Report of the RIBA Full Visiting Board to the University of Kent

Date of visiting board: 20-21 June 2019
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 19 September 2019
1 Details of institution hosting course/s
University of Kent
Kent School of Architecture and Planning
Marlowe Building
Canterbury
Kent
CT2 7NR

2 Head of School
Gerry Adler

3 Course/s offered for validation
BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1
M Arch, Part 2

4 Course leader/s
Chloe Street Tarbatt  BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1
Michael Richards  M Arch, Part 2

5 Awarding body
University of Kent

6 The visiting board
Martin Pearce  chair / academic
Paul King  vice chair / academic
Alison Coutinho  practitioner
Holly Rose Doron  academic
Lucia Medina  student
Sophie Bailey  RIBA validation manager

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 Recommendation of the Visiting Board
On the 19 September the RIBA Education Committee confirmed that the following courses and qualifications are awarded full validation

BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1
M Arch, Part 2

The next RIBA visiting board will take place in 2024.

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

Kent
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

Introduction
Kent School of Architecture (KSA) was established in 2005, and since March 2019 we have become KSAP – the Kent School of Architecture and Planning. We are expanding our scope of engagement in the region and beyond, and broadening our educational provision. Our current home in the Faculty of Humanities, one of three faculties at the University of Kent, is about to change as the University embarks on its two-year ‘Organising for Success’ initiative. Along with many other Schools, we will find ourselves in a smaller grouping of academic units, but with a concomitant larger presence, and will continue to find synergies with colleagues in the Humanities, Natural and Social Sciences, the better to reflect the holistic nature of architecture. The University of Kent is proud of its strapline ‘the UK’s European University’ and we see ourselves as the UK’s European School of Architecture, evident from our diverse student and staff body, and the frequent use we make of our proximity to mainland Europe, in particular the University’s Paris School of Arts and Culture. Our main areas of research, organised through our three research centres, inform the School’s teaching in history and heritage, material and environmental sustainability, and modern means of digital design and production.

Students
The school attracts particularly bright applicants, from across the UK, Europe, and the world. The average UCAS entry tariff for students entering Stage One is 159 points. We equip our students for a lifetime of practice and learning in architecture, starting with their first job in practice: we are ranked ninth in the UK for employability. The school promotes individuality and architectural ambition over house styles, giving students the freedom to explore, experiment and choose how they develop their ideas about space, materials, form, function, and the user experience.

- We equip our students for practice: 90% of our students are in professional employment within 6 months of graduation.
- We empower our students and trust them to represent the school: they curate the end of year exhibition and design, edit and publish the catalogue.
- We operate a fully developed peer mentoring system, and uniquely amongst UK Schools our MArch students act as teaching assistants in BA Stage 1 as part of their Pedagogy module.

Space
At the last RIBA Validation, we had just moved into our new Digital Crit Space, and this summer we look forward to its upgrade, following on from last summer’s overhaul of the Stage One studio, and the previous year’s remodelling of the M Arch ground-floor studios. Space comes at a premium, and we are exploring ways of finding a more equitable space-charging regime in the University as a whole. We
have worked closely with Spacelab to develop feasible solutions to our space deficit. In addition, our new grouping should afford us opportunities to share space with other Schools. Much teaching and learning takes place across the University and in the city itself, the locus of many of our drawing and historical studies.

Staff
The School has an expanding academic and support staff base, including a new Chair in Planning (2018), lectureships in Digital Architecture (2017 and 2018) and in Professional Studies (2019). The University as a whole is currently considering the mix of fte and hourly-paid lecturers, and the School is moving a small number of its hpl teachers to fte contracts, improving students’ accessibility to a wide range of staff. We are well supported by a cohesive and dedicated admin staff, and a professional workshop and technical team.

Research
The teaching in the School is research-led, with staff expertise organised through our three research centres in history and heritage, sustainability, and digital culture informing modules throughout the School, but especially in the MArch and postgrad programmes. At the 2014 REF we were ranked 8th in terms of research intensity, and a number of our colleagues have won prestigious scholarships, in addition to secondments that embed research in practice. The conferences we organise, and the ensuing publications, are international in their reach. Our researchers provide an exceptional contribution to teaching with their subject specialisms, with a focus on excellence in critical thinking.

Outreach and impact
KSAP hosts the University’s International Foundation in Design, with successful students feeding into our Part One programme. We organise many workshops for secondary schools in Canterbury and beyond. The School has responded positively to the Government’s apprenticeship drive, currently with our new MSc in Planning, where we are working with Kent local authorities, and we are currently working on our Part 1 and 2 engagement. We engage actively with local planning authorities in the region, and are setting up an ‘Urban Room’ in Canterbury to better engage with the public.

Academic agenda: BA (Honours) Architecture
• We operate a year system, with a solid grounding in history, theory, environmental design and construction, architectural representation and practice
• We teach and value fine art at all stages in the programme, and prepare our students for the digital world.
• Our design projects are located in the region, addressing contemporary issues and real project situations.

Academic agenda: MArch (Part 2)
• We operate a unit system that changes periodically of widely diverse practices and theoretical interests, each with their own dedicated teams of technical tutors. There is a strong studio culture with dedicated unit spaces
Academic agenda: postgrad taught and research

- Our flourishing PhD programme was founded in 2008 and currently has 25 students, many of whom teach as GTAs on the BA programme.

The future
KSAP’s Part 3 programme is due to start in September 2019, as is our MSc in BioDigital Architecture. Our medium to long-term plan is to begin a Masters in Landscape Design. Whatever the political relationship with Europe brings, we will fully engage with our neighbours in Continental Europe in terms of academic exchange and study visits.

11 Commendations
The visiting board made the following commendations:

11.1 The board commends the research activities of the school. Much of the research into the historic and cultural context of architecture informed the teaching responding to the previous board’s comment 14.2. This augurs well for the success of the school in the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework.

11.2 The postgraduate programme evidenced students’ ability to generate complex design proposals based on clear theoretical positions and an ability to test theoretical hypotheses through design. The projects were thorough and well-founded and the four thematic studios, combining stages 4 and 5, gave a strong and cohesive design education with ambitious and radical outcomes, many of which were of a very high design quality. GA 2.1

11.3 The board commended the excellent support provided by the dedicated architecture workshop and digital fabrication facilities supported by a team of staff who were central to the strong culture of model making and digital/physical design and manufacture that is shaping the future of the architecture profession and allied industries. GA 1.2, GA2.2, GC1.1

12 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. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

12.1 Whilst the teaching and assessment of technology at Part 1 was clear at stages one and two, at stage three the board found very limited
evidence that GC 8 and 9 were met in the lower passing portfolios. The school must ensure that all passing students evidence the technology component of their projects.

12.2 The board found very limited evidence of the testing or evaluation of the visual, thermal and acoustic performance of buildings in the lowest passing work at Part 1. As for example in the design of the final stage 3 project, which called for the design of a large auditorium space, there was extremely limited consideration of the means to achieve a visual, thermal or acoustic environment that would meet the requirements such a space required (GC 9 and GC 5.1). The school must ensure that sufficient measures are put in place to ensure that these criteria are fully met and evidenced in all of the passing students.

12.3 Across much of the work at undergraduate aspects of sustainability, both in terms of environmental design, materials, and social aspects should be significantly enhanced. The ability for students to develop design solutions through an iterative process of testing environmental performance was significantly inconsistent across the undergraduate programme. Based on the evidence presented to the board, the understanding of active and passive environmental systems, performance of building fabric and matters relating to sustainability in the choice of building materials and their impact on the environment, whilst delivered as isolated subjects in stage two, were at the lower range of marks and were very poorly demonstrated through their integration in the stage 3 design projects. The board strongly advises that the integration of aspects of GC8 and GC9 and the full range of sustainable design practice be urgently reviewed to ensure that all students meet the criteria in these respects.

12.4 The iterative nature of design and the recording of the design process was not clearly shown in the portfolios which, whilst some portfolios showed process work, was in general defined by finished presentation drawings and representations. In meeting criteria 1 and 4, the School might consider how this process work might be better recorded and valued in the portfolio as a record of the creative process beyond the highly edited 12-slide submission artefact and the importance of the recording of such process work was corroborated by the views of the external examiners.

12.5 The teaching of management, practice and law at part 1 and part 2 showed good practice in its link to the design project work. However, the board noted that some of the legislative codes and requirements had been superseded. Whilst the students were aware of the requirements in GC11, the board felt that students might develop a greater critical position in respect of the future of architectural practice and their careers, built on a greater understanding of the current issues facing the professional and construction industry.

13. Advice

The visiting board offers the following advice to the Department on desirable, but not essential improvements, which, it is felt, would assist course development and raise standards.
13.1 The school should consider rewriting the academic position statement, for whilst it provides a description of the activities of the school should better reflect the distinctive qualities of the school and courses and narrate a clear vision for the future.

13.2 The evidencing of group work in the portfolios was not clear and as such the advice point 14.3 of the previous board’s report stands.

13.3 The approach of an integrated design project for module 558 was clear and the board noted the mandatory pass requirement for both design and technology components the weighted allocation of 80% design and 20% technology did not give sufficient value to this aspect of integration.

13.4 The design briefs at undergraduate were largely determined for the students and the board felt there was scope for the students to develop skills in brief preparation, which although developed in the stage 2 might be further enhanced in pursuit of more speculative and radical proposals in the stage 3 (GC 6). Here the board noted that there was good practice in engaging real clients at the briefing stage however the development of design proposals could more fully represent the potential of live projects and their budgetary and legislative constraints.

13.5 At Postgraduate level, the board noted the practice module was relied on as a primary vehicle for the year out experience or the evaluation for the emerging design project. This made for a of lack of parity and, whilst the board supported the structure and content of the programme, the assessment vehicle might be reconsidered. GC11 GA2.5

13.6 The school has good student representation mechanisms and the processes for articulating and responding to the student voice were well established. However, the student experience was often marked by a perceived lack of coordination, planning and organisation on the part of the school. As for example the late notification and planning of field visits in stage 3 final design project.

13.7 The board noted both the school’s and students’ critical reflections on the provision of space. In achieving the future success, the school is in need of more dedicated studio space to maintain and enhance the creative culture of the school. The studio is a laboratory of design ideas and investigation, the vitality of which is central to the reputation and future recruitment prospects of the institution.

13.8 IT provision is good in respect of the dedicated computer laboratory. However, the model of a computer suite separate from the design studio might be developed or reconsidered, particularly with regards to the postgraduate studio provision where a modest increase in the IT provision in the studios left students, who were being expected to use complex parametric systems, were under-resourced with regards their needs for IT provision.

13.9 The module descriptors should be rationalised such that there are consistent learning outcomes and the assessment criteria might be better constructively aligned with the outcomes. In particular for some
of the modules e.g 558 the number of outcomes seemed to the board excessive and the opportunity for students to adequately meet these required greater clarity and succinctness. The school should consider mapping the learning outcomes across the programmes to provide a greater level of consistency in module requirements and patterns of assessment and feedback, to enhance the effectiveness and clarity of both formative and summative feedback. This view was corroborated by the students and external examiners.

13.10 Recent changes in the contractual arrangements for PTHP staff were noted by the board. The board and students felt that the bridge between academic study and practice achieved through the inclusion of practising architects with the design studio through the PTHP serves the school well in demonstrating the GA1.6 and GA2.7.

13.11 The board noted the school’s aspirations with regards new masters programmes and apprenticeship provision along with the aim of delivering a Part 3 architecture programme and RTPI-recognised programme. The operational plan review 2018, annex B of the documentary submission sets out these challenges along with several other opportunities and difficulties that the school foresees. The school may wish to consider prioritising the matters listed therein in order to mitigate risk and enhance opportunity over the coming period and in ensuring that the professionally recognised courses continue to find adequate resources to continue to meet the requirements of the professional and statutory bodies for the extant part 1 and 2 programmes.

13.12 The teaching of the history and theory of architecture was well covered in the undergraduate course, and the evidence of the dissertations showed students were able to research and construct arguments demonstrating a critical understanding of the historical and theoretical context of architecture and supporting and continuing this strength is advised.

13.13 The undergraduate stage one programme was broad and well-structured offering students a wide-ranging and engaging introduction to architecture, and in particular, the board felt that the ‘Folio’ project was an example of good practice at this beginning stage. This followed through into stage 2 where the educational progression was well established and provided students with suitably challenging design vehicles which delivered sensitive and thoughtful solutions in the areas of landscape and housing. The quality and effectiveness of this progression should be carried through into stage 3 of the course.

14 Delivery of academic position
See advice point 13.1

15 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.

Graduate Attributes for Parts 1 & 2
Please see advice points 13.5 and 13.10

16 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.

Graduate Criteria for Parts 1 & 2
Please see action and advice points: 12.1, 12.2, 12.3, 12.5, 13.4, 13.5

17 Other information

17.1 Student numbers
Part 1 (BA Architecture)
Stage 1: 110
Stage 2: 120
Stage 3: 125

Part 2 (MArch)
Stage 4: 35
Stage 5: 35

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