
Royal Institute of British Architects

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

**Date of visiting board: 18-19 October 2018
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 13 February**

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- 1 Details of institution hosting course/s** **(report part A)**
 Birmingham City University
 Birmingham Institute of Art & Design
 The Parkside Building
 5 Cardigan Street
 Birmingham
 B4 7BD
- 2 Head of Architecture Group**
 Head of Department Professor Kevin Singh
 Deputy Head of Department Hannah Vowles
- 3 Course/s offered for validation**
- | | |
|--|--------|
| BA (Hons) Architecture | Part 1 |
| Master of Architecture (M Arch) | Part 2 |
| Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice | Part 3 |
- 4 Course leader/s**
- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| BA (Hons) Architecture | Victoria Farrow |
| Master of Architecture (M Arch) | Michael Dring |
| Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice | Ian Shepherd |
- 5 Awarding body**
 Birmingham City University
- 6 The visiting board**
- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Matt Gaskin | academic / chair |
| Jane McAllister | academic |
| Toby Blackman | academic |
| Negar Mihanyar | practitioner |
| Lucia Medina | student |
| Sophie Bailey | RIBA validation manager |
- 7 Procedures and criteria for the visit**
 The visiting board was carried out under the *RIBA procedures for validation and validation criteria for UK and international courses and examinations in architecture* (published July 2011, and effective from September 2011); this document is available at www.architecture.com.
- 8 Recommendation of the Visiting Board**
 On 13 February 2019 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed that the following courses and qualifications are awarded full validation
- | | |
|---|---------------|
| BA (Hons) Architecture | Part 1 |
| Master of Architecture | Part 2 |
| Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice | Part 3 |

The next RIBA visiting board will take place in 2023.

9 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 institution of the annual statistical return issued by the RIBA Education Department

10 Academic position statement

(Statement written by the School)

The School is a wide-ranging design house which constitutes *design through the scales*, providing both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Landscape Architecture, Architecture, Interior Architecture and Design, and Product and Furniture Design, along with cross-cutting programmes in Conservation of the Historic Environment, Design Management, Design and Visualisation, and a Foundation in Architecture and Design. All of this sits within an exciting Faculty of Arts, Media and Design encompassing disciplines from Acting to Jewellery, Fashion to Fine Art, Journalism to Music. As part of this creative context the School offers Architecture programmes for RIBA Parts 1, 2 and 3, and enables us to rethink the profession, imagine and nurture roles beyond disciplinary boundaries, and actively engage in our art school setting.

Philosophy:

The Birmingham School of Architecture and Design genuinely puts students at the heart of its day-to-day life. We offer a tailored environment in which all students can explore and find their identity as design professionals and realise their personal and professional potential. There is no “school style”, no prevailing design language or means of production.

Our students are characterized by an outlook that is global and inclusive, and by behaviours that are entrepreneurial, independent and professional, equipped with the skills and attitudes they need to be successful in contemporary architecture practice above and beyond the discipline specific skills they develop in their professional studies. Over the course of their studies they engage with practitioners and researchers and are encouraged to become life-long learners, equipped to manage their own learning and creative and technical development, and to work effectively both autonomously and collaboratively.

Our support for diversity of development and expression is harvested

by the instrument of *spectrums* that define and characterise each of our disciplines and programmes. Specifically, for Architecture we encourage students to take a position along a spectrum that features *Established* at one extreme, *Emergent* at the other, and *Innovative* at its centre. Our declaration that no part of the spectrum has more value than any other encourages students to take a position deriving from commitment rather than any external or peer pressure, which in turn promotes personal development and authentic areas of interest. Through this tailored approach each student is supported to learn to take responsibility for their own direction, and to work towards constructing a position and defending it. This diverse environment makes for professional development based on rigorous argument and a tolerant celebration of difference.

This approach contributes to our ability to attract a wide range of students including those studying part time while working 4 days a week in practice, a substantial female student body, as well as a significant number of students from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds. This results in one of the most diverse schools in the UK, a reflection of Birmingham and the West Midlands region,¹ substantively contributing to the diversity of the architecture profession and also to advancing a knowledge of architecture and the construction industry in our contemporary multi-cultural society.

“Concerns” and Making:

Our *modus operandi* —best defined by the word ‘concerns’— is centred on inspiring students to tackle specific contemporary design challenges of the world we live in. As a result, through their project brief scenarios and in their written work, our students are encouraged to investigate concerns that are as diverse as their backgrounds, focusing on the everyday; on theory; or current affairs; or other issues with social, cultural and political impact in the world around them.

Alongside this conceptual and theoretical approach, the School has a deep-set tradition and preoccupation with “making” inspired by Birmingham’s industrial and artisan heritage and renowned status as the “workshop of the world” and as a “city of a thousand trades”, *making* is literally within our DNA.

Using our workshops and the city beyond, 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.

This *modus operandi* embodies 6 key values: 1. providing students with a challenging education; 2. instilling professionalism; 3. offering value, choice, and opportunity; 4. creating a platform for success (at University and employability afterwards); 5. creating an enjoyable experience; and finally 6. embracing a future-facing attitude which

Compared to a national average in 2011 of 76% and 83% white entrants to Part 1 and Part 2 programmes respectively, we enrolled 46% white students to our Part 1 and 61% to Part 2. (RIBA statistics)

drives us all forward.

Enterprise Education:

The School is widely credited with being the first in the UK to pioneer live projects and to embed them in the curriculum, starting with a 1950s housing project working with the Local Authority (<https://birmingham-colab.org/about/>).

This tradition thrives today further inspired by the concept of an Enterprise Education to equip students for life beyond graduation, by our extensive relationships with the professions and industries that permeate the School, blurring the boundaries between academia and practice, ensuring that our graduates are confident, independent, and well-rounded citizens and professionals. The wide range of experiences we provide for our students further extend the links between academia and practice, all set under the banner of Praxis – *practical and reflective engagement*.

Three particular components of the curriculum embody this approach:

The highlight of Praxis is a two-week work placement scheme which since its inception in 2012 spawned similar versions for our Landscape Architecture, Interior Architecture and Design, and Product and Furniture Design courses. Over 100 practices have contributed during this time from across the region, nationally and even overseas, and include such luminaries as MAKE, Hopkins, Grimshaw, Hawkins/Brown, AHMM, FCB Studios, Stanton Williams, Populous, and Gensler. The placement is held in the second semester of the second year of the BA programme, an optimum point where students are confident enough to engage with, benefit from, and be productive within the world of practice.

The scheme has proved to be transformative on numerous levels. Students often earn paid summer work and secure year out jobs (it is widely acknowledged that students who undertake work experience find employment more readily); they typically learn new CAD programmes (especially Revit), and inevitably gain a sense of the profession as a whole. In terms of personal development there have been some very rewarding stories, particularly of students who previously “didn’t get” Architecture school but even a short spell in practice has given them a fresh perspective, a greater appreciation of the wide-ranging context of practice, and new-found confidence. Students begin to realise that just because they are not top of the class it does not mean they cannot make a meaningful contribution to the profession and have a rewarding career. We encourage them to see the process as one of “trial and error”, helping them to target a specific year out position rather than randomly “just finding a job” which helps them start to define their career path and their life beyond graduation. By the final year, our students have a clearer idea of the type of practice they’d like to work in and so can be focused in their search for employment.

Secondly, Co.LAB, a live design and research module since 2011

combining undergraduate and postgraduate students across the disciplines of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Interior Architecture and Design, and Product and Furniture Design. Co.LAB provides students with opportunities to collaborate with the city of Birmingham and beyond, with other disciplines in the Faculty including Acting, English and Fine Art, through community groups, commercial entities, and others on live projects, which by definition engage creatively with the constraints and challenges of client, budget, “curveballs”, deadlines, collaborative working methods, disciplinary boundaries, and encouraging diverse careers and innovative new modes of practice.

The School’s assimilated Enterprise position has meant that the School has always been the architecture centre of the region, spawning practices, being the focus for debate, and generally having an influence on the city. The School has a staff consultancy arm, Co.LAB Consult which acts as a vehicle for staff research, CPD, live projects, an opportunity to support SME’s, and of course generate income.

Co.LAB Consult recently led two key strategic University projects, Knowledge Hub an urban design masterplan for the area around the campus which was awarded a National Urban Design award, and STEAMHouse, a mixed incubation, collaboration and maker space featuring creative business profiling, arts-led solutions to city challenges, prototyping workshops and cross-sector knowledge transfer. Our work on STEAMHouse resulted in an award of £14m of central Government funding.

Finally, Superstudio is a unique opportunity for all full-time students to engage in a creative, collaborative, and multi-disciplinary environment which reflects the School’s “design through the scales” ethos and reinforces our embracing of multi-disciplinary working and collaborative practice. Superstudio features skills building, course specific content, cross discipline opportunities, referral tutorials to aid progression, as well as a social zone for films and events. A refined version for M.Arch students offers opportunities for new skills development and additional support tutorials. Through Superstudio, students build relationships with students not only across different disciplines but also with others in years both above and below, which fosters peer learning. Superstudio has recently been extended to include a series of Masterclasses and a “hot house” for top performing students, supported by Visiting Professors Glenn Howells (Glenn Howells Architects) and Les Postawa (structural engineer at Thornton Tomasetti).

The celebration of Praxis and collaboration in the School has generated other benefits such as the annual BIM camp, a two-day exposition featuring regional to international practices which students take the lead running, and a group project with Civil Engineering students either from University of Birmingham or our own Faculty of the Built Environment. There is also a strong mentoring culture in the School where we encourage M.Arch students to actively participate in the development of our BA students, as well as recent graduates to return for reviews, which also acts as an apprenticeship system for future Visiting Tutors and staff.

Research:

The research culture in the School has been re-energised by new appointments with completed doctorates, as well as supporting staff in undertaking PhD and MEd awards. As a consequence of staff retirements and new appointments the School's research interests have consolidated and shifted the dynamic of research within the school which now has four operational research clusters. Critical Artistic Thinking in Design [CATD] which has attracted funding for its work in partnership with industry in strategic regional design for HS2 and a National Park based in the West Midlands; Well-Being which runs a very successful annual conference with close connections to the University of Birmingham; Design Pedagogy | Practice which is closely aligned with the association of architectural educators, RIBA Education, and the National Teaching Fellowship. The Cultural Context centre hosted the AHRA 2017 Conference on *Architecture, Festival and the City*; and over the next five years we will be looking to consolidate these centres and utilise them to develop a stronger research culture within the school that reflects the primary concerns of our students and staff. As a part of this drive we will be developing closer links between teaching and research and teaching and enterprise as well as encouraging more uptake of research degrees via the M.Arch Special Study option, with further plans to promote PhD by practice.

The School is very well positioned for an exciting future.

11 Commendations

The visiting board made the following commendations:

- 11.1 The Board commends the inter-disciplinary workshop provision which enables material practices to inform the design process.
- 11.2 The Board commends the links between academia and practice which is evidenced through Co.LAB, inter-disciplinary working and different modes of practice.
- 11.3 The Board commends the School's active engagement in supporting alternative routes to the profession.

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.

- 12.1 The School should continue to develop the distinctiveness between the Part 1 and the Part 2 courses further developing the sophistication, experimentation and resolution of the design portfolio.
- 12.2 The students expressed concern over the consistency of feedback and marking across the components of the Part 1 and Part 2. The School should develop a robust system to ensure parity across the validated courses for both staff and students. This should include a review of the cross marking on final submissions.

13. Advice

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

- 13.1 The School should consider redrafting the Academic Position Statement to more fully reflect the culture and identity and future direction of the validated courses.
- 13.2 A strategy is needed to develop the entrepreneurship as a pedagogic proposition that informs the design process of the various modes of the courses, the innovative Co.LAB is a potential mechanism for this activity.
- 13.3 The Board encourages the School to reconsider the standardisation of the current portfolio format which restricts the full expression of the design proposition at Part 2 level.
- 13.4 The Board is pleased to hear the plans to develop the reciprocity for research between the Part 2 course and the proposed PhD by Practice, and the support for early career researchers to become research active. The Board encourages this to continue/progress further.
- 13.5 The board commends the expanded suite of programmes in the Faculty which is laudable but must keep sight of the impact of increased student numbers in relation to facilities, resource and the student experience.

14 Delivery of academic position

Please see advice point 13.1.

15 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 Parts 1 and 2

The Board confirmed that all of the Parts 1 and 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the Architecture BA (Hons) and the Master of Architecture (M Arch).

16 Review of work against criteria

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

Graduate Criteria for Parts 1 and 2 and Professional Criteria for Part 3

The Board confirmed that all of the Parts 1 and 2 graduate criteria and Professional Criteria for Part 3 were met by graduates of the BA (Hons) Architecture, Master of Architecture (M Arch) and Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice.

17 Other information

17.1 Student numbers

Part 1

Full time 202

Part time 20

Part 2

Full time 62

Part time 49

Part 3

Part time 82

17.2 Documentation provided

The faculty provided all advance documentation in accordance with the validation procedures.

***Notes of meetings**

On request, the RIBA will issue a copy of the minutes taken from the following meetings:

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