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**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**report of the RIBA visiting board  
to Newcastle University**

School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape

date of visiting board: 17/18 November 2016  
confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 15 February 2017

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- 1 **details of institution hosting course/s**  
School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape  
Newcastle University  
The Quadrangle  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 7RU
  - 2 **head of school**  
Professor Adam Sharr  
  
**head of architecture**  
Professor Graham Farmer  
graham.farmer@ncl.ac.uk or 0191 208 5623
  - 3 **course/s offered for revalidation**
    - BA[Hons]Architecture  
RIBA part 1
    - MArch: Master of Architecture  
RIBA part 2
    - Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice and Management  
RIBA part 3
  - 4 **course leader/s**

Dr Sam Austin	BA[Hons]Architecture	part 1
Dr Zeynep Kezer	MArch: Master of Architecture	part 2
Dr John Kamara	Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice and Management	part 3
  - 5 **awarding body**  
Newcastle University
  - 6 **the visiting board**

Roger Hawkins	chair
Virginia Rammou	vice chair
Chris Boyle	co-professional
Paula Craft-Pegg	academic
Peggy Le Cren	practitioner
Tania Love	regional representative
Brigit Luffingham	student/graduate
David Gloster	RIBA Director of Education (reporter)
  - 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 the 15 February 2017 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed unconditional revalidation of the following courses:
    - BA[Hons]Architecture  
RIBA part 1
    - MArch: Master of Architecture  
RIBA part 2
    - Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Practice and Management  
RIBA part 3
 The next visiting board will take place in 2021.

## 9 standard requirements for continued validation

- Continued RIBA validation 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 New Courses Group
  - 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)

*Newcastle University is home to one of the most successful and longest-established architecture schools in the UK. Founded in 1922, ranked by QS in our discipline's World Top 100 and well placed in the in UK's primary subject league tables, our graduates include Alison and Peter Smithson, Terry Farrell, Eric Parry and Richard Murphy. The University is part of the Russell Group and considers itself as a 'world-class civic university'. The School reflects this. Evidence that our research is regarded as 'world-class' is provided by the most recent UK research assessment, REF 2014, which placed the international quality of our work fourth in tables measuring Research Intensity and Research Power in our Unit of Assessment (second only to UCL amongst schools that offer RIBA accredited education at Parts I and II). We returned over 90% of our eligible staff to REF and 85% of our work was graded as world-leading or internationally excellent. This positions us as the largest and most active hub in the UK outside London for professional education combined with built environment research. We actively propagate a culture of research throughout our taught programmes and our students benefit from research-led teaching from leading scholars, both in studio and in the lecture theatre.*

*Four threads drawn from our city's history and character inform our identity as a civic School. First, we are active contributors to Newcastle's globally-recognised culture-led regeneration. Second, we are inspired by the city's legacy of technological and material innovation in the nineteenth century. Third, like our port city - which has often had more in common with its global connections than with the rest of the UK, we are international in our outlook. Finally we are part of a long-standing tradition of participatory design in the North East, epitomised by Ralph Erskine's work at Byker in the 1970s and 80s. So our research and research-led teaching – our interest in the cultural opportunities that architecture affords, our commitment to material and environmental innovation, our engagement with the world around us, and our attention to the politics of the built environment – are profoundly rooted in our region's heritage and civic traditions. Our architecture research group, Architecture Research Collaborative (ARC), spans the reach of the architecture discipline from architectural science to practice, history and theory, and our teaching reflects its activities. ARC contributes to our curricular and extra-curricular activities and is home to arq: Architectural Research Quarterly, Cambridge University Press's international journal. Bridging academe and practice, arq is unique in drawing together international peer-reviewed scholarship for an audience of professionals as well as academics, mirroring ARC's commitment to relevant interdisciplinary research. We have an increasingly shared research and teaching culture with colleagues in Planning (with whom we co-teach a new non-accredited BA Architecture and Urban Planning programme and several postgraduate taught programmes). Our institution provides us with excellent opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaborations and we have teaching and research links with several*

*schools including Engineering and Fine Art (the latter, currently ranked as the top Art & Design School in the UK). Our professional programmes are enriched by a thriving postgraduate provision delivering a range of specialist design programmes. Our substantial PhD cohort, comprising home and international students, includes the largest group of PhD by Creative Practice candidates outside London. This last group in particular has had a positive impact on our studio culture. In addition, we have a burgeoning post-doctoral community, unusual in schools of architecture, including a Leverhulme Fellow and several University-funded Fellows.*

*As a research-led school of architecture, staffed by leading scholars with a breadth of expertise across the discipline, we understand design to be a collective cultural endeavour that involves the acquisition and exercise of complex knowledges and skills. These we believe are best realised through a dynamic approach to education, which we see not as the transmission of a set of truths, but as an on-going process of inquiry in which staff and students are both participants. Our approach is directed toward fostering an academic environment that values this openness, while encouraging the pursuit of design, in all its aspects, at the highest level. Where some schools of architecture may be committed to the production of certain sorts of architecture or modes of graphic representation, we see ourselves as committed to the production and cultivation of architects as individuals. Our response to a changing profession is to recognise that the architects of the future will have to be specialists as well as generalists, and we seek to help students identify, and then take charge of, their specialism by offering an increasingly diverse spectrum of research-led options as they progress through the programme. We know that architects must deliver their speculations and we are committed to the translation of research into practice. We also acknowledge that many of the specialisms of the future don't exist yet and that we need to equip students with the research skills they need to stay ahead of a changing professional environment during their long careers. As a result, our graduates are highly sought after. Practices report back that our alumni bring both the competences they need, and as a direct consequence of our research-led approach, an independence and self-starting ability to think through problems creatively. Last year, 100% of our students were in professional or managerial employment within six months of graduation, making us the joint highest amongst UK schools of architecture for graduate employment. Indeed, our employability statistics remained very high even through the recession.*

*The structure of our accredited programmes helps students begin to define the kind of architect they want to be and tailor their portfolio towards the kinds of practices that interest them. In the BA, Stage 1 introduces professional methods and competences, and the idea that design involves research. Stage 2 situates architecture in an urban context, emphasising the politics and economy of the contemporary city alongside the development of environmental, technical and material knowledge. Students here work in studios offered by particular tutors that inflect the year's themes in relation to research topics (we call them 'studios' rather than 'units' because we reject the master-pupil model of architectural education). In Stage 3, students choose from a diversity of stimulating research-led graduation studios, frequently developing themes that interested them from Stage 2. We are one of the last UK schools to offer an undergraduate dissertation; something we choose to invest in because it helps students develop specialist interests that either contribute to, or supplement, the investigations of their graduation projects. At MArch, around half of our students are returners, the other half joining from a broad range of UK and international schools. The whole of the first year of the MArch is based in a major European city, selected because it provides a challenging historical, social, urban or environmental*

context. In the first semester students address the urban scale, and in the second semester they concentrate on the details of a building, and on construction and technologies. The accompanying 'Tools for Thinking' module introduces research methods and themes and is designed to equip students with critical reading and writing skills. MArch students can also choose a specialist route alongside studio which can include: urban design, planning, sustainable design, a dissertation or a 'linked research project' with a staff member – the latter a distinctive offering at Newcastle that includes a thriving 'live build' programme. In Stage 6, students choose from a diversity of thesis studios, resourced with research and technical expertise and with an emphasis on the translation of research into practice. We retain a Part III programme because we value the connection it provides with practice and our links with the profession are also strengthened by the large proportion of our academic staff who continue to practice in various ways. Several staff and research students contribute to a growing School-based design consultancy, Design Office (DO). Other research-active staff operate their own award-winning practices and our teaching is supported each year by over a hundred practitioners, drawn from all over the UK and beyond who act as part-time tutors, lecturers, critics and structural and environmental consultants.

Alongside our research culture, our greatest strength is our highly capable, enthusiastic and industrious students, and we value and support the sense of community and the studio culture they share with us. We empower our students to play an active role in the running of the School: they are members of School committees and inform School policy and curriculum development, they co-manage the plotting facilities and run the student 'Kofi Bar' – an entrepreneurial spirit we're keen to encourage. Students also organise the end-of-year exhibitions in Newcastle and London, they design and edit the annual Design Yearbook, and organise an extra-curricular lecture series. The student society, NUAS, organises a vibrant programme of social events and, last year, was awarded 'Best Student Society' by the University's Student Union. We recruit excellent students from around the world and we are proud to have one of the most diverse student bodies in the University. Our international identity is further enhanced by our ERASMUS and international exchanges and our partnership with the INTO organisation, with whom we have developed unique and highly successful architecture-themed English language training programmes. Our attractiveness to students from across the world and our emerging global reputation provides us with the impetus and foundation for the next stages in our development. Having firmly established ourselves in recent years as one of the most significant hubs for architectural education and research in the UK we are now keen to do the same on the global stage.

## 11 commendations

The visiting board made the following commendations.

- 11.1 The visiting board wished to congratulate the school on the comprehensiveness and sophistication of its response to a range of challenging internal and external circumstances, extending over the period 2011-16. The breadth and depth of the academic restructuring of the architecture programme, whether in relation to the appointment of committed and very effective new members of staff, the building programme currently on site, the thoughtful research themes permeating stages 3, 5, and 6, the inter-disciplinary *charrette*, and the successful reconfiguration of the part 3 course evidenced bold reshaping of architectural education at Newcastle University. The academic position articulated strategies for teaching-led research that were considered by staff to well represent both the school's ethos, and individual academic aspirations
- 11.2 Linked Research and the school's commitment to teaching pedagogically substantial live projects were particular highlights of the work reviewed by the

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- board; these projects demonstrated strong social engagement, with the programme embedded in a diverse range of interesting communities
- 11.3 Students in the school had unselfconsciously created a genuine live-in studio culture in their main building, and one where the desire to share information and knowledge was seen as a greater concern than a competitive studio/unit/atelier system where principles of separation might more normally be expected.
- 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 visits. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board
- 13.1 **existing premises**  
The board were concerned that whilst 24/7 opening of university buildings potentially offered great opportunities for students, persistent observations about the main studio building not being wholly fit for purpose needed to be addressed in the short term. Issues with heating, lighting, health and safety, the lack of lockers and storage space for personal effects and models, and a clear under provision of rooms for making (in addition to workshops) etc. tended to contradict the notion of 'a world class civic university'
- 13.2 **new premises**  
The board were naturally pleased to note the imminent provision of additional space for architecture in the Claremont building; however, it was considered that whilst this might alleviate immediate issues with overcrowding, there would remain concerns with architecture students working in cramped conditions – and that, strategically, this needed further attention. It was also noted that the social and cultural environment of architecture in the studios needed to be carefully nurtured, and that too much diffusion of the subject area across the campus might have unintended consequences
- 13.3 **library**  
Whilst there was a core of well-chosen books in the library, the board were concerned that i) more books could usefully join the subject collection (including those on modern architectural theory); ii) more non-book related resources needed to be offered in the library (e.g. more physical space devoted to workspaces, layout spaces, group working areas etc.); iii) more e-books and e-journals should be available for students; and iv) that the architecture (and related art) collection in the library needed to be creatively reimagined to reflect the strong research ethos and scholarship of the subject area. Being proactive in this respect would further underpin the aspirations of the university in terms of its world rankings
- 13.4 **technology**  
Particularly at MArch, the board had concerns that architectural technologies (structural and constructional systems, materials, strategies for energy and resource efficiency, advanced digital design and the relationship to digital fabrication, BIM and construction modelling, advanced building services systems, the use of virtual and simulated worlds in architectural design etc.) were not being identified and developed as powerful sources for driving the research and teaching agenda. The board strongly encourages the school to revisit the credit structure and content of the course to give greater primacy to this curricular area (which, if stage 5 specialisms are not taken by students is currently represented by only 5% of available credits). The school is also strongly encouraged to review the teaching of architectural technologies internally, with a view to repositioning technology as a creative driver of students' thinking

13.5 **Student Contract**

The board were clear that the use of the student contract (pp.256-259 of the visiting board document) for defining the commitments of both teacher and learner was beneficial, but encourages the school to consider incorporating the validation criteria and graduate attributes in this document to ensure each student is aware that their work should reflect these parameters

13.6 **Academic Portfolio**

The board were unanimous in their appreciation of the excellent standards of presentation of the student work they reviewed; in the best examples, graphic standards were exceptionally high, and the integration of a range of a demanding curricular skilfully handled. However, the folios were considered over-edited, and thus omitted evidence of the iterative cognitive processes students inevitably engage with. The school is strongly encouraged to ensure that all students collate their work to include more discursive evidence, as well as the honed final product. It was considered that further reference to the RIBA's notes on the academic portfolio would usefully complement the advice given to students by the school (pp. 260-264 of the visiting board document)

13.7 **support of PhD candidates**

As part of the commitment to being a world class civic university, the school is strongly encouraged to develop additional scholarships and bursaries supporting the aspirations of those potential doctoral candidates graduating from the MArch: Master of Architecture who may be deterred from level 8 study by lack of funds.

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 It is suggested that there should be greater emphasis on the funding of administrative and technical staff to alleviate the workload of academic staff already committed to research, teaching, and practice

14.2 The board advises the school that in setting a disciplined framework for the development and completion of design studio briefs, the results are not unintentionally prescribed

14.3 With the developments in the new part 3 course which were considered to significantly increase its appeal to candidates, the board suggest that a more proactive marketing and promotion of this offer would be beneficial to the school and those candidates considering undertaking the course

14.4 It is advised that careful consideration of the timing and availability of external consultants and guest critics might better support the development of integrated studio design projects; this would require an appropriate financial framework to achieve the most benefit

14.5 It is also advised that careful monitoring is in place to ensure there is parity of student experience at all levels of the programme, in relation to tutorials, design review, assessment, and opportunities to travel, particularly across the stage 3, 5, and 6 studios

14.6 The board suggests that the school considers further strengthening its links with professional practice through the Design Office, university estates department, site visits in the city and region, and reaching out to other like-minded bodies in similar latitudes

14.7 Finally, the board advises that the school consider developing a research theme around the notion of Critical Practice, with a view to defining new models of professional engagement.

\*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