the University to revise its regulatory framework to restrict the number of resit attempts on the Part Two course to a maximum of two. The Board understands and welcomes the news that a similar revision is due to be implemented in respect of the Part One course in 2005/06.

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.

12.4 Context of the course within the wider provision of the School and the Faculty

The Birmingham School of Architecture was established in 1907 and gained RIBA recognition for its Part One course in 1924 and for the Part Two and Three courses 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.

At the time of the last full 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 that it was dissolving the Faculty of the Built Environment and was reallocating the existing schools within other Faculties of the University. The Birmingham School of Architecture, incorporating Landscape Architecture and Urban Design will be located in the University's Faculty of Art and Design, the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD) from July 2005. Located in Birmingham city centre, BIAD offers a large infrastructure to support design disciplines. The Board shares the School's optimism about this relocation, and believes that the move (coupled with the strong backing for the School expressed by the Pro-Vice Chancellor) will help to reinvigorate the School.

In addition to the validated Part One, Two and Three courses the School offers the following degrees:

- BA (Honours) Landscape Architecture
- Graduate Diploma in Landscape Architecture
- Postgraduate Diploma in Landscape Architecture
- MA in Landscape Architecture
- MA in Urban Design
- MA in Architectural Studies
- MA Architecture: Theory and Design
- MA Architecture: Intervention Design
- MA Architecture: Urban Design
- MA Architecture: Structural Design
- MA Architecture: Architectural Journalism
- MPhil and PhD degrees by research.

12.5 **Detailed commentary on the Part One course:**
BA (Honours) Architecture (three years full-time or five years part-time)

- 12.5.1 *Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives*
The School sees the primary objective of the Part One course as encouraging students to progress to good degree level education and competence in the subject area. In particular students are encouraged and supported to:
- Gain a systematic understanding in the subject area, its associated skills, techniques and knowledge.
 - Develop and construct a comprehensive academic and design portfolio of their coursework that demonstrates creative and critical accomplishment in integrated design practice.
 - Prepare for appropriate employment and further learning.

In the view of the Board the objectives of the Part One course were clearly stated, appropriate and for the most part were being achieved. The School also provided a detailed mapping of the programme against RIBA ARB Part One Validation Criteria.

- 12.5.2 *Course design and content*
The course is a credit-based modular programme of study in two stages. Stage 1 has one Level, Level 4, of 120 credits. Stage 2 has two Levels, Levels 5 and 6, each of 120 credits.

The course can be undertaken in a three-year full-time mode or part-time in four years by day release. Students accepted on the part-time mode must be employed in an appropriate design practice and will be assessed for

Advanced Standing in 60 credits at Level 4. Two further modules in Level 5 are undertaken and assessed through experiential learning in practice. In all other respects the two modes are essentially the same and students studying in either mode may apply for transfer to the other mode.

Design as an iterative, integrative and cyclical process and practice is the central platform on which the course operates with an emphasis on the development of independent creative and critical judgement tested in the studio context through project-based coursework.

The Board welcomed the ambition of the Part One course with its focus on developing traditional core skills, early introduction to professional practice using the strong links forged with local practices and the parallel cycle of formative evaluation and feedback to students on their performance through each Level. In terms of the course structure the Board suggested that the School might investigate developing longer modules than it has at present to enhance the integrated learning of students.

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

As stated in 12.2.1, there was no student intake at Year 1 for the 2004/2005 academic session. The Board therefore viewed only second and third year work.

- *Design*

The Board was satisfied that all the Validation Criteria in the area of Design were being met by all graduates from the BA (Honours) Architecture course. The regulatory frameworks and health and safety considerations that guide design and building construction were adequately

covered in lectures and coursework. The Board also commended the School on the use it has made of Birmingham city centre to provide different sites for project work. It was clear to the Board that the School had responded actively and speedily to suggestions on this matter made by the 2003 Revisiting Board.

The Board noted that the 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). The Board did not see any documentation regarding the new structure of Year 1 (to be introduced with the 2005/2006 new cohort) but would encourage the School to see it as an opportunity to provide a platform to support the strengths of Years 2 and 3.

- *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 (Honours) Architecture course.

The Board encourages the School's attempts to introduce more integration into the teaching of these important subjects and recognises that the appointment of a new technology co-ordinator is crucial and will assist the School in managing this aspect of the course more effectively.

Students enter extended practice in Year 2, undertaking a series of visits to a practice and its project on site or completing a report on the basis of work encountered, or

alternatively they may choose to write an essay on a particular area of professional practice. The Board agrees that this is an excellent means of raising building awareness as the interface with practice will make this even more apparent to students.

- *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 (Honours) Architecture course. The School told the Board that it sees the city of Birmingham as a laboratory and this function also applies in the case of the cultural context. The investigation of precedents in this area through model-making and field visits to other cities is a strong feature of the course. The specific urban design projects were clearly identified and well worked out.

The Board recognised the ambition to encourage more exploration of cultural context and theory. This was well developed in the course with a clear strategy for integrating the work of specialist staff into the programme and the Board noted many interesting examples – perhaps a reflection of the multicultural environment and the staff of the School.

Students enjoyed many opportunities to reflect on and relate their ideas to a design and to the work of others, including those available during the field study tours. The Board was impressed by the high quality of the field study information that was presented.

- *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. It noted the emphasis on model-making in the course and was pleased to see some very good examples of exploratory models crafted to convey design proposals and ideas. It is the policy of the School to give students a good grounding in traditional drawing skills before engaging them with CAD, though skill in this area was also demonstrated to a good standard.

The Board considered that more could be done to improve volumetric and contextual assessment of projects and advises the School to use the enhanced model-making facilities now available in this context. It wishes to support the School in its efforts to obtain increased workshop access for all its students.

- *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 (Honours) Architecture course.

The Professional Practice Studies - Management, Practice and Law module provides students with a grounding in management, practice and law connected to Level 5 studio practice, cultural context and technology modules. Part of the module is devoted to an investigation into the pre and post contract phases of a construction project, and the sphere of statutory and non-statutory controls and contracts which are applied in the process.

The Board learned that the School intends to move this module from Year 3 to Year 2. It supports this initiative to

introduce students to this important area earlier in the course.

- Preparation for Professional Experience

In the Professional Practice Studies module in Year 2 subjects within the framework of management, practice and law are taught as a lecture series to both full-time and part-time students. Alongside this lecture series, and as part of the assessment for this module, students may undertake a series of visits to a practice as described in the earlier Technology and Environment section.

The Professional Experience and Development Record (PEDR) is introduced during the lecture series and its rationale explained. Before students graduate the School holds a meeting to prepare them for their practical training year or to explain the School's requirements for PEDR for the part-time mode. The Professional Studies Advisor is on hand to give advice and assist individual students in finding practice placements.

The vast majority of students the Board met were appreciative of these measures and considered themselves well prepared for the first stage of professional practice.

12.5.4 *Progression within the course*

The School had experienced extraordinary difficulties in summer 2004 due to the unprecedented failure rate (93%) in the Part One examinations which led to an internal enquiry, conducted by the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) of the University. The findings of the enquiry concluded that the School needed additional support from the University to re-establish its position. Measures have been put in place to curb this trend, but poor progression rates remain a problem. The School is advised to continue

to monitor and review progression rates, taking action as appropriate.

In the opinion of the Board, University regulations made in respect of the Part One course, which had allowed 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 and have not helped the situation. The University's Senate has commissioned a review of the standard Undergraduate Assessment Regulations and recently approved changes. 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.

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 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.

12.5.5 *Assessment*

The School uses a variety of methods to assess its students which in the view of the Board are appropriate to the subject area and stage of learning. All learning is supported by a parallel cycle of formative evaluation and feedback through each Level so students are aware of and can

monitor their progress towards achieving the required learning outcomes. Final summative assessment takes place at the end of each Level and is based on the entire submission of assessable assignments and the relevant coursework.

The Board concluded that the course structure being developed in Part One had an appropriate assessment weighting.

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

The School did not provide any details on admission requirements in the documentation.

The School is committed to widening participation and encouraging diversity, and this is reflected in the range of academic qualifications and ethnicity of the students it accepts onto the Part One course.

Most students who enter by routes other than those described in the School's general entry requirements are encouraged to join Year 1 unless it is clear that their experience or prior learning is of a standard that make this unnecessary. In some cases direct entry is allowed into Level 2 of the full-time or part-time modes of the Part One course where applicants have either passed the first year of another recognised Part One course and references have been obtained or they are mature candidates with a depth of experience in architectural practice. Direct entry into Level 3 of the course may be permitted in exceptional circumstances.

12.6 **Detailed commentary on the Part Two course:**

Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture three years sandwich course, three years part-time, two years full-time)

12.6.1 *Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives*

The stated ambition of the Part Two course is to provide graduates with the confidence, motivation and ability to meet the challenges and opportunities created by the expanding and developing role of the architect.

The Board found the strategic objectives of the Part two course to be clear, comprehensible and legitimate, and that these were being achieved by students of all abilities.

The School also provided a detailed mapping of the course learning outcomes onto the RIBA ARB Part Two Validation Criteria.

12.6.2 *Course design and content*

The course is structured as a credit-based modular programme. Each module may be studied and passed independently, provided that the maximum completion time is not exceeded. For the award of the Part Two qualification all modules from Stages 1 and 2 of the course must be obtained. The MA degree course involves a further 60 credit dissertation or major project.

The minimum time for completion of the part-time course is three academic years and is by far the most popular route chosen by students. The School informed the Board that the usual completion time for the full-time mode is two academic years.

Each 15 credit module involves 150 hours of study, split between staff-directed study and independent learning.

The course has been designed to offer a compact series of modules arranged in clusters. The School believes that this allows students freedom to speculate and to concentrate on specific areas of study. The Board wondered whether this division of much of the course into a series of small modules was in fact discouraging students from completing theses and major project work that was fully integrated. It seemed to the Board that students were given no opportunity to revisit key areas of learning and information once the major project had been completed.

In general the Board considered that the structure of the Part Two course was too heavily controlled and prescribed. It can understand the need for more direction and control in the wake of previous criticisms but the Board strongly feels that authorship of the course should be a result of a School-wide forum, as was the case with the Part One course. The Board would advise the School to look again at this matter and review the structure of the Part Two course to introduce more flexibility and greater choice for students.

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

- *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 agreed with the External Examiners that the level of exploration and interpretation of design briefs in relation to site and context was not much in evidence in the academic portfolio. Knowledge of regulatory

requirements was covered in a comprehensive manner during the course but the Board considered that this knowledge should be used by students to inform their curiosity and sense of exploration rather than limiting it.

- *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 synergy between technology and the design process.

It was generally satisfied with work being undertaken on structure, construction and environmental issues, but would advise the School to further develop the potential in the course for exploration of materials and innovative construction.

- *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.

It was particularly pleased to see the use the School had made of Birmingham city centre in this respect. However, the Board encountered limited examples of student work 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.

- *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 saw examples of good model-making skills and was able to observe the iteration of drawing skills. It was pleased to see students encouraged to develop key skills in this manner. The Board thought that the more able students displayed a sophistication in their creative drawing and communication skills, a view echoed by the External Examiners. The more talented students experimented with diverse media to produce reports that were graphically sophisticated and covered a wide range of architectural issues. However for the generality of students at Part Two level, the Board would have expected to see more complex spatial arrangements being developed in their modelling.

- *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 provides an overarching professional context to all work carried out across the Postgraduate Diploma course, and encourages students to understand the important relationship between design work and the aspects of management and law. The module also links the

professional studies undertaken on the BA course with experience gained during the practical training year. Underpinning the module is a series of core lectures where contemporary professional issues take priority, but a range of other teaching and learning methods are involved, including:

- Case studies
- Seminar discussions
- Exercises to simulate professional life
- Group work
- Visiting speakers from professional practice
- Directed reading
- Assessment work
- Independent studies.

12.6.4 *Progression within the course*

The School provided progression statistics for Parts 1, 2 and 3. In discussion with the Board, the School acknowledged that poor progression rates remain a concern. The School is advised to continue to monitor and review progression rates, taking action as appropriate.

12.6.5 *Assessment*

The Board considered that there was a broad and appropriate range of assessment measures in place to test the breadth and depth of student skills and understanding in relation to each of the module learning outcomes.

As in the Part One course, students are appraised of the specific assessment strategies and criteria at the start of the module and given feedback as appropriate during the module and on its completion.

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

The School requires that evidence of RIBA/ARB Part One exemption must be provided by prospective entrants to the Part Two course.

The School also insists on a mandatory interview to ensure that all enrolling students are fully prepared for the course ahead and are capable of undertaking work at postgraduate level. Any weaknesses are identified and discussed so that students understand the areas they need to develop and work on. Each student is entitled to a maximum of two interviews (the opportunity for a second interview is at the bequest of the course director) to gain admission to the Part Two course. The second interview is used primarily to allow a rejected student to reapply having gained more practical experience. The Board supports the Course Director in his efforts to achieve high quality entry requirements.

12.7 **Detailed Commentary on the Part Three course:**

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

12.7.1 The Birmingham School's Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice is a formal award of the University of Central England, and is the concluding part for both the seven-year full-time sandwich course and the eight-year part-time course in architecture. The Diploma is subject to the usual University external examining, quality assurance, validation and appeals procedures.

12.7.2 The course is assembled as a series of lectures and seminars delivered over a period of eight days in total.

These are arranged across a twelve-month period in two blocks of three days and a further block of two days.

12.7.3 The Final Examination comprises four main sections:

- Professional Practice Record (PEDR) or log book, a curriculum vitae and an appraisal by the candidate of their own performance in practice (minimum pass 40%)
- The Management Paper (minimum pass 40%)
- The Written Paper (minimum pass 40%)
- The Oral Examination (pass or fail only)

(Each of the four parts of the examination must be passed independently.)

12.7.4 The Board was satisfied that the Birmingham School's Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice was being delivered in accordance with the RIBA Description and Regulations for the Recognition of Courses and Examinations in Professional Practice and Management (Part Three). As required by the procedures the University has appointed an External Examiner. The Board noted that this was a strong External Examiner from an academic background.

12.7.5 The School provided a detailed mapping of its Part Three course onto the RIBA/ARB Part Three Validation Criteria. On the basis of this and examination of the candidate work provided, the Board confirms that all Part Three Validation Criteria are being met by all graduates from the Part Three programme.

12.7.6 The Board found the course had a strong academic rigour and was extremely well organised and excellently administered. The course aims and objectives were clearly

set out and appropriate and the content of the course was both comprehensive and up to date, covering all aspects of the criteria. Assessment was rigorous but fair and the standards achieved by candidates were high. It was clear to the Board that the course was a centre of excellence and one of the strengths of the School. Much of the credit for this must go to the Course Director who at time of the Board's visit was on the verge of taking up a post elsewhere. The Board reminds the School that the appointment of a new Course Director of a similar calibre will be crucial in ensuring continuity and maintaining the excellence of the course.

12.8 External examining arrangements

The Board was able to meet the majority of the School's External Examiners and to confirm that the School had assembled a strong team of External Examiners, drawn from both education and practice.

In their meetings with the Board the External Examiners expressed strong support for the School and declared their satisfaction with the way that they were involved in the School's assessment process. They also confirmed that the School responded in a timely and appropriate fashion to issues raised in their reports. All the External Examiners had a clear view about what was required of them in their role, having received a thorough briefing about the process in advance of their appointment.

12.9 Arrangements for Monitoring Professional Experience

Section 12.5.3 describes the opportunities available to students wishing to spend time in practice during the undergraduate course and other helpful measures introduced by the School to prepare them for the first

stage of professional practice. During the Practical training Year the School holds two recall days to enable full-time Part One graduates to reflect on and appraise the experience they have gained. The Professional Studies Advisor (PSA) is available on both days for individual meetings and to help resolve any difficulties that have arisen for students undertaking their professional experience.

As part of the entry requirements to the Part Two course students are asked to complete a self-appraisal paper focussing on their work and practice experience during their "year out." The School asks students to retain this paper in their logbook or Professional Practice Record (PEDR). At the end of Year 2 of the Part Two course a review of the PEDR of each student is undertaken and an introduction is made to the requirements to be met on the Part Three course.

The overwhelming majority of students consulted by the Board were very satisfied with the arrangements made by the School both to prepare them for and support them in their professional practice.

12.10 Students

The Board met a large group of students representing all years of the courses (except Year 1 of the Part One which had no intake in 2004/05) together with students on their first stage professional practice and Part Three candidates and graduates. The students confirmed that they had contributed to the School's Critical Self-Appraisal; they also produced a student statement to the Board in advance of the meeting.

At the meeting the students were very supportive of the School and almost entirely positive about their experience on the course. They commented in particular on:

- The impending move to BIAD, which would bring with it the benefits of improved facilities and resources and would increase their exposure to an inclusive design culture.
- The timely and constructive feedback they received on their work.
- The accessibility and helpfulness of staff, particularly full-time staff. This was seen as important by all students but particularly by those following the part-time mode who needed an established staff contact.
- The early introduction to practice in Part One. Students described this as a very positive event, enhanced by the help and support of local practitioners.
- Visiting tutors who brought a contemporary perspective to teaching.
- The well-established Part Three course, especially the excellent series of lectures.

Specific concerns raised by the students included:

- The need for a clearer definition of some modules, particularly in the Part Two course.
- The need to improve attendance rates on the Part One and Part Two courses. The student perception was that there existed a healthy core of students who regularly attended. Those who did not attend regularly either preferred to work at home or were failing students. Though a minority, this group did have a negative impact, lowering morale and reflecting

adversely on the aspirations of the majority of students.

- University regulations which permit students to trail failed modules from one year 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. The Board has already referred to this matter in section 12.5.4 and has made a recommendation for action to be considered by the University.
- The need for easy access to a combined design library (this will be met once the move to BIAD takes place).
- The lack of tool-based workshops on campus (this will improve once the move to BIAD takes place).

12.11 Staff

The Board was impressed by the attendance at this meeting and by the contribution made by part-time staff. The Board thought that the full-time and part-time staff formed a cohesive and committed team. There was a good spread of ages amongst the staff. The key strengths of the staff team were seen to be:

- A broad spread of expertise
- The substantial involvement of practitioners
- The collective commitment to supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds.

The School has 10 permanent members, 7 full-time staff and 3 part-time staff. This provides a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 8.8 with a visiting tutor part-time equivalent to approximately 2 FTE teaching a student FTE of 215 in total. The School therefore calculates the staff/student ratio to be 1:20. Additionally, the School benefits from

four permanent full-time staff for landscape architecture within the School.

The School has a small nucleus of full-time staff and relies on this and a much larger corps of visiting part-time tutors from local practices to deliver the courses. Though appreciative of the excellent and enthusiastic contribution made by the visiting tutors, the School needs to ensure that the strategic direction of its courses is firmly guided by its full-time staff.

Reflecting on the size of the full-time staff corps, the Board was concerned about potential underresourcing in this area. The Institution is advised to look 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.

It was noted that the post of Technology Co-ordinator is currently vacant, and that of Part Three Course Director will soon be vacant.

12.12 **Research**

The School informed the Board that its research profile included:

- Design consultancy in architecture and landscape.
- Scholarly and funded research in design theory and philosophy, community and urban forestry, Iran arts and architecture, and international urban regeneration and place-making.

The School currently has two active research units but its research strategy is being reviewed in the light of the imminent move to BIAD. Negotiations are ongoing between the School and BIAD to agree how best to

combine their resources and talents. Members of the School's research units were optimistic about the outcome, as the University has made a very strong financial commitment to BIAD to support it in the next Research Assessment Exercise. The School believes that it will also benefit from this revenue, which will allow staff to buy out their teaching time in order to concentrate on research. The BIAD Research Director appeared to have a clear strategy and it would be reasonable to assume that the School's research profile will be enhanced by the move.

12.13 **Equal Opportunities**

In advance of the Board the School provided a breakdown of its student population by gender and ethnicity. It was clear that both the University and the School took the issue of equal opportunities very seriously indeed. The School's percentage of female students is close to the national norm, but it has a significantly higher proportion of students from minority ethnic groups. In the meeting with staff the Board learned that staff had encountered problems with some students who had an inadequate grasp of the English language; in many cases this had been a greatly contributing factor to students' failing their School examinations. 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.

The permanent full-time staff of the School comprises eight men and two women.

12.14 **Resourcing and Facilities**

- General

The Board found the Pro-Vice Chancellor to be very supportive of the School as it comes through a difficult period and contemplate a move to new premises at BIAD on the Gosta Green Campus. Resources have been committed to facilitate this move. The School has been allocated £100,000 in 2004/05 for the appointment of a new member of staff and the acquisition of a wide range of IT and IT facilities. In addition BIAD has been allocated funding for 2005/06 to upgrade the quality of the teaching and learning environment, including the School of Architecture's new studios.

- Studios

At the time of the visit the new studios were under construction, and therefore access and equipment were difficult to assess. The space for Part One students appeared to be very good. However, the Part Two studio looked small, which added to concerns about the future of a studio culture at Part Two level.

- IT

To date students have had access to a Faculty-dedicated computer suite and other computer suites on the Perry Barr Campus. These facilities are shared with the School of Property and Construction and the School of Planning and Housing. When the School moves to BIAD it will share a computer suite with Interior Design. The Board

was told that the School was allocated £73,000 in 2004/05 to spend on IT and IT facilities, including desktops, PCs, laptops, colour printers, scanners, digital projectors and digital cameras with supporting software. The School was very satisfied with this allocation which has allowed it almost to double its IT provision. BIAD will offer students access to the associated technologies of computer graphics, multimedia, and animated and digital video-editing.

The School's website also contains an impressive range of useful information for students, staff and prospective students, including details of:

- Studio projects, showing the work currently being undertaken in the School.
- Staff profiles and photographs.
- Research being undertaken at the School.
- Feedback from attendees at the School's admission open days.
- Advice for candidates/prospective applicants to the School.
- School timetables.
- Practices visited overseas (these are accessed by students prior to their overseas study trips).

All the information on the website will be incorporated into the BIAD website. The School believes that the website has been influential in improving communication links and rebuilding confidence after recent difficulties. The Board shares that view.

- Workshops

The workshops at BIAD, though remote from the new studios at Gosta Green, were well equipped and were

staffed by a supervising technician. The space available to architecture students was impossible to assess as all BIAD students used the same workshops.

Despite student observations, the usefulness of these machine-based workshops to the majority of projects, was not immediately evident. The Board felt that space adjacent to the studios, for less sophisticated techniques, might be more effective.

- Library

The Board visited the Kenrick Library on the Perry Barr Campus and noted that it contained a good supply of architectural books and journals. The School estimates the present size of the architecture section at approximately 800 volumes with 200 volumes being added per year. 74 journal titles are currently subscribed to on behalf of the School. These acquisitions are made from the School's dedicated library budget of £6,000 to £7,000 per year.

When the School relocates to BIAD the architecture and landscape book stock will be transferred to BIAD's Library at Gosta Green, together with the dedicated librarian, who is a member of the Association of Architectural Librarians. The BIAD Library includes sections on Art, Design, Media Studies, Fashion, Textiles, Graphics and Jewellery as well as Architecture. The proximity of a combined design library will reassure students who have had to travel to Gosta Green if they wished to borrow books of this type.

13. Attachments

13.1 Prior to the visit, the Board was provided by the School with the following documentation:

- Critical Self Appraisal
- Response to Questionnaire
- Supplementary Information
- Part One Course Handbook
- Part Two Course Handbook
- Part Three Course Handbook
- Course Structures
- Mapping of all Course Content and Learning Outcomes onto RIBA/ARB Validation Criteria for all courses to be validated
- External Examiner reports 2000/01-2003/04
- Staff list
- Student profile
- Management and Committee Structure of Birmingham Institute of Art and Design.

13.2 The Board was provided with the following additional during the visit:

- Programme specifications for the Part One, Part Two and Part Three courses
- Module Descriptors
- Mark sheets for Part One, Part Two and Part Three examinations
- Student Self-Appraisal
- School's Vision Statement
- Staff Curriculum Vitae
- External Examiners' Curriculum Vitae
- Visiting Lecturers' Curriculum Vitae
- Faculty Procedures for Annual Monitoring (Action Plan)
- Birmingham Institute of Art and Design Faculty Handbook – Academic and Quality Assurance Procedures

- Quality Assurance Procedures for Validation, Approval and Review of Programmes
- Handbook for External Examiners
- Race Equality Statement
- Equal Opportunities Statement
- Annual Course Reports and Responses to External Examiners
- Senate Working Group Final Report and Action Plan
- Institutional Audit Report 2002
- Recent Dissertation Topics – Postgraduate Diploma course 2004/05
- Recent Dissertation Topics – Special Study Module 6313 2004
- Undergraduate Prospectus 2005
- Part –time (all levels) Postgraduate and Professional (full and part-time) Prospectus 2005.