

## **Report of the RIBA visiting board to Cardiff University**

**Date of visiting board: 8 & 9 July 2021**  
**Confirmed by RIBA Board: 17 November 2021**

**1 Details of institution hosting courses**

The Welsh School of Architecture  
Bute Building  
Cardiff University  
King Edward VII Avenue  
Cardiff CF10 3NB

**2 Head of School**

Professor Chris Tweed

**2.1 Course Leaders**

Dr Juliet Davis, Director of PG Teaching (Head of School from Aug 2021)  
Dr Steve Coombs Director of UG Teaching  
Dr Dimitra Ntzani BSc 1 Year Chair  
Dr Ed Green BSc 2 Year Chair  
Michael Corr BSc 3 Year Chair  
Caroline Almond MArch 1 Year Chair  
Dr Mhairi McVicar MArch 2 Year Chair  
Prof Sarah Lupton Programme Leader of the PG Dip in Professional Practice

**3 Courses offered for validation**

Part 1 BSc in Architectural Studies  
Part 2 MArch  
Part 3 Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture: Professional Practice

**4 Awarding body**

Cardiff University

**5 The visiting board**

Matt Gaskin – Chair  
Carol Norton – Vice Chair  
Dr Carl Meddings  
Daniel Goodricke

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk, RIBA validation manager – in attendance

**6 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](http://www.architecture.com).

The procedures were adapted to allow the board to function remotely.

All requirements for documentation and portfolio samples were exactly as for a physical visiting board but viewed remotely.

All timetabled events took place as for a physical board but remotely.

**7 Proposals of the visiting board**

At its meeting on 17 November 2021 the RIBA Board confirmed continued validation of the following courses:

Part 1 BSc in Architectural Studies

Part 2 MArch

Part 3 Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture: Professional Practice

The next full visiting board should take place in 2026.

**8 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 of the annual statistical return issued by the RIBA Education Department

**9 Academic position statement (written by the School)**

The Welsh School of Architecture is renowned for its strengths in energy, environment and sustainability. Recently it has undergone a process of significant, planned growth leading to diversification of its research base and educational offer, and expansion of its accommodation and facilities. Today, therefore, the School contributes to a wide range of key topics in the built environment, reflected in the breadth of our research output, the variety of design units on offer and in the spread of our Masters degrees. Throughout the recent growth, the School has protected and retained its core values: justice (social and environmental), equity and inclusivity, creativity and curiosity. Together, they form the basis of the School's distinctive mission of evidence-based design that will enhance the lives of all people *without destroying the planet for future generations*.

The School's growth has been achieved through a £20M+ investment by the University in response to the School's business case – Well-Informed Design Education and Research in the Built Environment (WIDER-BE). As well as greater student numbers, staff numbers have increased (see Course Appraisal), providing more strength across professional services and academic areas such as urbanism, architectural humanities and environmental design. Facilities have developed too, with the School expanding into the lower floors of our traditional home in the Bute Building to provide a new reception and gallery, design studios, workshops and staff areas integrated with the Architecture Library.

In line with WIDER-BE, and to develop a strategic approach to the School's increasingly diverse research, the three previous core research groups have been expanded into six Research and Scholarship Groups (RSGs) which integrate research, scholarship and curriculum development: Design, Making and Materials; History and Theory; Computational Methods; Urbanism; Energy, Environments and People; and Heritage and Conservation. The School has recently submitted its REF2021 submission, returning all staff who are recognised as 'independent researchers' using the new RSG structure.

The School aims for cross-fertilisation of academic and ‘real-world’ perspectives on the issues confronting design, reflected in collaborations and partnerships with government, industry, communities and practice in Wales and internationally. These include the University’s Community Gateway project (led by the School), projects with central and local government actors, local charities, schools, the Royal Society of Architects in Wales (RSAW), the Design Commission for Wales (DCfW), CADW and the Indian Institute of Architects. It is also reflected in the development of an extensive network of practitioners and consultants that contributes to our teaching and shapes our curriculum. These collaborations enrich our RIBA validated courses and have helped our graduates succeed as leaders in architectural practice and other creative disciplines.

The School nurtures a ‘grounded creativity’ informed by our core values that embraces cultural, political and ethical dimensions of architecture. This offers students multiple opportunities to consider, question and critically explore the production, significance and impacts of design. Our teaching promotes student-centred learning and the development of critical, informed, reflective and creative approaches to design supported by technology, history and theory and methods of representation.

The School continues to perform very well against recognised indicators of quality. Our current NSS Overall Satisfaction reflects improvements in Assessment and Feedback (81%), Organisation and Management (86%), Learning Community (87%) and Student Voice (87%), positioning us in the top 3 of the Russell group. We are positioned consistently in the top 10 league table positions (currently 5<sup>th</sup> in The Times’ Good University Guide, 6<sup>th</sup> in The Complete University Guide, 4<sup>th</sup> in The Guardian), and 37<sup>th</sup> in the QS World Rankings.

A key distinguishing feature of the School’s accredited courses remains the 5-year programme integrating Part 1 and 2 with a year of education in practice in MArch 1. The programme consists of five subject threads running across each year, designed to provide a progressive learning experience. Outcomes are aligned to the FHEQ level descriptors beginning with ‘principles, experience and experimentation’ and culminating in Year 5 with advanced skills in ‘research, rigour and criticality,’ enabling us to clearly distinguish each year within the BSc and the MArch in terms of appropriate degrees of knowledge and skills. All core modules have also been mapped against the General Criteria and Graduate Attributes to meet the core competencies.

In the BSc, projects integrate and apply cultural, contextual, technical, practice and ethical knowledge through the delivery of a ‘building(s)’ at individual or collective scale. Each year is sub-divided into smaller studio groups: 5 ateliers of 3-4 tutor groups in BSc 1; 5-6 Studios in BSc 2 each with a slightly different approach to a year wide brief and agenda; 12 design units in BSc 3 with an individual focus that is supported through technical, historical/ theoretical and practice modules. The non-assessed Vertical Studio between Years 1 and 2 promotes experimentation and speculation through a diverse menu of units. The Design Principles and Methods (DPM) modules have evolved to provide electives on computational methods, making and fieldwork developing important skills for contemporary practice.

In MArch, work is student-led through personal research interests often developed from and a reflection of practice/ professional experience leading to broad and original investigations on what architecture may be. MArch 1 is the year of 'Education in Practice' integrating academic and practice-based learning. MArch 2 centres on the Design Thesis as a student-led investigation of a design within a specialist Unit theme. Updated Unit themes include computational design, environmental analysis, retrofit and adaptation of historical structure, alongside continuing themes of making, atmospheres and place.

The Part 3 Diploma Professional Practice (DPP) provides an in-depth understanding of legal and economic aspects of architectural practice and construction procurement along with the professional skills essential to practice. Its distinguishing features include: the variety in tasks that students undertake, interactive small group work, and the involvement of a wide range of industry experts and alumni in delivering the programme. Another unusual feature is that the DPP shares three modules with our Master of Design Administration, a new multidisciplinary programme aimed at those engaged in design management.

All these features of our courses have been sustained during the Covid-19 pandemic, though there have been changes to some modules to facilitate delivery, and study trips have largely been cancelled. However, the School has maintained studio and workshop access to support student learning.

To conclude, the School continues to offer a rigorous and stimulating learning and teaching environment informed by high quality research that places wellbeing and the student voice at its heart. Our focus on grounded real-world concerns, encouragement for supported self-directed learning results in graduates who are able to take the initiative on society's challenges and to lead rather than follow future practice. The WIDER-BE project capitalises on the School's many strengths while extending its horizons to ensure it speaks clearly to the issues of the climate emergency, the wellbeing of future generations and post-covid changes in education and society.

## **10 Commendations**

- 10.1 The Board commends the Part 3 programme for its synthesis of academic rigour and practice.
- 10.2 The Board commends the School's environmental and social sustainability ethos, which is both progressive and expansive in its outlook and evidenced throughout.
- 10.3 The Board commends the collegiate nature of the School and the commitment of all staff to the student experience.

## **11 Conditions**

There are no conditions.

## **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. The university is referred to the RIBA's criteria and procedures for validation for details of mid-term monitoring processes. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve

action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

- 12.1 The School should implement a strategy for digital education which is firmly embedded within the programmes to ensure students are equipped for a rapidly changing working environment.

**13 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.

- 13.1 The Board strongly advises the School to provide explicit evidence of the design process and reflective practice to support the rationale of the final output.
- 13.2 The School should strive to build on the existing competence of students to encourage greater ambition and experimentation in their work.
- 13.3 The School should ensure that opportunities arising from the new facilities and plans for growth are aligned with the curriculum review of the undergraduate and postgraduate offer.
- 13.4 The School should ensure that all responses and actions resulting from student panels are formally disseminated to the School community.
- 13.5 The School should consider reviewing the academic position statement to better reflect identity, ethos and ambition of the programmes.

**14 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.

**14.1 Part 1**

The Board confirmed that all Part 1 graduate attributes were met by the graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architecture programme.

**14.2 Part 2**

The Board confirmed that all Part 2 graduate attributes were met by the graduates of the Master of Architecture MArch programme.

**14.3 Part 3**

The Board confirmed that all Part 3 professional criteria were met.

**15 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.

15.1 The Board made no further comments.

**16 Other information**

**16.1 Student numbers 2020/21**

BSc in Architectural Studies (Part 1): 436

Master of Architecture (Part 2): 204

PG Dip in Professional Practice (Part 3): 42

**16.2 Documentation provided**

The Department provided all documentation as required by the Procedures for Validation.

**17 Notes of meetings**

On request, the RIBA will issue a copy of the minutes taken from the following meetings: **These notes will not form part of the published report but will be made available on request. The full set of notes will be issued to the mid-term panel and the next full visiting board.**

- Meeting with budget holder and course leaders
- Meeting with students
- Meeting with the head of institution
- Meeting with external and professional examiners
- Meeting with staff