Report of the RIBA visiting board to the University of Ulster

Belfast School of Architecture
Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment

Date of visiting board: 25/26 September 2014
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 11 February 2015
1 Details of institution hosting course/s
University of Ulster
Belfast Campus
York Street
Belfast
BT15 1ED

2 Head of School
Professor Peter Walker

Associate Head of School
Dr Jenny Russell

3 Course/s offered for revalidation
BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1
Master of Architecture MArch, Part 2

4 Course leader/s
Mike McQueen, Course Director, BA (Hons) Architecture Part 1
David Coyles, Course Director, MArch Part 2

5 Awarding body
University of Ulster

6 The visiting board
Professor Kevin Singh – Chair
Martin Pearce – Vice Chair
Gill Scampton
Stefanie Rhodes
Joe Edgard - graduate member
Ewan Pullan - co-professional member
Dawson Stelfox - regional representative

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk, RIBA Validation Manager, was 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.

8 Proposals of the visiting board
At its meeting on 11 February 2015 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed unconditional revalidation of:

BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1
Master of Architecture MArch, Part 2

The next full Visiting Board to the University of Ulster will take place in 2019.

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)

In Belfast, between the gantries and the mountains. The Belfast School of Architecture at the University of Ulster is a unique and distinctive school – located on an island off an island off Europe; in a place that is part of the United Kingdom, but not of Great Britain; on the Island of Ireland, but not part of the Republic of Ireland; in a city that is at peace, but still divided by religion and national identity and still defined in the minds of many by its troubled past; in Belfast - the only city on the island of Ireland to experience the Industrial Revolution - a post industrial city in a predominantly rural country; and part of a 'plate glass university', but located physically and emotionally in the Art College. In short, we are a School of Architecture located in a place apart.

In our academic vision we see this 'state of being apart' not for one moment as a problem, but rather as our legacy and as the reality of what we are and where we are; something to be embraced and celebrated, and the provenance of the things that make us the very distinctive school that we believe we are.

From Solar Rays to Performance Art. In the 'culture quarter' of Belfast, between the Art School and the School of the Built Environment, the Belfast School of Architecture is situated in a unique urban and educational context which provides rich opportunities for collaboration, cross-disciplinary teaching and research. Examples include Built Environment staff teaching into the Making Buildings and Green Building modules, and Art School colleagues contributing to the module How Design Thinks. A common BA first year - architecture, interior, product and furniture - explores shared modes of design practice. The two cross faculty Research Institutes encourage inter-disciplinary research. Engagement: Building a Community. The School is very conscious of its place in the community that is Belfast and Northern Ireland, and Belfast School of Architecture staff participate in a wide range of civic, community and professional engagements including the Northern Ireland Ministerial Advisory Group and the Councils of the RSUA, the Landscape Institute and the CLAT. Public and private bodies contribute to the lecture programme; staff and students regularly work with local practices; host events (for example the All Ireland Architectural Research Group 2014 Conference); and have secured funding to explore particular issues in NI including a Berlin/Belfast housing study; a study of the Belfast Peace Walls; community projects in contested North and West Belfast linked to an MArch module; and research, installations and publication on the Belfast Smithfield Quarter. Widening Access: Opening Doors. Importantly for Northern Ireland 'widening access' is a central social and educational objective towards building a more enterprising and tolerant society and the Belfast School of Architecture is involved in initiatives to engage the unique educational environment of NI and to widen access to architecture as a career. These include project work with secondary schools; publications and events for primary school pupils (How to Design a Building); membership of the Belfast PLACE Educational Advisory Group;
and the 'Connected' project with NI Higher Education Colleges. **Thinking through making.** The Art School context embraces those deeply interested in making, and the wide range of workshops and equipment, combined with the open studios offer an intense environment for craft, model-making, casting, textiles, graphic design and film making. The new £250m University of Ulster campus being 'made' on our doorstep is a further teaching tool. **Locally specific, international in dialogue.** Beyond our engagement in Northern Ireland, exchanges and projects provide a wider international dialogue and place the School in a wider cultural and social discourse. These include the Berlin housing project, a vibrant Erasmus programme, the Nantes Architecture School Belfast exchange, Science without Borders students from Brazil, and links with Notre Dame Beirut.

**Learning and Teaching** at BSA develops from a continuous, structured and reflective review of course and context specific conditions and opportunities. In this, courses have sought to recognise and support **individual student journeys**, including those from a widened access entry point, to the highest levels of graduate success. The exceptional BSA facilities support a BA strategy that develops spatial appreciation through model making and hand drawing methods that have been specifically developed to transcend student limitations at entry point. This approach also underpins digital design explorations. The MArch extends this approach in developing sophisticated urban and rural explorations. Students are encouraged to establish personal learning environments within an urban context and to use this as a vehicle to develop architectural and cultural skills and understanding. **The NI post-conflict/post-industrial context** allows a rich combining of local contextual study with international experience and exchange, the School's studio culture reframes student's pre-entry experience within a broader discourse. Engagement and outreach activities contribute to local, regional and international engagement, which shapes learning and teaching approaches. Tuition fees increase pressure on students to balance study with paid employment. At BSA this coexists with a predominant 'commuter student' community. Dedicated on-campus studio and workshop facilities, Blended Virtual Learning Environments and small student cohorts allow appropriate **academic support**.

The RIBA Graduate Attributes provide the starting point for, but not the definer of, the **differences between the under graduate and post graduate programmes.** In the BA **design** studio students are expected to develop an appreciation and understanding of space and tectonics and from this to generate design proposals; whereas in the MArch studio these would be complex proposals to which more sophisticated and original thought has been applied, where matters on which one can be less confident are speculated about and hypotheses are tested. In the teaching of **technology**, the BA Module Constructing Architecture is a partly didactic lecture and partly studio based exploratory course to explain, instil and test an understanding of materials, construction processes and techniques of building; whereas the MArch modules encourage on the one hand critically evaluating building technology, and on the other hand (alongside the studio teaching) applying the technology in a complex architectural design that is practicable, sustainable and thoroughly resolved. The BA **history and theory** modules provide students with an overview of architectural history with an emphasis on paradigm shifts in Modernity. This provides a historical framework and reference points to develop the ability to comprehend arguments posed in scholarly literature, and to analyse architecture and the scholarship about it. This approach fosters critical evaluation and provides the skills to arrive at well researched, credibly argued, and thoroughly reflected thinking and writing. In the MArch self-directed research, reflection, synthesis and writing is encouraged through workshops, seminars and individual supervision and tutorials. **Professional practice** in the undergraduate course is concerned with developing knowledge and understanding (including of issues beyond traditional practice); whereas in the MArch the application of that knowledge is set in studio and 'real world' community based projects, and students
develop a reflective understanding of the contested nature of professions and professional discourse.

Both the undergraduate and post graduate courses provide skills relevant to modern professional practice. The Professional Context modules acknowledge that the contemporary practice of architecture is situated in political, socio-economic and cultural contexts that are in constant flux. Students are encouraged to reflect upon this and develop skills as persuasive advocates for good design and sustainable architecture. The course builds on the idea of the architect in practice, but acknowledges that this can take many forms and sits alongside a range of career routes open to graduates beyond architecture. This diversity is brought together through both live projects and staff led research projects. Architectural knowledge in practice requires an understanding of the relationship of professional groups to society, and the social and economic externalities that arise from professional activity. We seek to understand this complex context from both the ‘supply’ (construction industry) and ‘demand’ side (the client/user) side. The School staff includes a number of practitioners on 0.5 lecturer contracts, who bring insight and critical reflection on the changing context for practice. The School works with the UU Careers and Employability unit to build personal, professional and employability skills - workshops are held in the graduating years to prepare students for employment. A Post Part Professional Experience Year-Out Course is open to all.

We share the university aspiration to provide a professional education for a professional life, but position this alongside the personal once in a life time opportunity that studying architecture allows to explore, engage, experiment, read, reflect and take risks.

11 Commendations
The visiting board made the following commendations:
11.1 The Board were impressed by the articulation of a clear identity for the School in a ‘place apart’, driven by the craft of making buildings but with an ambition to contribute to the regeneration of city and region, based on both academic research and civic engagement.

11.2 The Board commends the studio-based character of the School and impressive resources shared with the School of Art and the School of the Built Environment.

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 Whilst the approach to the integration of technology at Part 1 is commendable there are significant concerns about how explicitly this manifests in the student portfolios. The input from the School is at times impressive but there is often a substantial gap between what is “covered” and what is “assessed”. A number of portfolios show little evidence of the application of this knowledge. Therefore, the Board believes that it is
imperative that a more connected and explicit format is implemented to ensure that students record, investigate, and apply this input into their design projects. There currently appears to be too much of an onus on the student (albeit with support) to interpret Learning Outcomes and ensure Graduate Attributes and Criteria are met.

13.2 At both Part 1 and Part 2, GC9 (relating to environmental/sustainable design), is not as evident, influential or integrated as it should be (particularly in light of the Schools academic position). Therefore, the Board believes that it is imperative that in a similar manner to the Action Point above, a strategy is implemented to ensure that all students communicate their understanding of this and its influence on their design proposals.

13.3 The Board recommends that the School take a strategic overview of the cohesiveness of each programme as well as the student journey as a whole to ensure that the various “strands” of technology, history and theory, professional studies etc come together in a clearer narrative / roadmap for students.

13.4 The Board recommends that the School review the workload and balance of credit sizes/weightings of a number of modules at both Part 1 and Part 2, with a view to ensuring that the various strands of the curriculum are not lost within the larger modules and assessments are appropriately balanced.

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 Part 2 course has now established itself and so the Board advises that the staff team take this opportunity to allow the students to develop their personal expression and ambition, in particular in terms of design methodology and presentation techniques (including digital skills).

14.2 Whilst technology on the Part 2 course is satisfactory the Board advises that students be encouraged to be less linear and more experimental and research-driven particularly as regards construction techniques and materials with a view to ensuring that the opportunities to use technology as a design generator are not lost.

14.3 The context of the School alongside an Art School manifests in a number of positive ways, as does the relationship to the School of Built Environment. The University, Faculty, and School are encouraged to think strategically about the opportunities presented by the relocation of the Built Environment to the adjacent site.

14.4 The Board acknowledges the manifestation of the philosophy of Learning by Making. The Board advises the School to further develop this culture of model making to investigate, reveal and record interior inhabitation, materials and atmosphere whilst ensuring that this emphasis does not obscure the need to communicate the design process and methodologies and to produce a comprehensive and rigorous set of architectural drawings.
14.5 The connections with the Product Design and Interior Design courses in Year 1 are welcomed but are perhaps underexploited at present. The Board advises that the School reviews the timing and content of its delivery to create a more dynamic first year environment.

14.6 The Board applauds the University’s “widening participation” stance and encourages the School to be more outwardly confident about its ethos, context, pedagogy, and research/enterprise activities and to be more ambitious and pro-active in its recruitment strategies for both Parts 1 and 2 to increase diversity and the opportunities afforded by this.

15 Delivery of academic position
The School provided a clear academic position statement, consistent with the educational experience and School aspiration. However, please refer to action point 13.2.

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 was content that the BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1 met all the Part 1 graduate attributes.

The Board was content that the Master of Architecture MArch, Part 2 met all the Part 2 graduate attributes.

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.

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;

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

Please refer to action point 13.2.

18 Other information

18.1 Student numbers
18.2 **Documentation provided**
The School provided all advance documentation in accordance with the validation procedures.

19. **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