

---

**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Report of the RIBA visiting board  
to Robert Gordon University**

The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture & Built Environment

**Date of visiting board: 21 & 22 June 2018**

**Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 19 October 2018**

- 1 Details of institution hosting course/s**  
The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture & Built Environment  
Robert Gordon University  
The Sir Ian Wood Building  
Riverside East  
Garthdee Road  
ABERDEEN AB10 7GJ
- 2 Head of Architecture**  
Professor David McClean
- 3 Courses offered for validation**  
BSc Architecture / Master of Architecture (RIBA Parts 1 and 2)
- 4 Programme Directors**  
Part 1 – Theo Dounas  
Part 2 – David Vila Domini
- 5 Awarding body**  
Robert Gordon University
- 6 The visiting board**  
Virginia Rammou – Chair  
Michael McQueen  
Elizabeth Dow  
Ricardo Rosa  
Brigit Luffingham – Student / graduate

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk – validation manager – in attendance.
- 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](http://www.architecture.com).
- 8 Proposals of the visiting board**  
On 19 October 2018 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed unconditional revalidation of the:

BSc Architecture / Master of Architecture (RIBA Parts 1 and 2)

The next full 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 (written by the School)**

*Architecture has a long history at the Robert Gordon University. Indeed provision in Aberdeen is the third oldest in the UK with 2018 marking over a century of continuous RIBA Validation. The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture & Built Environment is a multi-disciplinary School with discipline expertise ranging across a broad range of professions relating to the design and construction industry. At a time of rapid change within the profession and the wider industry, this context is significant in preparing students for multiple forms of professional roles and practice. The University's ethos of high quality teaching and learning is reflected in the award of TEF Gold status, and the application of this to professional disciplines and its commitment to applied research, informs the academic portfolio of the institution as well as the disciplinary composition of the School.*

*The University has recently launched a revised strategy that seeks to position the institution distinctively within the sector. Its ambitions are bold and transformative, whilst also maintaining the core ethos that has served as the philosophical backbone to the institution since its original inception in 1729. These include values relating to social innovation, inclusion, and widening access.*

*The study of architecture in Aberdeen exploits the School's location and the conditions that its unique situation presents, in particular those of city and diverse landscape context. As a result many of the issues explored through the architecture courses demonstrate a sustained engagement with the city and its community, as well as those of the region. Indeed, the last few years have seen a strengthening of engagement with Aberdeen and its rural hinterland, up to and including the Northern Isles. The focus of course endeavour in this way facilitates the development of strong community engagement at a local and regional level, whilst also exploring a range of ideas and thinking of broader relevance to contemporary architectural debate in this country and beyond.*

*The position which describes architecture as the 'art of building' is an enduring theme within the architecture courses, and has fuelled a broader School interest in how high quality buildings and spaces are made, as well as how they perform. The primary interest is the development of ability in the student to produce well-conceived and designed architectural propositions that are based on an understanding of the complex relationships that exist between*

---

*natural and man-made environments, and which are responsive to future change driven by clients, building users and a range of socio-economic and cultural imperatives. Hence, the attributes of course graduates as creative, resourceful, yet 'grounded' practitioners, are valued by the profession and underpin the significant graduate employability record of the course.*

*The specific character of the architecture provision at RGU relates to two principal aspects; the strength of engagement with regional issues, and; the unique character of the Part 2 experience. As a core underpinning in the knowledge, processes, and skills relating to the Architecture discipline, the Part 1 constitutes a relatively generic experience, although the ethos that flourishes in the Part 2 has its seeds sown in the earlier years. Equally, the idea of architecture invested with a tectonic reality and sensibility to context and place is cultivated and embedded throughout the Part 1.*

*The opportunity afforded by the School's new building, in which the entire Part 1 cohabits a single studio, has created benefits in the everyday learning experience. In marked contrast, but building coherently on the base of the Part 1 award, the extended research-informed nature of the Part 2 design work, undertaken in bespoke, flexible studios, offers opportunity to develop substantial depth of study and rigorous enquiry in defined areas, consistent with Master-level study. The structure assumes that student work is able to demonstrate compliance with Part 2 criteria after 3 semesters, facilitating a broadening or further deepening of student enquiry in Semester 4 dependent on individual predilection and choice.*

*The Part 1 is regarded as the part of the 5-year continuum during which students acquire fundamental knowledge, skills, and understanding across a broad range of aspects of architecture, this forming a sound platform on which to further develop through the Part 2. At Part 2, the School believes that, through an integrated 2-year research-led experience, students should develop and articulate a personal philosophical perspective which evidences an empathy with the role of the architect, extending beyond the competences expected for Part 1 compliance into more complex professional domains. The unique structure for the Part 2 seeks to provide opportunity for the individual to develop personal interests within a structure consisting of 3 'units', each developing distinctive, research informed agenda that are pursued rigorously over a 2 year period.*

*From an early point, the courses seek to cultivate a critical awareness of the interdependence of clients, architects, and allied professionals in producing high quality architecture that meets the needs of contemporary and future society. In this respect, the School is able to draw on the full breadth of staff expertise, utilising the skills of co-professionals (tutors) and industry leaders to reinforce the view that design is a collaborative process. Team working skills are fostered throughout, culminating in the work of the*

---

*Masters students at Part 2 which develops collaborative, research, and communication skills to a highly professional level.*

*The course capitalises on strong links with the profession, industry and expertise across a range of professional disciplines allied to the design and realisation of the built environment. Specific areas of expertise have been developed over time, such as housing and low energy design and, based on the existence of strong disciplines, the School has recently revised its strategy to orientate itself more deliberately around the cross-disciplinary themes of Housing and Community; Projects, Processes, and Performance; and Digital Design and Communities. Significant progress has been made in embedding research within the Part 2 curriculum, including joint journal publications with academic staff and students. It is envisaged that the aforementioned thematic structure will further integrate research with the curriculum (particularly at Postgraduate level), inform definition of studio enquiry (at least in part), and guide academic portfolio development. Hence, over time, these cross-disciplinary themes will develop a further depth around which reputation can be enhanced.*

*The University, and by extension the School, has an enviable record in graduate employability, and the strong industry and professional relationships that exist provide a mechanism for ensuring that the skills developed through the course align strongly with the needs of the contemporary profession. However, it is also recognised that most professional and industry areas are undergoing rapid transformation through digitisation, and the School has identified the strategic need to address this directly in both curricula and delivery methods.*

*Issues of crucial strategic importance to the University include access and inclusion and a commitment to developing innovative, flexible learning pathways, the focus and enhancement of research activity, the development of inter-disciplinary opportunities, further deepening of industry partnership, community engagement, and thought leadership. Within the context of these strategic priorities there is considerable opportunity for the School in general, and for architecture specifically, both as a pure discipline, and in terms of collaborative potential. As an illustration, for the last 2 years Stage 2 students have mounted a public exhibition of work in the city centre; Stage 3 students recently collaborated with their counterparts from Occupational Therapy on the theme of design for dementia; and Stage 3 students have been working with a range of agencies looking broadly at areas of urban intervention through collaborative practice. Equally, on a more strategic level, the Part 2 project looking at the social and economic sustainability of the Orkney Islands relates to a cross-University strategic partnership with the islands community. In contrast, the School has many ongoing projects with Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils, including advisory work relating to the city's lighting strategy.*

*The strategic development of the course over the next 5 year validation period takes the following as priorities and areas of focus:*

- *Responding to the rapid, progressive digitisation of the industry*
- *Development of course delivery to align with contemporary student learning expectations (including digital forms of delivery and assessment).*
- *Further alignment of studio enquiry with research themes and issues of strategic regional importance, and cross-pollination between project groups, units, years, and / or courses.*
- *The strengthening of business skills within the curriculum to address the needs of the profession as well as the transferable skills agenda.*

*In relation to the first bullet point, the School has a depth of expertise in digital visualisation and design as well as Building Information Modelling and Management, the latter of which is the subject of a new Masters award currently in preparation for validation. Discussions are also ongoing with the Construction Scotland Innovation Centre regarding the establishment at RGU of a national ‘hub’ to address industry needs in this area.*

*In addition, the School is actively developing its response to the RIBA Education Review in terms of a revised educational model that is appropriate for the School’s context and which acknowledges the nature of practice within the North-East, and across Scotland.*

*The School maintains a scale of operation that perpetuates the strong relationship between students and staff, something that has long been recognised as an important characteristic by all. The architecture student community within the School is vibrant and active as exemplified by initiatives such as the student-run 57 10 lecture society (now in its 29th year), and their heavy involvement in events such as the ‘Big Crit’, the production of the Yearbook, and various outreach activities such as the first London Show in July 2017, and a presentation to the RIAS Convention in May 2018. Such engagement is a powerful illustration of a motivated, energetic, and ambitious student body.*

## **11. Commendations**

The Board commends the following:

- 11.1 Student agency has a positive impact on student satisfaction and forms a strong, collegiate environment.
- 11.2 The students’ positive, engaged, robust attitude towards the course.
- 11.3 Excellent facilities which are conducive to student learning and a positive studio culture.
- 11.4 The breadth and accessibility of online teaching and learning resources.

**12 Conditions**

There are no conditions.

**13 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.

- 13.1 Technology lacks enough speculation, rigour and complexity, especially in regards to MArch level. Environmental and technological aspects should not be seen in isolation but as creative drivers for projects.
- 13.2 At MArch, dissertation should offer more of an academic challenge and should enhance the critical engagement through theoretical and intellectual research that could directly benefit the final design project.
- 13.3 The BSc cultural context/history and theory elements would benefit from greater clarity, vision and leadership
- 13.4 There should be explicit evidence of the design process as an integral component of critical design engagement and presentation.
- 13.5 Clarify assessment processes and learning outcomes to students, external examiners and staff and articulate feedback in order to reduce the potential for confusion.
- 13.6 Reward risk, innovation and challenge in both MArch and BSc and reinforce the value of material investigation, working spatially, using innovative modelling techniques and fabrication.

**14. 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.

- 14.1 The elective at MArch could be timetabled to allow it to inform the design thesis.
- 14.2 Attention to be given regarding module/assignment overlaps to minimise repetition, reduce student workload and potential confusion.
- 14.3 Increase exposure to other disciplines, which allows cross-fertilisation and exchange of ideas.

14.4 Attention should be given to over-prescriptive briefs at both BSc and MArch levels.

**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.

**15.1 Part 1**

The Board confirmed that all Part 1 graduate attributes were met.

**15.2 Part 2**

The Board confirmed that all Part 2 graduate attributes were met.

**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.

16.1 The Board made no further comments.

**17 Other information**

**17.1 Student numbers**

Part 1 - 150

Part 2 – 64

**17.2 Documentation provided**

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

**18. 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 mid-term panel and the next full visiting board.**

- Meeting with budget holder and course leaders
- Meeting with students
- Meeting with the head of institution
- Meeting with external examiners
- Meeting with staff