

Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA Full visiting board
to Lancaster University**

Date of visiting board: 7-8 November 2024

Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 20 February 2025

1 Details of institution hosting courses

Lancaster University
Lancaster School of Architecture
LICA Building
Lancaster University
Bailrigg
Lancaster LA1 4YW

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/lica/architecture/>

2 Courses offered for validation

Master of Architecture MArch

3 Head of School & Course Leads

Course Leader Master of Architecture
Professor Des Fagan

Executive Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Professor Edward Simpson

Director of LICA
Emma Rose

4 Awarding body

Lancaster University

5 The visiting board

Paul King	Academic/Chair
Steve McIntyre	Practitioner/Academic Vice Chair
Lucia Medina	Practitioner
Tracy Flanagan	RIBA 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.

7 Proposals of the visiting board

On 20 February 2025, the RIBA confirmed conditional validation/s of the following courses:

Master of Architecture MArch

A revisiting board will take place at a date to be agreed between the university and the RIBA.

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)

Our School of Architecture delivers a high-quality teaching and learning experience, evidenced by our position in subject and student satisfaction rankings: placed 7th for Architecture in the *Complete University Guide 2024* and ranked 2nd across all UK universities for overall satisfaction in Architecture in the *National Student Survey 2024*. Our courses focus on the dynamic balance between heritage, adaptive reuse and regenerative architecture in response to the climate emergency; specifically, how the profession must adapt to new technical parameters including material reuse, planning policy, the building regulations and carbon measurement. To achieve this, students are embedded in a cross-disciplinary community of professors, researchers and architects engaged in the problem of how to design for the future of a built environment in constant change.

Part 1 – BA (Hons) Architecture – Creative Exploration and Resolution

The climate emergency is foregrounded from year one of design studio, explicit in our approaches to architectural technology and critically explored in our humanities we me. This focus is sustained across modules as students' progress to inform increasingly sophisticated design approaches with positive environmental and social outcomes. Students evaluate the performance of their design studio projects against the RIBA Sustainable Outcomes, critically examining practicality, whilst being challenged to seek radically creative design solutions. Year one introduces design skills in tandem with technical strategies for low carbon design. Live projects are launched in year two, with students designing for local community groups (e.g. *Lancaster Music Coop, 2024*), before third year asks students to construct a brief to explore the context of local sites to uncover social and sustainable design solutions.

Part 2 – Master of Architecture – Heritage, Research and Adaptive Reuse

Part 2 marks a step-change in students' experience, providing an intellectual foundation to develop robust and ambitious design theses. The MArch builds on prior learning to focus on the balance between heritage, preservation and climate adaptation within the context of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the UK and abroad. In year one, students are asked to design for two contrasting contexts by exploring global vernacular construction techniques and the policy, climate and planning issues that inform them. For their final thesis year, students develop their studio brief in tandem with Lancaster university researchers outside of the traditional disciplines of the built environment - specialists in diverse fields, including blue carbon, oceanography, food futures and immunology, amongst others. This pairing of students with leading transdisciplinary experts supports the intellectual rigour and ambition of thesis work, and introduces cutting-edge, real-world enquiry into their propositions.

Synergies between Research and Teaching

All staff within the School of Architecture are active members of *Imagination Lancaster*, a world leading exploratory, design-led research centre conducting applied and theoretical research into people, products, places and their interactions. Our students are taught by research-led staff and lecturers who are experts in *Low Carbon Design, Participatory Architecture, Operational Landscapes, Future Living, Computational Design, Regenerative Architecture* and more; representing the multi-disciplinary knowledge that is essential to the future skills of the architect. Key areas of expertise range from, *Material Reuse and Material Passports, Coastal Erosion, Infrastructural Landscapes, AI and Authorship and Intangible Heritage* through to *Biological Structures and Participatory Planning* – our research engages with student interests, the curriculum, industry and international academia fora, to generate impact and enact positive change. To amplify this work, our *Technology, Environment and Architecture (TEA) Talk* series illuminates how staff-led research is uncovering design and theory-based solutions to the de-carbonisation of our environment. Students engage with these talks on multiple levels; as audience, organisers and as presenters themselves.

Locus Lancaster - Location, Facilities and Support for Teaching and Learning

Our unique location, adjacent to a small wood in a self-contained campus on the edge of the historic city, provides an excellent locus from which to investigate the global climate emergency and its environmental challenges. Protected areas, such as the Lake District, Morecambe Bay and the Trough of Bowland provide distinctive contexts with diverse habitats and industries from where to explore historical means of building amongst heritage and nature, re-discovering craft through the contemporary lenses of digitisation, automation and mechanisation. The resources of the university – our new *Forest Lab*, the *Ruskin Library* and the *Lancaster Environment Centre* – alongside regional growth initiatives such as the *Eden Project Morecambe*, provide outstanding opportunities for staff and students to test alternate means of living and working using the apparatus of sustainable and lean construction through our live research and studio projects.

Student Wellbeing and Finance

Recognising the health challenges that students face, our School prioritises welfare and wellbeing – evidenced, in part, by our high student satisfaction and support rankings. We work closely with our wellbeing team to offer practical assistance, advice, and guidance. Acknowledging the need to deliver a welcoming and inclusive environment, the Lancaster University Architecture Society is supported to organise diverse extracurricular events each year, including social events, skills workshops and peer mentoring to bring our cohorts together. Responding to some of the financial burden of higher education, we offer free site visits, bursaries for the funding of international field trips and essential model-making materials as part of our commitment of care.

Our *Lancaster Summer School (2019-)* provides an annual forum for staff and students to socialise and work together beyond the traditional structure of academia, during a non-credit bearing week of team building activities that ranges from willow weaving and mud brick building through to book binding and bamboo construction. This informal event fosters a spirit of care and collaboration between students and staff, wherein vertical units of students, staff and guests enjoy experimentation with construction skills in the woods, delivered in the spirit of fun and exploration.

Regional and National Practice Collaboration

We have established a strong and growing network of national and regional practical experience. Ongoing research projects, award sponsorship and teaching collaborations with national practices includes work alongside *Fosters & Partners*, *Grimshaws*, *Snøhetta*, *Purcell* and *ORMS Architects* continues to expand the vocabulary of our student experience. All students are offered a placement in local architectural practices in their second year of our undergraduate course through the RIBA North West Student Mentoring Scheme that provides experience and opportunity for approaching employment. We have ongoing partnerships with several leading regional practices, which enhances our studio teaching, providing a reciprocal relationship in which practitioners engage students with current issues, whilst academics help practices explore their priorities of research and development. Facilitated in part by the regional RIBA chapter, the *Lancashire and Westmorland Society of Architects*, we encourage students to start networking early, via organisation and invitation to events ranging from RIBA practice meet ups, awards ceremonies, competitions, and cross- university studio reviews.

Student Employability

Lancaster University is ranked fourth in the UK for total employability, outperforming all research-intensive universities. According to the latest figures released by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2024), 97% of Lancaster graduates go into work or further study within six months of graduating. examiner and employer feedback on our graduates is beginning to converge on the distinct qualities we aim to engender in all Lancaster School of Architecture alumni in future: a sense of social responsibility and ethical practice underpinned by agile thinking and technical ability.

10 Condition

Conditional validation has been recommended for the following reason:

As per the RIBA Procedures for Validation, for new courses approaching initial validation only, or (exceptionally) where student numbers in a School are smaller than usual, the RIBA regards a portfolio sample of 10 students to be the minimum number required to make a visiting board viable and therefore to award full validation.

A revisiting board will take place at a date to be agreed between the University and the RIBA

11 Commendations

The Board made the following commendations:

- 11.1** The board commends the School on the positioning of the MArch course to respond directly to the climate emergency using architectural heritage.
- 11.2** The board commends the integration of research within the School of architecture and encourages the continued collaboration with Imagination Lancaster and the Lancaster Institute of Contemporary Arts to foster the development of a School of architecture with a unique character.

- 11.3** The board commends the School for the establishment of a nurturing and caring community which is greatly appreciated by the students, as well as the staff body's comradery in the establishment of a holistic and ambitious course.

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. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

No action points given

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 advises the School to consider input from co-professionals, e.g. structural engineers, into the curriculum to further enhance design studio teaching.
- 13.2** The board advises the School to develop a more detailed grade descriptor for work above 70% to help students improve and to aid academic staff in their teaching, marking and moderation processes.
- 13.3** The board recognised that the School of architecture is very ambitious and well organised – this is reflected in their ability to develop a successful academic programme in a very short period of time. To facilitate the School's future growth the School of architecture must be supported with a comprehensive estate strategy, which should be developed in conjunction with the School of architecture, to enable its ambitious business plan to be delivered. It is important that the growth in student numbers is reflected in a growth in teaching resource to ensure the collegiate character of the School is maintained.
- 13.4** The board advises the School of architecture to continue strengthening its relationship with Imagination Lancaster and Lancaster Institute of Contemporary Art to further embed art and research into the architecture department. This, over time, will reinforce the School's unique character.
- 13.5** The board advises that the School of architecture embrace the facilities within the Lancaster Institute of Contemporary Art and encourages the exploration of a diverse range of media, such as film making, to broaden how architecture students are able to communicate the design process and architectural ideas.
- 14.0 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 2

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

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 2

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

16 Other Information

16.1 Student numbers (from the School) 2024/2025

Year 4 = 7

Year 5 = 3

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. The full set of notes will be issued to the next full visiting board.

- Budget Holder
- Students
- Head of Institution
- External examiners
- Staff