# RIBA

**Royal Institute of British Architects**

# Report of the visiting board to Plymouth University

Date of visiting board: 26/27 January 2017
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 31 May 2017

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**1 Details of institution hosting course/s**
School of Art, Design & Architecture
Faculty of Arts
Plymouth University
Room 112, Roland Levinsky Building
Drake Circus
Plymouth PL4 8AA

**2 Subject leader**
Simon Bradbury, Head of Architecture and Built Environment
Associate Head of School Art, Design and Architecture

**3 Courses offered for validation**
BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1
MArch, Part 2

**4 Course leaders**
Andy Humphreys, BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1
Simon Bradbury, Bob Brown, MArch Part 2

**5 Awarding body**
Plymouth University

**6 The visiting board**
Professor Kevin Singh – chair/academic
Kate Cheyne – vice chair/academic
Chris Bryant – practitioner
Matt Hill – practitioner
Sheila Ryding – co-professional member
Jonathan Braddick – regional representative

**In attendance:**
Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk, RIBA validation manager

Anamaria Lisboa Casassas, Dean of Architecture, Universidad Central de Chile, Santiago, attended as an observer.

**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 Proposals of the visiting board**
On 31 May 2017 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed, by circulation, unconditional revalidation of the following:

> BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1
> MArch, Part 2

The next full visiting board will take place in five years' time.

**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]**
*The area of Architecture and Built Environment within the School of Art Design and Architecture offers BA Architecture (part 1) and MArch (part 2) programs as well as BA Architectural Technology and the Environment (ATE), BSc Architectural Engineering, BSc Construction Management and the Environment, BSc Building Surveying and the Environment, MSc High Performance Building and MA Architecture. We also offer Research Masters and PhD's in Architecture.*

*At Plymouth, we aim through our teaching and research, to help students become creative professionals who are flexible to the changing nature of the architecture profession, able to work collaboratively and actively engage through their practice in the wider challenges our society faces. This we believe requires an ethos that is centred around a strong sense of social purpose reinforced by considerations of culture, ecology, economics, politics and the craft of making.*

*The primary intention of this ethos is how a response to these challenges and opportunities can collectively enable people's livelihoods in buildings and cities. This ethos permeates both the structure and content of teaching and our pedagogic approach, our research and how we engage with the region and wider community.*

***Outward facing in our teaching and engagement***
*The ambition of our teaching is to be outward looking both regionally and internationally. This is achieved through collaborations with external organisations across a range of modules in both BA and MArch. This includes 'live projects' in studio at every stage of the course moving. Starting with regionally located small-scale build projects in year 1 and moving to complex urban environments in international contexts in the MArch. This model is not limited to studio, with engagement with local architects embedded in professional practice, on-site build projects with external organisations as part of technology, and analytical work in MArch modules on sustainability and urbanism. Through these projects students are exposed to both the professional and social context in which they will be working and the people that will inhabit the buildings and environments they are designing. This approach also offers direct support to local*

3

*communities that have included the design and construction of play spaces for local nurseries, consultation on community development / regeneration proposals and the release of council assets for community use in Plymouth.*

*We are supported by national and international academics and practitioners. This includes associate tutors, from local and national practices, reinforced through the visiting distinguished practitioner program, lectures organised by the student society (PADS), partner lectures with local and regional RIBA and visiting academics. This has included academics such as Prof. Doreen Massey, Prof. Tim Ingold, Prof. Jeremy Till and Prof. Saska Sassen, past presidents of the RIBA George Ferguson, Stephen Hodder and Jane Duncan and practices such as Witherford Watson and Mann, 6A Architects, Architype, Takero Shimazaki, BDP and CRAB studio.*

*This diversity of input alongside an increasingly international student intake and our international staff body create rich environment to enable a broad learning experience and foster a debate about the future of the profession and students future career paths. This is celebrated annually through a symposium on the future of the profession that has included on the panel past presidents of the RIBA.*

***Supporting a community of learners***
*In addition to being outward facing in our ambition, we value the creation of a supportive learning community within our courses. It begins with the building itself, with students having their own permanent studio space for the duration of their studies, while allowing for cross-studio communication with students from other years. It is reinforced by students working together within and across year groups at certain points in the year. In the BA Architecture course years 2 and 3 work together in studio in semester 2 sharing the same site while in MArch the initial projects are done collaboratively. This enables a cross-year dialogue to emerge while still supporting each year group at each stage of their learning. In addition MArch students are invited to support the teaching in the year 1 as design studio assistants, an activity that builds confidence in the MArch while supporting links across the school. These activities alongside a strong student society result in a collegiate and supportive atmosphere among students.*

*It is within this environment that students are encouraged to develop their own interests. This is enabled firstly through an academic structure that explicitly draws links between non-studio components of the curriculum (technology, history and theory, communications) and design, enabling students to identify their own strengths and direction over any house style. This is encouraged from year 1 but becomes increasingly explicit and ambitious as students move up the school and is most explicit in the MArch where intake from a broad international context is increasingly the norm. In addition a number of modules are taught collaboratively with Architectural Technologists and electives are offered in MArch with students on the MSc in High Performance Building. This is a first step in exposing students to other professions and is a practice we are looking to build on in future through exploring*

*collaborations in teaching with courses within the area but also the wider school and university.*

***Research-led teaching***
*We have series of areas of interest that are connected to our strengthening research profile. Our research has grown significantly over the last 5 years and led to our first submission to REF 2014. Emerging areas that are connected to teaching include, critical urbanism, digital cities, digital fabrication and building performance.*

*Research-led teaching in critical urbanism and digital cities is most explicit in the MArch course and is supported directly by staff actively researching in this area and is connected to our research group. The MArch is becoming increasingly ambitious forging new partnerships in Europe and more recently in South East Asia with projects and research partnerships in Macau.*

*We have interests in the relationship of the craft of making and new forms of architectural production. This agenda, has underpinned a number of technology summer schools in Japan and Innsbruck, a live build project in first year, and for the first time this year a live build project for 2nd and 3rd years on Dartington Hall. This has been supported with new investment in digital fabrication equipment and research grant funding.*

*Finally Architecture and Built Environment also benefits from a range of academics active in the area of building performance analysis and post occupancy evaluation. There is an ambition to develop this more explicitly in the BA and MArch course moving forward alongside links areas of research strength.*

*We believe that Architecture at Plymouth is well positioned to confidently move forward giving our students a strong foundation for their wide ranging professional careers.*

**11      Commendations**

11.1    The Board commends the structure and approach of inter-subject teaching on the BA programme, in particular, the quality of the integration of Technology with Design.

11.2    The Board commends the commitment of the School to a live project agenda and for the manner in which these are used as vehicles for students to investigate the local context, and other areas of the curriculum such as professional practice and technology. The Board noted the brave and ambitious use of the live-build project in BA Year 1 along with its positive outcomes.

11.3    The Board commends the pro-active and positive attitude and operation of the School leadership and staff team in dealing with the recent almost-constant state of change, an attitude which has ensured that their collegiate approach, commitment and dedication to the student body has not waivered.

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**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    Although the Board recognises the current changes being made at both Part 1 and Part 2, the Board found the presentation of student portfolios to lack criticality, cohesion and narrative. The School should continue to develop learning and teaching strategies to address this issue that may also manifest in the final portfolios students take to interviews in practice.

13.2    The School is clearly providing substantial input in a number of professional and technical curriculum areas, such as Building Regulations and Planning Policy at both BA and M.Arch level. However, there are instances on both courses where students are not evidencing this knowledge in their portfolio, which should be addressed. The School could for example, develop minimum requirements in project outputs in order to avoid any perception of gaps in meeting the professional body criteria.

13.3    The Board identified issues at Part 2 in the balance between research and analysis work, and design iteration and resolution. The School should explore a more appropriate balance in time, emphasis, and attitude, to ensure greater resolution and diversity of the design proposals, both in design sophistication (especially in the exploration of the third dimension), and comprehensive and stimulating graphic representation. The following criteria and attributes GC1.1, GC1.3, GC9, GC10, GC11; and GA2.1, GA2.2 and GA2.3 are particularly affected and need to be considered in relation to the above.

13.4    Whilst the School's approach to Graduate Attribute GA2.4 on the M.Arch programme*: "critical understanding of how knowledge is advances through research to produce clear, logically argued and original written work relating to architectural culture, theory, and design"* is clear *(*via a number of shorter essays), inconsistencies in the students response to these across the cohort result in the School's strategy and intention being undermined at times. The Board therefore asks the School to review its position and strategies for addressing this Graduate Attribute.

13.5    The Board considers the marking standards of Design and Technology at MArch level to be too generous and strongly recommend that the School develops a more robust marking system and moderation sequence to ensure both parity of marking but also to reflect the range of standards of work.

**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    Whilst the integration of Technology is commendable at BA, both the BA and M.Arch courses would benefit from encouraging students to propose exploratory/ non-standard technology and construction detail responses.

14.2    The School is advised to enter into a dialogue with a supportive Faculty and University hierarchy about University-wide regulations to ensure greater resonance with professional body requirements and sector norms such as essay lengths, and the split of M.Arch at Level 6 and 7, which results in different pass mark thresholds.

14.3    The students are very happy and supportive of the School, and highly value the availability of personal studio space. The studio is clearly one of the greatest selling points of the school and contributes to the lively and supportive student / staff community. However, there are a few minor irritations, which if resolved, may result in increased student satisfaction. These include the poor climate control in the building and the availability and perceived expense of A4 and A3 printing.

14.4    The Board wishes to encourage the current trajectory of exploring interdisciplinary opportunities with the Built Environment courses presented by the new Faculty structure – both through teaching and research projects.

14.5    The Board advises the School to keep a close eye on the potential number of international collaborations and articulation agreements and to ensure that progress in these areas is not at the expense of the current excellent student experience.

14.6    The Board encourages the School to continue to develop links with practice to further establish the role of the School as a local centre for architectural debate.

14.7    The Board advises that in the absence of a Part 3 programme the School appoint / select a Professional Studies "champion" to ensure that this area of curriculum is fully represented at Part 1 and 2 level, as well as looking after Year out students in terms of their PEDR, any employment issues, and generally reinforce links with local and regional practices.

**15    Delivery of academic position**
The following key points were noted:
The School was invited to resubmit its Academic position statement to more explicitly reflect the distinctiveness of the School which is captured elsewhere in the documentation.

Whilst the School promotes a research-led approach to teaching it is important that this ethos does not compromise the students attitude to the resolution of design projects.

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**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.

**16.1** **BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1**
The Board confirmed that all graduate attributes were met.

**16.2** **MArch, Part 2**
Please see action point 13.3 and 13.4.

**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.

**17.1** **MArch Part 2**
Please see action point 13.3.

**18** **Other information**

**18.1** **Student numbers**
BA Architecture (Part 1) 186
MArch (Part 2) 40

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

**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.**

- Head of Department and course leaders
- Student meetings
- Meeting with the Dean of Faculty and Head of School
- Discussion with external examiners
- Staff meeting