

**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Report of the RIBA Full Visiting Board  
to Birmingham City University**

**Date of visiting board:** 19-20 October 2023  
**Confirmed by RIBA:** 31 March 2025

**1 Details of institution hosting courses**

Birmingham City University  
Birmingham Institute of Art & Design  
The Parkside Building  
5 Cardigan Street  
Birmingham B4 7BD

**2 Courses offered for validation**

BA (Hons) Architecture	Part 1
MArch Architecture	Part 2
Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice	Part 3

**3 Head of School/ Course Leaders**

Dr Jemma Browne	Head of School
Katriona Byrne	Deputy Head of School
Dr Mike Dring	Subject Lead Architecture
Ollie Chapman	Course Director BA (Hons) Architecture
Max Karlsson Wisotsky	Course Director BA (Hons) Architecture
Alessandro Columbano	MArch Part 2 lead
Ian Shepherd	Course Lead Part 3 PG Dip

**4 Awarding body**

Birmingham City University

**5 The visiting board**

Musa Garba	Practitioner / Chair
Roger Hawkins	Practitioner
Dr Luigi Pintacuda	Academic
Layton Reid	Practitioner / Academic
Jaime Solloso	Validation Manager

**6 Procedures and Themes and Values for Architectural Education**

The visiting board was carried out under the RIBA Procedures for Validation and Themes and Values for UK and international courses in architecture (published September 2021, and effective from September 2022); this document is available at [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com).

**7 Proposals of the visiting board**

On 31 March 2025, the RIBA confirmed continued validation of the following course(s):

BA (Hons) Architecture	Part 1
MArch Architecture	Part 2
Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice	Part 3

The next visit to the Birmingham City University will take place in 2028.

**8 Standard requirements for continued recognition**

Continued RIBA recognition of all courses and qualifications is dependent upon:

- i external examiners being appointed for the course
- ii any significant changes to the courses and qualifications being submitted to the RIBA

- iii any change of award title, and the effective date of the change, being notified to the RIBA so that its recognition may formally be transferred to the new title
- iv submission to the RIBA of the names of students passing the courses and qualifications listed
- v In the UK, standard requirements of validation include the completion by the of the annual statistical return issued by the RIBA Education Department

## 9 **Academic position statement (written by the School)**

At the Birmingham School of Architecture & Design we believe that design has the power to create transformational change. We aim to empower our students to generate ideas and actions to radically change the way we live, now and into the future.

We are a diverse and interdisciplinary design community exploring the designed environments through the scales. From within the Faculty of Arts, Design & Media we provide undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Landscape Architecture, Architecture and Interior Architecture and Design, along with cross-cutting postgraduate programmes in Conservation of the Historic Environment, Design Management, Design and Visualisation, a Foundation in Architecture and Design and innovative programmes such as Design for Future Living, focussed on radical housing and retrofit. We use this breadth to imagine and nurture roles beyond disciplinary boundaries, creating graduates ready for future practice. We equip our students with the skills and attributes to be ethical, entrepreneurial, and forward-thinking; with knowledge and understanding of sustainable, inclusive futures; and an activist mentality ready to make positive change in the city, its communities and the professions.

We are proud to be one of the most diverse Schools in the UK, [1] a reflection of Birmingham and the West Midlands region, substantively contributing to the diversity of the creative professions and to broadening knowledge of the architecture and design industry in the region.

Equality of opportunity and access to architectural education was key to the development of our Foundation degree and the L7 apprenticeship. Progression from Level 3 Foundation is strong and growing, through this route we attract a wide range of students, from families who have never studied in HE, and women who often face barriers to the profession through caring responsibilities within the wider family. We create these opportunities through programmes such as our professional mentoring scheme with SPAB for young Black and Asian women and other minority ethnic groups and our partnership with Open City to support their Accelerate programme, widening access to careers in architecture.

**Our curriculum and community support the students to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes to act as ‘agents of change’ in the city and beyond.**

We are strongly engaged with our city, region and beyond having led architecture and design in the city since 1908. Working with and for the city and its communities, the School is a critical voice in imagining the future of our local places, empowering positive change from above and below.

The School pioneered 'live' design-build projects in the 1950s-60s. Building on this legacy, Co.Lab, is an annual module of vertical, cross-disciplinary studios, where students collaborate on live projects in the city, nationally and internationally, with real clients including community groups, local authorities and cultural organisations. Recent clients included BT, Birmingham Wildlife Trust, Swift Conservation Trust, CIVIC Square, Birmingham City Council and Shahjalal University to implement the Prince's Foundation's Rapid Planning Toolkit in Bangladesh.

We bridge the gap between academia and practice, with courses that equip students with the skills, knowledge and attributes to be successful in the expanded creative and construction industries and beyond. Students engage with practitioners and other industry professionals in studio and at extra-curricular programmes with invited guests, visiting professors and tutors connecting with leading edge practice. There is a strong tradition of our graduates remaining in the city and going on to found influential practices in the region.

All courses have an integrated work placement. We have worked with over 100 practices including MAKE, Hopkins, Grimshaw, Hawkins/Brown, AHMM, FCB Studios, Stanton Williams, Fira and Gensler, where students learn the applied context of professional skills and knowledge and develop confidence and the opportunity to build professional networks. This exchange between academia and practice results in a virtuous circle of integrated teaching, practice and research. Engagement with practices through specialist teaching, is developed to a high level in the MArch L7 module, Advanced Praxis. Students work on a live case study which combines complex, synthesised design skills with the collaborative, administrative, legislative and technical challenges of working within a live practice framework.

Our Beyond Graduation scheme supports graduates in the transition to our Part 3 with access to the University's facilities and contact with our Professional Studies Advisor to sign off PEDR, membership of STEAMHouse and STEAMIncubator can offer business and entrepreneurial support and prototyping space for start-ups.

### **Ethical, entrepreneurial and activist designers capable of rising to 21st century challenges.**

Our courses stimulate our students' intellectual curiosity as designers by exploring complementary strands in design studio practice, history and theory, sustainability and technical studies, and professional knowledge. From this grounding, students are encouraged to develop their own design attitude and to take a critical stance on contemporary issues such as the climate and biodiversity crisis, spatial justice, health and ageing, digital technologies, or new materials.

Our BA (hons) Architecture studios are designed to foster an inclusive and diverse curriculum which nurtures confidence, builds social capital, values individual backgrounds and experiences to transform students' knowledge, skills, and behaviours. Through provocative briefs, students develop an understanding of the key competencies including fire and life safety and climate literacy, in the wider context of 'just transition.'

The MArch course develops high level design and communication skills and an integrated understanding of architectural design in the Anthropocene, with open ended, and where appropriate, speculative design manifestations in year one, leading to the architectural thesis in year two; a platform for further enterprise and research-oriented work in architecture and associated disciplines.

The thesis projects run through vertical units, with research led thematic design strategies. Students choose between critical, collaborative and creative practices, drawing on intersections between culture and architecture; or pushing the boundaries of architectural production to intervene as an active part of the solution to the climate crisis. Working with community partners including the West Midlands Fire Service or considering the principles of civic conditions in the city with the ethical dimension of how and why we build. Grounded in the pedagogy of ‘research by design’, our students are engaged with contemporary issues, they graduate with opportunities for transdisciplinary in the production of traditional and non-traditional forms of knowledge and architectural design.

The School has a deep-set tradition and preoccupation with “making” inspired by Birmingham’s industrial and artisan heritage. Using our workshops and the city, students are encouraged to explore materials, techniques and processes, both digital and analogue, to inform, define and develop an individual design process to complement their theoretical positions.

### **Research Informed**

Research in BCU is undergoing a transformation with an ambitious strategy to integrate research, practice, teaching, and knowledge exchange to transform individuals and to benefit our university and society. 2021 saw an improved submission to REF with 15 submissions from the School. Our research environment has accelerated since, with 42% of staff with PhDs and a further 26% with emerging researcher status.

BCU is recognised by government as a leader in STEAM education, supported by this and our two transdisciplinary research clusters, we influence international, national and regional research agendas and policies. The Urban Cultures research cluster brings together an interdisciplinary group of architects, landscape architects, architectural conservationists, human centred design thinkers, and inclusive design specialists – to explore the designed environment. Critical Artistic Thinking in Design (CATiD) is an international, multidisciplinary research, design and consultancy lab based in the School. It explores the possibility that a new idea of landscape can change the identity and reputation of an entire region. CATiD has attracted funding for its work in partnership with industry in strategic regional design for HS2 and its proposals for a West Midlands National Park.

Knowledge exchange is a key feature of the School calendar. In addition to regular public research seminars, we hosted the AHRA 2017 Conference ‘Architecture, Festival and the City’ and EURAU 2021, ‘Multiple identities: Reflections on the European City’, jointly hosted by BCU and the University of Staffordshire. We have transnational education partnerships in China and Malaysia, and support student mobility, with students participating in self-initiated volunteering projects with communities in Sri Lanka, Nepal, the

Philippines and Indonesia this year, actively seeking to address global inequalities that they learnt about in studio through engagement with the UN SDGs.

### **Leaders in Sustainable and Inclusive Design Education**

Our curriculum innovation and research were noted as an example of leading-edge climate activism in the RIBA publication 'Everything Needs to Change' (2021). The Experimental Sustainability Studio has had a measurable impact, through collaboration with Birmingham City Council resulting in student work on Environmental Justice being shared with Local Cabinet and informing policy. Our Sustainable and Inclusive Environments Framework underpins the School's activity from strategic vision to individual student experience. The five principles of the Framework are founded on the UN SDGs and build the knowledge, skills and attributes for personal transformation, enabling students to act as 'agents of change' in the city and beyond.

[1] Compared to a national average in 2019/20 of 61% and 67% white entrants to Part 1 and Part 2 programmes respectively, we enrolled 35% white students to our Part 1 and 56% to Part 2 in 20/21. (RIBA statistics)

## **10 Commendations**

- 10.1** The Board commends the School and especially staff on their dedication and support which is greatly appreciated by students.
- 10.2** The Board commends the ambition of Co.LAB with its inter-disciplinary and vertical groupings which is an asset to the School.
- 10.3** The Board commends the School for their outreach work and involvement with the local community through projects which are a benefit to students, staff and Birmingham.

## **11 Conditions**

There are no conditions

## **12 Action points**

The visiting board proposes the following action points. The RIBA expects the university to report on how it will address these action points. The university is referred to the RIBA's criteria and procedures for validation for details of mid-term monitoring processes. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

- 12.1** Following the recent turnover in leadership and staff, the School should take the opportunity to put in place a strategic plan for future identity and direction of the School.
- 12.2** The School should ensure resources, both physical space and staff, are adequate to support current growth in a sustainable way.
- 12.3** Given the ethos of the institution, the School should consider the analysis of a widening demographic and its true implications regarding students from an

international and diverse background. In this context, working with student services to provide enhanced opportunities for disadvantaged students to participate appropriately.

**13 Advice**

The visiting board offers the following advice to the School on desirable, but not essential improvements, which, it is felt, would assist course development and raise standards.

- 13.1** The Board notes that progress has been made in differentiating Part 2 from Part 1 however there is still further work to be done in order to make the separation distinct.
- 13.2** The School should develop Co.Lab as a strategic REF/KEF submission for the institution.
- 13.3** The School should develop and implement a plan to support staff in their research output and career development.
- 13.4** The School should take advantage of its location in Art & Design to allow for student experimentation in a wider range of media from analogue to digital.
- 13.5** The School should take the opportunity to develop collaboration with Built Environment colleagues within the institution and beyond, to allow students to widen their perspectives and for staff to expand on their research opportunities.
- 13.6** The School should develop a course diagram which would allow students to better understand course structure and expected outcomes.
- 13.7** In line with the global aspirations of the School we recommend that the School engages with a wide range of national and international educational forums. These could include conferences, exhibitions, online media and publications.

**14 Delivery of graduate attributes**

It should be noted that where the visiting Board considered graduate attributes to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or an attribute clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested a graduate attribute was particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

**Graduate Attributes for Part 1**

The Board confirmed that all of the Part 1 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the BA (Hons) Architecture.

**Graduate Attributes for Part 2**

The Board confirmed that all of the Part 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the Master of Architecture MArch, Part 2



**15 Review of work against Themes and Values**

It should be noted that where the visiting board considered the Themes and Values to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or a T&V were clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested a T&V was particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

**Themes and Values for Part 1**

The Board confirmed that all of the Themes and Values were met by graduates of the BA (Hons) Architecture.

**Themes and Values for Part 2**

The Board confirmed that all of the Themes and Values were met by graduates of the Master of Architecture.

**Themes and Values for Part 3**

The Board confirmed that all of the Themes and Values were met by graduates of the Part 3 Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice.

**16 Other information**

**16.1 Student numbers (from the School)**

BA (Hons) Architecture	Part 1: 242
MArch Architecture	Part 2: 55
Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice	Part 3: 83

**16.2 Documentation provided**

The Department provided all documentation as required by the Procedures for Validation.

**17 Notes of meetings**

On request, the RIBA will issue a copy of the minutes taken from the following meetings. These notes will not form part of the published report but will be made available on request.

- Budget holder and course leaders
- Students
- Head of Institution
- External examiners
- Staff