Royal Institute of British Architects

Report of the RIBA visiting board to Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Date of visiting board: 23/24 October 2014
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 11 February 2015
1 Details of institution hosting course/s
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University
111 Ren-ai Road
Dushu Lake Higher Education Town
Suzhou Industrial Park
Suzhou
Jiangsu 215123, China

2 Acting Head of School
Theodoros Dounas

3 Course/s offered for validation
BEng Architecture

4 Course Director
Benjamin Spaeth

5 Awarding body
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, China and the University of Liverpool, UK

6 The visiting board
Professor Lorraine Farrelly – Chair, academic
Professor Kevin Singh – Vice Chair, academic
John Ashton, practitioner
Peggy Le Cren, practitioner
Mike Bradley, practitioner – regional representative

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk, 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 validation for Part 1 of the

BEng Architecture

with effect from the 2013/2014 graduating cohort.

The next full visit will take place in 2019.

NOTE: The BEng in Architecture programme awards two degrees, stemming from the same learning outcomes, learning and teaching and quality assurance processes: the XJTLU BEng in Architecture and the University of Liverpool BEng in Architecture.
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)

Architecture is relatively slow to innovate and fairly resistant to neoteric elements. Sometimes conservative, architecture has often become a captive of other professions, domains, theories and projections. But in China, passivity is not an option for anyone wanting to shape the built environment; as such architects must understand the “world” in which we operate, and endeavour to understand the huge possibilities for change in the built and natural environment.

That said, our graduates must also understand constraints, employ discernment and put forward critical reasoning that goes beyond the lure of the image or the drawing. Going beyond the rote learning of the extant tertiary education system, we should employ other disciplines to inform both our views and the students’ view of the world, in an open discussion where conscious conclusions are drawn.

The strategic focus of the department of architecture at XJTLU is the critical subject. Through this we aim to redefine and refocus a global, modern model of architectural education, set in China. We are fortunate to be situated in an explosively dynamic social context - where students are keen to demonstrate their aptitude for learning as well as their attitude to learning (reflective of and responsive to economic and social vibrancy in which they find themselves). However, the critical subject, the self-aware individual, the creative spirit, the autonomous reflective individual are not an automatic consequence of economic growth; and it is a clear sense of agency that we seek to engender.

We are keen sensitively to relate, engage and challenge architectural design issues though the fast-changing socio-cultural prism of China, Jiangsu Province, Suzhou and the more local Suzhou Industrial Park (in which our university is based). Attempting to understand this changing urban/architectural landscape figures highly within our departmental (and across departmental) ambitions. Rarely do architecture departments have the opportunities that arise from being sited in an emergent metropolitan area of 7 million people, half of which was literally created within the last 20 years. We will not confine ourselves to the local, but there are opportunities for novel enquiry and exploration here.

As critical subjects, we want to explore as much the areas of contention as we do those aspects of harmony. As a result, we will be using genuine design scenarios and live projects in which students can understand the real world - as well as allowing them to indulge in some blue-sky thinking. Working with real sites we hope to expand the urban possibilities. Understanding, accommodating to and challenging many established Chinese practices — as
well as pragmatically learning from good Chinese practices – we intend to intervene in the contemporary architectural debate in this country and beyond. Linking with businesses/experts/practitioners, we want to understand and critique context.

In an effort to break free the discipline of architecture, we inspire our students to explore both the art and science of architecture. Critical and creative awareness means that our students may, at some point, be able to drive forward new models of architectural practice in the art and science of building, and those not necessarily imported directly from the western canon. This is not a short-term agenda, but we aim to lay groundrules for the future.

Students should understand - and make - architecture where the whole building is worked throughout its parts, and the parts reflect the whole. In this the students acquire a solid background in theory of architecture, in techne and technology, in science and aesthetic endeavors, to be able to forge new avenues for the practice of architecture. We are building work experience links to East and West to encourage this.

Contrary to the view that everything is architecture, that everything is design, we view architecture as a discipline that critically shapes the built environment, informed by and encapsulating political, ideological, social and technological advances. In this the educational position of the department of Architecture at XJTLU is defined by looking forward; learning from history rather than replaying models of the past. For us architecture is the positive shaping of the future, more so in a country where paradoxically - architecture is at its infant stages and yet still manages to impose its presence at the same time.

**VISION**

- Focus on a human-centred development of the built environment;
- Inspire a culture of intellectual exploration and innovative speculation;
- Educate towards creative, critical, sophisticated and responsible thought, and;
- Produce the next generation of creative thinkers - at home and abroad - of professionals able to make desirable places to live, work and enjoy.

**MISSION**

- Create original and influential models of architectural education, practice and research, firmly rooted in both the East and the West
- Nurture a critical climate of open architectural discourse firmly established in tolerance of views and positions, where risk-taking and experimentation can flourish.
- Explore intellectual autonomy and confidence of architects to change the environment.
- Build a dialogue (and strive to develop an understanding) between the West and the East in architectural discourse and practice.
- Frame a neoteric modernism and humanism in architecture
- Generate an international standing for the school in both research and practice of architecture.

**Additional Positional Framework:**
The BEng Architecture programme centres on applied architectural design studio modules (50% of credits) in combination with humanistic modules (25% of credits) and technical modules (25% of credits).

In the architectural studios students are led in small teams and in individual projects by either one or a team of members of staff in structured brief that expects resolution at the level of media exploration and space-creating at the first semester and at the level of completed buildings at the appropriate to the level complexity. The department sees increased complexity as the measure of difficulty, with the complexity increasing significantly through each of the years from level 1 to level 4. As levels progress, students are expected to employ critical abilities in architectural design, being increasingly free to develop their own agendas within the brief.

A strong grounding is provided in the early studios in the basic media of architectural representation so that students are familiar with and have command of the architectural vocabulary needed to perform in architectural practice.

**Year 0 /Level 1** includes significant English language provisions and training in the use of English for academic purposes, to prepare students for the subsequent three years, which are conducted entirely in the medium of English. Besides other modules on mathematics, Chinese and PE, the Year one includes lecture-based modules on the Built Environment and on Architectural Representation and Communication.

Years 2, 3 and 4 of the BEng Architecture programme structure consist of design, technological and humanistic elements. The major element in all years is architectural studio design, accounting for 50% of the credit value of modules. Architectural technologies (environment, construction and structure) account for 25%. History, theory and the arts, urban studies and professional practice, etc account for the remaining 25%.

**Year 2 /Level 1**
Level 1 lays the basis for the subsequent years. Students explore the presentation, modelling and design of small spaces and buildings in studio. Students are introduced to the history and theory of western architecture, building science, structure and construction as well as building technology in parallel to modules on English language.

**Year 3 /Level 2**
At Level 2, students have the opportunity to pursue larger scale design projects in the studio modules, mainly concerned with housing and urban buildings. Students continue to learn about building technology and the history and theory of Asian architecture - as their current setting - and about the development of urban areas.

**Year 4 / Level 3**
At the final Level 3, students undertake, individually or in small groups, a series of more challenging projects, which will require demonstrating a full understanding of the design process from initial concepts through to the design of practical buildings, taking into account human needs as well as structural, material and contextual considerations. Students also complete their large scale project and a final year project dissertation. Modules taught in this level include architectural technology, theory of architecture, professional practice and philosophy of arts and aesthetics. We urge the students to take a Year Out in practice at the end of their final-year Undergraduate degree and we have a Professional Studies Advisor monitoring work experience, compiling contacts and validating professional liaisons for that very purpose.

**Commendations**
The visiting board made the following commendations:
11.1 The Board commends the Department and the staff body on creating a distinctive environment in which students learn from an international and Chinese context, with an ambition to produce a new type of graduate, with an emphasis on human-centred architecture, for the emerging global context of the built environment.

11.2 The Board commends the approach of the Department to develop an understanding of local regional culture and its emerging research environment, considering both international and Chinese architectural contexts, with specific consideration of a broad range of Asian architectural influences.

12 Conditions
There are no conditions.

13 Action points
The visiting board proposes the following action points. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

13.1 The Board recommends that the studio design projects reflect an understanding of both the aesthetic and the technical requirements of structures, construction, materials and environmental system design (GC1.2 and GC1.3).

13.2 The Board recommends the final year design project should clearly evidence an understanding of a range of approaches concerning application of building materials, components and systems, specifications and relevant detailed design (GC8.3).

13.3 The Board recommends that students need to demonstrate an understanding of quantitative tools necessary to design appropriate building solutions with regard to sustainable design. This needs to be applied and evidenced in students’ design work (GC9.2, GC9.3).

13.4 The Board recommends that the Department continues to build the relationships with architectural practitioners to become more directly involved in the design studio to ensure students understand and evidence an integrated, applied approach to their design projects.

13.5 As a full cohort of the BEng has now graduated, this is an important point in the evolution of the course and the ideal opportunity to reflect, consolidate, streamline and integrate the student assessment requirement as appropriate, particularly in consideration of the comments regarding the general criteria as above. In light of this, the Board recommends that, as the course is in a period of dynamic change, staff engage with one another via a clear organisational structure and that an implementation mechanism is in place to facilitate holistic co-ordination across the course the expectation of the student experience and assessment requirement.
13.6 The Board recommends that, as the Department continues to evolve, develop and grow that there is a clear resource strategy in place. This should include an approach to space, staffing and associated facilities.

13.7 The Board recommends that the use of sketching and freehand drawing as a critical tool to explain the design process and the connection between conceptual thinking and design is an important discipline and needs to be actively encouraged and evidenced in all academic portfolios (GC3.3).

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 documentation provided to the Board did not positively reflect the overall quality of student work evidenced in both the exhibition and academic portfolios and the evident energy of the Department. The Department appraisal was compiled as a series of bullet points and the Board advises that in future this is considered as an important opportunity for the Department to articulate itself more clearly and imaginatively, and is undertaken as a collective exercise with the staff body.

14.2 The Board advises that the Department monitors and critically evaluates the impact of student mobility between XJTLU and Liverpool University (UK) and how this particularly affects resources, space and future planning and the learning and teaching environment connected to the staff and student experience.

14.3 The Board notes that the Library collection available for the architecture department is developing but advises that this needs continuous review to ensure adequate resource for the architecture course, commensurate with growing cohort sizes. The emerging research environment in the Department will need a range of information and resources to support this research culture.

15 **Delivery of academic position**

The School is referred to advice point 14.1.

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 all graduate attributes for Part 1 were met but draws the School’s attention to the action points and advice referring to specific criteria.

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.

**GC1  Ability to create architectural designs that satisfy both aesthetic and technical requirements**
The graduate will have the ability to:

GC1.2 understand the constructional and structural systems, the environmental strategies and the regulatory requirements that apply to the design and construction of a comprehensive design project;

GC1.3 develop a conceptual and critical approach to architectural design that integrates and satisfies the aesthetic aspects of a building and the technical requirements of its construction and the needs of the user.

Please see action point 13.1.

**GC3  Knowledge of the fine arts as an influence on the quality of architectural design**
The graduate will have knowledge of:

GC3.3 the creative application of such work to studio design projects, in terms of their conceptualisation and representation.

Please see action point 13.7.

**GC8  Understanding of the structural design, constructional and engineering problems associated with building design**
The graduate will have an understanding of:

GC8.3 the physical properties and characteristics of building materials, components and systems, and the environmental impact of specification choices.

Please see action point 13.2.

**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**
The graduate will have knowledge of:

GC9.2 systems for environmental comfort realised within relevant precepts of sustainable design;

GC9.3 strategies for building services, and ability to integrate these in a design project.

Please see action point 13.3.

18  Other information

18.1  Student Statistics 2013-14 Academic Year

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18.2 Documentation provided
While the School provided all advance documentation in accordance with the validation procedures, please see advice point 14.1.

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