Royal Institute of British Architects

Report of the RIBA visiting board to the Royal College of Art

Date of visiting board: 28/29 November 2013
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 11 February 2014
1 Details of institution hosting courses
School of Architecture & Interior Design
Royal College of Art
Kensington Gore
London
SW7 2EU

2 Dean
Professor Alex de Rijke

3 Head of Programme
Charles Walker

4 Course offered for revalidation
MA Architecture, Part 2

5 Awarding body
Royal College of Art

6 The visiting board
Professor David McClean – chair/ academic
Dr Richard Patterson- vice chair/ academic
James Lai- practitioner
Carol Norton- practitioner
Emily Friibance- student/graduate
Sheila Ryding- co-professional
Mike Tonkin- regional representative
Chris Thurlbourne attended as an observer.
Jenna Quinn (RIBA) attended as secretary

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
The RIBA Education Committee of 11 February 2014 confirmed continued validation of:

MA Architecture, Part 2

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

10 School’s academic position statement (written by the School)

RCA MA Architecture (Part II) RIBA Validation

This academic position statement will:

Define the areas of **activity** and specific **outcomes** the school would wish to be considered as exceptional

Architecture at the Royal College of Art (RCA) encourages individual speculation, experimentation and innovation. We engage students in a critical ideas-driven approach to architecture, underpinned by a strong sense of the material reality of the discipline, and an engagement in the physical act of making. Not only do we aim to harness and extend students’ knowledge, design skill and creativity, but also we want them to communicate their architectural ideas in an accessible way. We prepare students to design cleverly and provocatively, but also to be critically engaged in the world.

All the teachers in the programme are also architects in practice, researchers, writers or consultants; we see this as an essential undercurrent to a successful teaching environment. Through our practical experience married to the research culture of academe, we offer unexpected challenges, sparking creativity and supplying relevant critical analysis. We provide an environment where students can pursue, debate and prioritise issues as individual designers to create their own original and rigorous architecture.

The pursuit of these aims in architecture makes particular sense in the broader context of the College, where proximity to sophisticated practice across the art and design spectrum encourages a wide, multidisciplinary view of design. Interaction with students and tutors from other design disciplines, and the general ethos of the RCA as ‘a great place to grow’, establishes personal and individual creativity at the core of the programme.

The cultivation and emergence of individual student creativity is where RCA architecture seeks to be exceptional, always grounded in the material reality of our discipline. Our principle leaning outcome is the ability to think and design analytically and critically. To do this, our students engage in a critical design process, developing projects iteratively toward a level of completion that encapsulate student’s design philosophy, and is presented in a way that makes the projects accessible to a large audience.

Provide a distinctive account of the **features** of **teaching** and **learning** that characterise and separate the course offered when considered against other schools of architecture

To achieve a synthesis of critical ideas-driven approaches to architecture, underpinned by a strong sense of the material reality of the discipline, the trajectory of the course has been designed with distinct projects and educational experiences in mind. These

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move from the pragmatic and applied in the first year, to a more speculative and research-based project in the second year.

The first year begins with a one-term collaborative ‘live project’ working to a prescriptive design brief and supported by an external sponsor, with the winning proposal proceeding to construction. This is then followed by an individual two-term propositional project set by the studio tutors and completed at the end of the first year. The second year is structured as a thesis year, in which students spend one term in thesis preparation, defining an architectural thesis project by establishing a clear critical position, and writing their own project brief. This is followed by two terms of developing an architectural ‘thesis by design’, culminating in the exhibition of drawings, models and animations in the RCA Show.

At the RCA we see design as the key intellectual and practical skill of an architect, and students are expected to demonstrate knowledge and skills acquired through the design of studio projects. Thus studio projects are deliberately set on a trajectory moving from a pragmatic grounding in the material reality of the discipline, toward a more propositional design project, and finally a personal, critical and speculative thesis project.

Similar to other London schools, the course operates through a vertical studio system, each studio providing a thematic range of design, technological and related skills, as well as a clear and particular intellectual position within which to develop studio projects. However, at the RCA the second year thesis programme ensures that the final year is focused on the creative interest of the individual student, and offers an opportunity for the student to establish their creative presence through a significant self-defined thesis. Unlike other schools, the work of our graduating students at the RCA Show is exhibited by student rather than ‘unit’ or tutor group. By this point the thematic nature of the design studios has fallen away, with tutors effectively acting as advisors to the student’s individual thesis work.

**Define the ways in which the course offered provides skills relevant to the modern practice of architecture**

Architecture is an entrepreneurial profession with 45% of Chartered Architects being self-employed. Nurturing individual creativity and training architects to think strategically, to engage in a critical discourse, and to develop projects iteratively toward a level of completion that encapsulates a design philosophy, is central to modern practice. On this basis we seek to provide students with the tools necessary to establish an actionable critical position, essentially an entrepreneurial position that defines them as architects and differentiates them within practice. We see this as something that is necessary for practice to evolve.

Additionally the course aims to provide students with an awareness of the relationship between technology and practice. This enables them to understand and to work within the technological trends influencing the development of practice, both in terms of materiality and information-based systems. We want our students to be aware of leading structural and constructive systems as well as energy and environmental systems. Our extensive workshops and the general ethos of making that permeates the College, in conjunction with set projects requiring 1:1 scale mock-ups, encourages a culture of material research, experimentation and prototyping. In professional practice studies we seek to equip students with an awareness of the planning stages of projects and the legislative regulations that govern construction, employment and contract law.
Explain how the validation criteria have been creatively interpreted in terms of the course content and delivery

At the RCA we have established a unique course structure and trajectory. We have introduced a year-wide first term ‘live project’ that gets built, and operates while students are simultaneously tutored within a vertical studio system. The general progression from prescribed propositional projects toward speculative critical and research-based projects operates within the studios, in parallel to the emphasis on making.

As we recruit degree graduates from various programmes throughout the UK and overseas with diverse undergraduate experiences; the first year programme is used to teach technical studies and Critical and Historical Studies (CHS), ensuring that all our students have a sound grounding in the technical and practical validation criteria. This forms a foundation on which they can build in the second year, but in a more independently driven speculative and research-based thesis project.

The introduction of a one-term live project in the first year, the trajectory from propositional projects to critical speculative projects, the rich culture of socio-political interests in speculative architectural thesis in the second year – these qualities all differentiate us as a school. The general condition of studying architecture in the multidisciplinary context of a postgraduate-only art college, in which all of the other disciplines are deeply concerned not only with the act of designing but also with the act of making, provides a unique educational context and a unique interpretation of the content (the general criteria) of architectural study.

11 Commendations
The visiting board made the following commendations:
11.1 The RCA provides a unique setting for a school of architecture.
11.2 The College is highly committed to the development of the individual and underpinned by an extraordinary array of resources.
11.3 The School’s strong socio-political agenda.
11.4 The effective leadership of the School and the creation of a coherent staff body in a relatively short period of time.

12 Conditions
There are no conditions.

13 Action points
13.1 The Board notes the steps taken by the School to enhance environmental considerations through the use of external consultants, however, these need to be explicitly demonstrated within the developmental work of each student.
13.2 The true character and nature of design process was not fully revealed to the board through the exhibition and portfolio sample. The School should consider the broad range of resources at its disposal to appropriately document processes, paying particular attention to evidencing judgements made at the key milestones of interim review, Work In Progress (WIP), the degree show and viva voce.
13.3 The Board acknowledges the discursive ethos of the college but nevertheless the school should address the lack of parity in the existing processes of recorded feedback particularly in relation to constructive critique, and identification of specific areas of learning outcomes and criteria.
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 Board encourages development of the history and theory curriculum, which may also target the technical exploration of many of the units.
14.2 The School should pursue the ambition of developing new courses and the expansion of the school as this may provide an opportunity to increase the diversity of the student cohort.

15  Meetings
15.1 Meeting with budget holder and course leader
The Board held a meeting with the Dean, Head of Programme, 2nd Year Thesis Advisor and School Research Leader. The following reflects the key points of discussion:

- Since the last RIBA visit, the School has undergone a period of transition and change. In 2011 the wider college was restructured and changes were made to leadership and staffing including the appointment of the Dean (2011) and Head of Programme (2012).
- As a result of the restructuring process the School of Architecture (including Interior Design) is now established as an independent school that is separate from the School of Design. The culture of the school has evolved and grown from a small boutique arts school to a much larger independent and external facing school.
- The School has a historic tendency to operate as an internal and independent entity. This has changed and staff and students are now collaborating on competitions and live projects.
- The ethos of the course has evolved. Foci are wider and experimentation is more practical, but the work remains provocative.
- Professor Susannah Hagan was appointed School Research Leader in 2012 and is responsible for the coordination of the MPhil and PhD programmes. The School is working to establish a strong research identity. Design and social innovation is a dominant research theme.
- MA graduates of other courses use the end of year show as an opportunity to launch their careers. This has influenced students of architecture and they are investing a significant proportion of their time into preparing for the show.
- The School is unique in that it solely offers a postgraduate environment. Students establish a mature and professional relationship with their tutors from day one of the programme.
- Interaction is encouraged by the staff team and students collaborate with other disciplines on an informal basis in the school.
- RCA week is an excellent opportunity for students to experience working with other disciplines in another school.
- Since the last RIBA visit, the school of architecture has relocated to a larger studio space on the sixth floor of the Darwin Building. The College will continue to build at the Battersea site in order to secure additional space in the current building. At present the School shares a flexible and open plan studio space with...
fashion and textile students. The studio space can accommodate the short-term growth until fashion and textiles relocate to the new building. The Dean anticipates that this will take place in 2016.

- Architecture students can use all the workshop facilities at the RCA; however access must be negotiated by the individual. Technical facilities have improved and are now more centralised and shared across the college.
- The School intends to maintain the current size of the programme rather than increase student numbers. There are plans for the school to expand through the development of parallel courses which may include the development of programmes such as Landscape Architecture and Urban Design.
- The standard template for a two-year MA course at the RCA consists of one year of structured learning and one year of independent learning. There is a strong emphasis on independent learning throughout the course. Students are given choice but nurtured to be independently minded.
- The technical studies course has been restructured so that there is a stronger focus on environmental and sustainable practice.
- There are approximately 12 students in each Architectural Design Studio (ADS) group which are led by 2-3 tutors. Year one is aligned to developing students’ skill sets which enables the second year to be more flexible. Second year students think independently and focus on their thesis interest.
- Previously the school had a strong focus on arts-based PhDs, but topics are becoming more diverse due to the broad range of applicants applying to the college. The majority of students are now undertaking PhDs in practice. Demonstrating the value of PhD work to practices is challenging.
- The RCA supports a research model of intellectually independent work that is collaborative and serving a funder. There has been a change in focus and priority. The school is collaborating with other universities including the University of San Paolo.
- At present there is no thematic correspondence between the PhD programme and the Masters programme. The school holds PhD surgeries which enables students to give a presentation of their topic followed by an open discussion. Masters students are encouraged to attend and participate in discussions. The school is exploring different ways for the ADS groups to contribute to the PhD programme. ADS 1 and ADS 2 are led by staff members who are enrolled on the PhD course.
- The course handbook informs students of the assessment process and criteria. All students receive an email which gives details of how the criteria should be mapped to their portfolios. A presentation is also given at the beginning of the year which describes the criteria and assessment process for the year.
- There was a discussion on the examination and viva processes. The Board was informed that the interim examination is now conducted in two separate parts; a portfolio presentation and an examination. These components are assessed by separate panels.

15.2 Meeting with students
The Board held a lively and constructive meeting with approximately 28 students who were representative of year 1 and year 2 of the MA programme. Students were positive and articulate, and conveyed a strong sense of belonging and engagement with the school and wider college. The Board was interested in discussing the following areas: course structure, academic leadership and student aspirations, criteria
and assessment, facilities and interdisciplinary working, student finance and support. The following reflects the main points of discussion:

- The RCA offers a specialist arts school context and graduates approach architecture from a different perspective. This attracts many students to apply to the Part 2 programme.
- The school has a unique postgraduate environment and there is a collaborative rather than individually competitive spirit.
- The school offers places to applicants based on their talent, which is encouraging a more diverse range of people to apply to study Part 2.
- The RCA has excellent facilities which create opportunities to network with other professionals. Students benefit from working with a wide range of disciplines and they considered this to be an enriching experience.
- The School places a strong emphasis on students as individuals; they are given freedom to pursue their individual interests.
- RCA is a ‘melting pot of ideas’ and students are expected to make use of the full range of facilities within the school. Students reported that they felt confident in seeking specialist advice from members of staff in the school.
- The unit structure works well and unit tutors share their interests and expertise through the projects. Students have a diverse range of interests which offers scope to be involved in different projects. The School is not prescriptive in the design briefs that are set by staff.
- Students are encouraged to be independent and resourceful. There is pressure from the school in a constructive way, but students make the choice to initiate contact with other disciplines.
- ‘Across RCA’ is a one week interdisciplinary programme which enables students to participate in creative projects with other disciplines. In previous years many courses have been oversubscribed. The College has improved this process and offered 25 programmes in 2013 (up from 14 in 2012).
- In addition, there is a wide range of supplementary lectures and workshops that are held across the school which students may register to attend. Students considered Across RCA to be an exciting experience which gave an insight into the work of other departments.
- Students reported that they have ambitions to move into different and diverse forms of practice once they graduate. The Masters programme is not directed at a specific career path, and there are opportunities to explore different pathways throughout the two years of study. A significant number of students stated that they would like to set up their own architectural practice on completion of the course.
- The RCA listens to the student voice and shared forums are held every term to discuss issues. The Head of School directly responds to problems that are raised and students experience the outcome of changes that are made in the school.
- Tutors understand teaching time in relation to tuition fees; however, contact time may vary depending on the tutor.
- The link between the first year and second year has improved. Students considered that the year-out in professional practice helped to ease them into the first year of the Part 2 course.
- The structural lectures offer an opportunity for students to visit and talk to manufacturers which they find very useful.
• There is a strong connection between students and graduates of the RCA who return to participate in crits. Alumni support is a strength of the school and includes architects, interior designers and journalists.
• Research has a strong presence in the school and this is enhanced by the vast array of facilities that are available to students. Students also have access to facilities across London, including those at Imperial College and the V&A.

Students identified the following areas for development:
• While students acknowledged that there is financial support and bursaries available across the college, they raised concerns over the lack of support from Student Finance England. They advised that the government should consider recognising the MA programme as an undergraduate degree in order to secure student loans and financial support.
• Students felt that there should be more support given to international students from across the profession. The Board was later informed that many international students face having to return home 4 months after completing their studies because of the removal of the post study work visa.
• The management of the technical programme could be more inspirational.

15.3 Meeting with head of institution
The Board held a meeting with the Dr. Paul Thompson, Rector of the Royal College of Art. The following reflects the main points of discussion:
• RIBA validation is the only professional accreditation within the Royal College of Art. Institutionally the RCA is very familiar with the process of validation as the architecture course is long established. External reviews, validation and student feedback are taken seriously and strongly valued by the school.
• The RCA is in the midst of delivering a master plan that was initiated in 2008. In line with this plan, the architecture programme has gradually increased since the last RIBA visit with approximately 95 students enrolled on the course (previously 45).
• There are plans to expand the Darwin workshop and to dedicate more space specifically to Architecture. The new Woo Building at the Battersea campus is due to be completed in 2014, and two programmes within the School of Material will relocate to this site. The additional space will become available to the School of Architecture.
• At present every programme has its own dedicated seminar room. Many of these remain vacant outside of teaching hours. There are plans to restructure the facilities system so it is more centralised and lecture/seminars rooms will be used as shared bookable spaces.
• The College has dramatically increased the size of the development department in order to broaden its bursary support. At present £3.5 million is offered to students through bursaries across the RCA.
• There has been substantial investment in research. The College is research intensive and mindful of the blend of research active staff and teachers within the school. Knowledge exchange is encouraged across all disciplines.
• Architecture, sustainability and urbanism are strong aspects of research at the college. Professor Susannah Hagan was appointed in 2012 and is leading two major research projects; one in collaboration with the University of San Paolo and an EU (Marie Curie) research project.
15.4 Meeting with external examiners
The Board held a meeting with one external examiner attached to the MA programme. The Board was interested in the school’s vision and leadership. There was also a discussion on various aspects of the external examining process including appointment, briefing, and involvement at interim assessment stages. The following reflects the main points of discussion:

- The School offers a holistic education and does not constrain creativity. There are spaces at the RCA for students who are ‘off the wall’ and unique.
- The MA is as much of a programme about architecture as a discipline as it is an MA in Architecture. This is a powerful and unique aspect in comparison to other courses.
- The strongest students are the most individual, ambitious and enquiring. These students are producing work that the school had previously shifted away from.
- There is a strong culture based on production and working that is within students at the RCA.
- Students have embraced the new leadership and benefitted from the range of positive developments that have taken place in the school as a direct result of new staffing.
- The external examiner’s role must be considered in relation to the arts school context of the RCA.
- External examiners have the opportunity to meet every student before and during the examining process. The interim review stage enables examiners to gain an understanding of the range of projects across the school through observation. It is also an opportunity to have a discussion about any students of concern.
- Examiners visit the school on a regular and informal basis. The School holds a formal meeting with examiners to discuss how they will respond to their reports on an annual basis.
- The Board was informed that examiners are not involved in discussions with the school about the development of other courses.

Areas identified for development:

- The School is very small and has a limited number of staff. The majority of staff balance teaching with working in practice, which makes it challenging for a collective research culture to develop in the school. Tutors should be given additional hours for preparation and evaluation.
- The School should find ways of enabling a culture of critical support across the unit system. The College should find time for critique.
- Viva presentations could be filmed as a way to document the assessment process.

15.5 Meeting with staff
The Board held a meeting with approximately 20 members of staff who were representative of full and part-time appointments. The following reflects the main points of discussion:

- The School will adapt its vision to suit the new circumstances and changes in leadership and staffing. The new Dean and Head of Programme have a determined view of making and process which is supported by the staff team. A clear trajectory has been discussed at staff away days and they anticipate the new vision will fall into place over the next two years.
- There is a good level of communication between students and staff. The School holds regular feedback forums and a feedback loop is in place.
The course team would like to align and strengthen the link between the first and second year of the Part 2. In first year the students work collaboratively on live projects. In year two they progress to independent study which culminates in a thesis.

The majority of staff are teaching in other schools of architecture and working in practice. This has introduced a wide range of new expertise to the RCA. The School intends to make full use of the expertise of visiting lecturers who form the main body of staff.

A range of collaborative projects are taking place across the school. The Across RCA project helps to integrate disciplines. There is knowledge exchange with other departments such as interior design and urbanism which has materialised in the form of collaborations.

The small size of the school enables a strong studio culture and easy integration. The studio system encourages students to share conversations with other disciplines. The lifts and cafes in the building are also good places for students and staff to mingle.

The workshop facilities are renowned and known to students before they apply to the course. Every student has a full induction within the first 2 weeks of term one. New members of staff also attend the induction sessions alongside students.

Technical support at the school is excellent and workshop technicians are always available to help and support students. The first year is now incorporating technical skills in projects.

Students at postgraduate level are expected to use their initiative and make use of the full range of facilities that are available in the school. Students are encouraged to use the facilities to explore new working methods and techniques. Many tutors are graduates of the RCA and they share their knowledge and understanding of the facilities.

Students make a vast amount of models, but they do not document process work thoroughly. Evidence of making is challenging to demonstrate due to the lack of storage space in the school. The Work In Progress show presents a large volume of developmental work that is not included within the individual portfolios.

Portfolios are curated and edited by students as professional documents; this is part of the culture of the school. Portfolios are viewed as curative pieces of work rather than comprehensive records. Process work is assessed throughout the year by the student's ADS group.

The Board held a discussion with staff about the application and interview process at the college. The Board was informed that all applicants attend an interview with their portfolio. The process is rigorous and the interview panel includes a selection of tutors and the Head of Programme. Students are asked to discuss their ambitions and reasons for applying to the college.

The majority of students who apply to study architecture at the RCA have a specific interest. Students are determined, ambitious and talented. Projects can range from sculptures to multi-million projects. The Architectural Design Studio (ADS) system offers a variety of interests, diverse approaches and expertise.

ADS groups are distinct in their thematic interests. At the beginning of the year, tutors give a presentation of their studio theme to students in addition to a personal insight into their individual work and interests. Students make three choices and attend an interview with the ADS leader for each chosen group. Following this, students will be allocated to an appropriate ADS group according to their interests.
The Board considered that the staff team has adopted a healthy approach toward unit selection. Tutors listen to students and decisions are not made on a competitive basis. The school aims to have a very different set of students and skill sets in each studio group.

Students embark on their own personal journey within their ADS group. The school advises second year students to choose a studio group that is aligned with their thesis project and individual interests.

Students demonstrate their ability to read and research at viva stage. All philosophical ideas are explored through the oral presentation. Presentations are a creative and active discussion.

16 Delivery of academic position
The Board noted the following points during the visit:

- The culture of the institution is based on a significant amount of exchange of critical discussion.
- The primary pedagogic objective of the school is to enable individual students to 'find their own voice'.
- Pedagogic methods in the school are predicated on a high level of student capability, independence and prior achievement.
- The Board acknowledges the extraordinary resources that students have at their disposal, and encourages the School to ensure that the opportunities these create are fully exploited.

17 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.

MA Architecture, Part 2

Through the Board’s review of the course output in relation to the Criteria, it was noted that the School had not undertaken an explicit parallel mapping to the Graduate Attributes. The Board strongly suggests that this is done in advance of the mid-term visit.

18 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.

MA Architecture, Part 2

GC9 Adequate knowledge of physical problems and technologies and the function of buildings so as to provide them with internal conditions of comfort and protection against the climate

GC9 The graduate will have knowledge of:

.1 principles associated with designing optimum visual, thermal and acoustic environments;
.2 systems for environmental comfort realised within relevant precepts of sustainable design;

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strategies for building services, and ability to integrate these in a design project.

The Board noted that there was visual evidence of criterion GC9 within the sample of portfolios provided; however, the School is advised to find ways to transparently demonstrate the sub-points of this criterion.

19 Other information
19.1 Student numbers
Year 1: 60
Year 2: 25

19.2 Documentation provided
The school provided all advance documentation in accordance with the validation procedures.