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**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Report of the RIBA visiting board  
RIBA Examination in Architecture for  
Office-Based Candidates**

Franchisee:  
School of Architecture  
Oxford Brookes University

Date of visiting board: 9/10 July 2015  
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 3 February 2016

**1 Details of institution hosting examinations**

Royal Institute of British Architects  
Operated under franchise by  
School of Architecture  
Oxford Brookes University  
Headington Campus  
Oxford OX3 0BP

**2 Head of Architecture**

Matt Gaskin, Head of School

**3 Examinations offered for revalidation**

The RIBA Part One Certificate in Architecture  
The RIBA Part Two Diploma in Architecture

**4 Course leader/s**

Ronnie MacLellan, Programme Director

**5 Awarding body**

The Royal Institute of British Architects  
66 Portland Place  
London W1B 1AD

**6 The visiting board**

Professor Don Gray – Chair,  
Eamonn Cronnelly – Vice Chair  
Penelope Haralambidou  
Stefanie Rhodes  
Julian Manev – student/graduate  
Professor Doug King - co-professional member  
David Bonta, regional representative

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**

At its meeting on 3 February 2016 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed unconditional revalidation of:

The RIBA Part One Certificate in Architecture  
The RIBA Part Two Diploma in Architecture

The next full visiting board should take place in 2020.

**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

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- 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 discussed with the RIBA so that its recognition may formally be transferred to the new title
  - iv submission to the RIBA of the names of candidates passing the examinations 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

### **RIBA Examination in Architecture for Office-based Candidates Academic Position Statement**

*This document has been written by the Programme Director of the RIBA Examination in Architecture for Office-based Candidates with input from a representative of the RIBA Professional Examination Committee, the RIBA Director of Education, the RIBA Professional Education Manager, the Head of School of Architecture at Oxford Brookes University, the Programme Manager and examiner members of the Programme Management Committee.*

#### **Origins**

*The RIBA Examination in Architecture for Office-based Candidates (commonly abbreviated to Office-Based Exam or OBE), although pedagogically unlike any studio and lecture based programme in architecture, leads to an equivalent award with respect to Part 1 and Part 2; indeed in its original form, this is the examination from which validated qualifications offered by schools of architecture were exempted. The RIBA OBE is an evolution of architectural pupillage which was formalised through establishment of the 1863 Examination in Architecture. In 2002 the RIBA awarded Oxford Brookes University an initial ten year franchise to deliver the RIBA OBE; this partnership was renewed in 2012 with continuation of the franchise agreement for a further ten years. In its current form the RIBA OBE meets the requirements of Article 47 of the EU Professional Qualifications Directive EC/2005/36 which allows for training outside of academia. Candidates, although predominately UK based, are located throughout the European Economic Area and the Channel Islands.*

#### **Distinctiveness**

*Factors which distinguish the programme are:*

1. **Inclusivity:** *The programme was established for candidates who either do not have access to university education for logistical, social or financial reasons; or who want to develop their learning from a practice base and free from the constraints of a conventional higher education environment.*
2. **Professionalism:** *Candidates have a commitment to professionalism as salaried practitioners in architecture for the duration of the programme, and indeed for at least three years prior*

to enrolment. They share a motivation with their practice which is aware of and frequently encourages the candidate's intended development.

3. **Independence:** Candidates resource and appoint their own tutors from outside their practice, in particular for the development of theoretical and hypothetical academic design thesis and consequent projects. Tutors' suitability is considered by the programme director via submission of their C.V. for advisory comment. Tutors' workshops are provided to offer assistance in understanding how assessment criteria should be interpreted in a creative manner.
4. **Synthesis:** Candidates develop professionally with support from their office mentor by forming links between learning and application of skills through practice which will both enhance their role within the practice, and contribute to their academic portfolio. They learn through a synthesis of theory and practice, providing documentation of this in their portfolio examinations.
5. **Diversity:** The candidate body is situated in diverse locations; they prepare for assignments in their personal studios or practice offices. They attend Oxford Brookes University on approximately three occasions per annum, for initial design workshop, interim review, and examination. Non design assignments are submitted by post and digital media.
6. **Individualism:** Candidates set their own academic agenda within a flexible timeframe set by the Examination team which from 2015 will be formalised in their annual Statement of Academic Intent. Design projects are situated in locations of the candidates choosing, briefs either originated by the candidate or, for final design project, developed from a choice provided by the Examination team.
7. **Examination:** The programme is an Examination in Architecture, with examiners drawn from a combination of practice and academia. It is governed by the same standards which are set for every validated qualification in architecture. It differs from these in that candidates, guided by the programme framework, assisted by their practice mentor and supported by their personal tutor, develop a personal approach to architectural education.

### **Academic Objectives**

The programme is distinctly rooted in practice and therefore builds on the opportunities this provides. At the same time, candidates are encouraged to perceive architecture as an idea rather than as a production process leading to predictable outcomes. They are expected to learn about architecture by speculation of possibilities which might not yet exist within their practice; to research, hypothesise, experiment and test design solutions that lie beyond their experience. The uniqueness of the programme is that each candidate has an opportunity to explore issues of particular interest to themselves; with their tutors and mentors they define the curriculum path of what is in effect their own individual school of architecture. What candidates have in common is that this exploration is supported by a professional ability which often exceeds that of their full time academic contemporaries.

**Part 1** candidates, on admission to the programme, have knowledge of building design which is above that of the typical first year student as a consequence of their experience in practice, often reinforced by a qualification in building technology. The programme challenges Part 1 candidates by requiring them to develop projects from a conceptual basis, to consider architecture in an expanded field, and to develop projects that might require a greater level of innovation in determining appropriate design and technological solutions. Candidates are required to develop awareness of architectural precedent, in particular through reference to contemporary projects and emergent ideas; to learn how to evaluate design projects including their own, being aware of their individual position in the sphere of architecture. There is an emphasis on expanding their methods of developing, testing and presenting ideas, placing high value on design process. Emphasis is placed on the cultural context (history and theories of architecture) in which their proposals are made, along with the need to devise technological solutions that are appropriate to their design intent and outside their normative practice.

**Part 2** candidates are a more diverse group of individuals, coming from a range of backgrounds including Part 1 of this programme, and most frequently having completed a Part 1 degree in architecture at an academic institution. The dissertation is a key element in Part 2, enabling candidates to raise their cultural, technological or professional understanding of architecture and encouraging a culture of research based work. Candidates sit a formal written examination in Management, Practice and Law. The final design project brief which candidates are expected to reinterpret critically for their chosen context, is inherently complex and evaluated through more demanding assessment criteria which are defined by the higher level of Graduate Attributes assigned to Part 2. Candidates are encouraged to be speculative, critical, or even polemical, in their project work, testing their own ideas about possibilities that can exist within the field of architecture and how this can be developed and subsequently communicated.

**The Future:** Arising from revisions to the EU Professional Qualifications Directive, the increased cost of higher education and levels of debt, the globalisation of architecture, and the opportunities that digital communication offers 21<sup>st</sup> century society; architectural education is at a threshold which the RIBA OBE can capitalise on.

Following the last Visiting Board, a WIKI was set up for candidates, mentors and tutors with a forum where each group could communicate; there was also a notice board to advise candidates on submissions due, and a space for exemplary work. This did not prove as popular as anticipated and, in consultation with the candidates, it was decided to explore another form of on-line communication. Our soon to be launched website and forum will begin to exploit the potential of new communication possibilities, offering an alternative to the School of Architecture studio culture. It will continue to develop in accord with the changing landscape of architecture, in response to candidate, tutor,

*mentor, and external examiner feedback, and as new opportunities emerge for enhanced online learning.*

*The Programme Management Committee continues to reflect on the Ethos and Values\* of the programme, inspired by candidates' enthusiasm as much as by external examiners' guidance. Like all schools of architecture, this programme will be influenced by reviews of architectural education which are currently under development or have recently been published. Importantly, the RIBA and Oxford Brookes University will further promote and publicise the RIBA OBE, partly through open access to its website, so that there is an increased awareness of this unique alternative route to graduation in architecture. Our motivation is reinforced by comments from alumni, candidates and their mentors which clearly suggest that the value of their learning and graduation is a significant enhancement to the architectural practice as much as to the candidates' own sense of fulfilment and self-worth.*

*Ronnie MacLellan, Programme Director, March 2015*

\* Martin Pearce (March 2014) *Ethos and Values in the RIBA OBE Design Examination.*

## **11 Commendations**

The visiting board made the following commendations:

- 11.1 The Board commends the Programme Management Committee (PMC) on the provision of an Academic Position Statement which is clear, concise and aspirational.
- 11.2 The Board congratulates the PMC on establishing a learning process which produces committed, enthusiastic and engaged candidates.

## **12 Conditions**

There are no conditions.

## **13 Action points**

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

- 13.1 The PMC should produce briefs that actively require candidates to develop a conceptual and critical approach to architectural design. Candidates should be required to demonstrate the application of appropriate theoretical concepts to design projects.
- 13.2 The Board strongly recommends that the PMC continue to refine an online digital resource in consultation with candidates, graduates, tutors and mentors.

**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 PMC is advised to utilise the online digital resource so that candidates may engage in peer review and exchange information about exemplars and precedent studies.

14.2 The Board advises that submission of all information relating to the special nature of the examination be incorporated within the advance documentation delivered to members prior to the visit (see section 18.2).

**15 Delivery of academic position**

The Visiting Board response to the Oxford Brookes OBE Academic Position Statement (APS) requires further comment.

The *RIBA Procedures for Validation and Validation Criteria* are clear in their requirements for an effective Visiting Board:

RIBA visiting boards will:

- firstly, acknowledge experimentation, innovation, and professional relevance in course delivery, teaching methodology, and academic outcomes, emphasising the distinctive qualities of a school in its written report
- secondly, place emphasis on schools providing the means for students to meet the graduate attributes stated for each award level
- thirdly, use the criteria as diagnostic tools to consider where any shortfall in meeting graduate attributes is apparent

The frequent use of the word “programme” in the APS replaces any reference to a structured syllabus or associated curriculum. Neither is mentioned in the APS, although the OBE submission mentions the University Guide Syllabus and Regulations (GSR) in the School Programme Appraisal and elsewhere. The GSR sets out main principles, syllabus, and assessment criteria for the examinations, rather than a programme of study.

There are no “students” in the programme, only “candidates”. With no conventional curriculum to examine, the Board is limited in its ability to investigate ...*experimentation, innovation, and professional relevance in course delivery, teaching methodology, and academic outcomes...* With only a timeline to establish the pre-examination sequence of events, the Visiting Board can only validate the examination procedure and outcomes. Scrutiny of the candidate portfolios and the meeting with candidates is crucial to consideration of whether graduate attributes have been met.

Without a curriculum there is no conventional Quality Assurance system to monitor teaching standards: great trust is thus placed in the effectiveness of the tutor/practice/candidate relationship.

The Board was unable to interrogate pedagogic methods as this is not applicable to OBE, which does not provide teaching. Whilst the principle of work based learning and counterpointing practice with academic study is clear, and valued, each candidate develops their academic position individually in collaboration with their tutors. The board did not feel that this is necessarily a disadvantage as it results in the work presented for examination encompassing a wide range of approaches.

Action point 13.1 recognises the key role of the brief in challenging candidates, setting expectations and providing a springboard for creativity which might actively seek to encourage a diverse range of responses, not only in the building as artefact, but in the ideas and processes that shape them.

**16 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.

The Board confirmed that all Part 1 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the RIBA Part One Certificate in Architecture

The Board confirmed that all Part 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the RIBA Part Two Diploma in Architecture

**17 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.

The Board made no further comments.

**18 Other information**

**18.1 Candidate numbers**

Part 1 33 candidates  
Part 2 96 candidates

**18.2 Documentation provided**

The School provided all advance documentation in accordance with the validation procedures. A large volume of supplementary written material relevant to the understanding of the examination process including the *Guide, Syllabus and Regulations* was made available on the first morning of the visit. This addressed the “special features” of the examination. The Board recommends that submission of all such information be incorporated within the advance documentation delivered to members prior to the visit.



**19. 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.

The Office-Based Examination will hereafter be referred to as the OBE or 'the examination'.

- **Budget holder and course leaders meeting**
- **Candidate meeting**
- **Meeting with the Oxford Brookes University Vice-Chancellor**
- **Meeting with the Pro-VC Dean of the Faculty of Technology, Head of Architecture and the RIBA**
- **External examiners' meeting**
- **Tutors and mentors**
- **Staff meeting**