

# **Report of the RIBA visiting board to Anglia Ruskin University**

**Date of visiting board: 7 and 8 October 2021**  
**Confirmed by the RIBA: 8 February 2022**

**1 Details of institution hosting course**

Anglia Ruskin University  
Lord Ashcroft Building  
Bishop Hall Ln,  
Chelmsford CM1 1SQ

**2 Professor of School of Architecture and Planning**

Prof Maria Vogiatzaki

**Course Leader**

Dr Francesco Zuddas

**3 Courses offered for validation**

BA (Hons) Architecture

**4 Awarding body**

Anglia Ruskin University

**5 The visiting board**

Albena Atanassova – chair  
Oliver Hall  
Toby Blackman

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk, RIBA validation manager – in attendance  
Jaysha Fernando, RIBA validation manager – observer

**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 to comply with government Covid regulations.

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**

On 8 February 2022 the RIBA confirmed the following:

BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1

with effect from the 2020/2021 graduating cohort.

The next visiting board will 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 ARU BA(Hons) Architecture Academic Position Statement (written by the School)**

The distinctive curricular underpinnings of Architecture at ARU originate from the prescient legacy of John Ruskin who established the Cambridge School of Art in 1858, which grew into Anglia Ruskin University. Ruskin’s mission, complementary to that of an art critic, and arts and crafts champion, was to reconnect lay people with nature through education and to ultimately eliminate the detrimental effect of human activity upon the planet. In our present time of climate emergency, and geopolitical and ethical crises, we believe that the challenges that Ruskin sought to address have never been greater, nor more current. Through cross-disciplinary creativity fostered by the integration of arts and crafts, our curriculum aims to transform our students, who will in turn, as graduates, transform all those human and nonhuman forces they design for and design with, ultimately aspiring to create and craft a world of healthy people and a healthy planet.

Situated within the School of Engineering and the Built Environment (SEBE), Architecture draws from the multi-disciplinary expertise available, underpinning the importance of teamwork. As the programme has developed, five distinct elements have grounded the BA (Hons) Architecture, as it is today and going forward, both firmly at ARU and within the academic position that it takes as a subject:

- ARU’s Active Curriculum Framework;
- the formalization of Live Briefs as design teaching vehicles in all design modules;
- the introduction of the new compulsory ARU Ruskin Module;
- the cross-pollination between our curriculum and EBE’s research agenda on future resilient cities and communities;
- ARU’s distinctive geolocation.

*ARU’s Active Curriculum Framework*

The ARU Curriculum Framework (2017) is highly appropriate for a course in architecture, where higher-order thinking and the intuitive hands-on learning are imperative. ARU’s Curriculum Framework (2017) is founded on the concept of active inclusive learning, and the proven link between engagement with activities that require students to use higher order-thinking and effective learning. Its focus is on the student learning experience in its broadest sense, including curricular, co- and extra-curricular learning. It is based on the premise that students learn most effectively when they are actively involved in their learning, both individually and with others, and when they are given frequent opportunities to check their progress, evidence their learning and demonstrate the broader set of employability skills employers expect. In our curriculum, higher-order thinking is stimulated by the humanities-led elements,

and attunes our learners to evaluating critically their design briefs and respective design proposals by contextualizing them within the modules of Histories and Theories of architecture, and of architecture's Professionalism, Values, and Ethics module. Thus, students learn how the various architectural paradigms emerged. They also learn how to develop their morally-, ethically-, and politically aware practice while all the above coalesce in sustainable, integrated projects. This has been our agenda for over ten years and well before professional bodies started urging Schools to encompass competencies on sustainability and safety in School curricula.

Our position is that effective learning is ensured when higher-order thinking is complemented in the design studio with the craft of practising techniques of: experimentation; expression; representation; communication; integration of software and hardware; building technology; construction; making; simulation; and performance.

#### *Live Briefs as a Design Teaching Vehicle*

The pivotal role of Live Briefs (LBs) is illustrated through their establishment as compulsory elements of modules across ARU. In our curriculum all the design modules at all Levels contain LBs. These enhance co-learning opportunities by presenting students with a real-world problem, and challenging them to create novel ideas that could benefit an organisation. As LBs involve a real client (an industrial partner, a local community, a housing association, or a group that supports a natural element) and engage with a real project, they are ideal learning and teaching vehicles for exposing learners to the breadth of architecture. LBs inject innovative ideas from HE into the industry that materializes them at real scale. LBs raise student awareness of the realities associated with industry whilst developing a closer partnership with organisations, communities and a network of stakeholders enhancing learners' cross-disciplinary work skills. Learners not only learn to work in teams, communicate, negotiate, and compromise with peers, but also learn to work with stakeholders beyond the confinement of the university and their own comfort zones. LBs support the learning journey by enhancing career aspirations and employability prospects.

#### *ARU's Ruskin Modules*

Cross-disciplinary creativity is further cultivated through the Ruskin Modules, which are an exciting innovation in ARU's strategy to give our students an additional edge in graduate destinations. Ruskin Modules bring together students from different courses to tackle 'wicked' challenges. With no single answer, 'wicked' challenges enable students to explore solutions outside their disciplines and offer the opportunity to take different perspectives, develop innovative and speculative thinking, and acquire creative problem-solving skills that the jobs of the future will demand. Ruskin Modules' basis of 'wicked' challenges is a perfect fit for a profession that spans humanities and sciences, and where the innovative response to a challenge is neither right or wrong, nor is it one and only.

#### *Curricular Cross-Pollination with Research*

As we recruit staff and develop our research, we are strengthening our bond with the broader School's research agenda and network on future resilient cities; currently over 2/3 of our SEBE staff are active within the Future Cities agenda (multimillion-pound funded projects). Our staff's engagement with

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research into other art and engineering specialisations and the Global Sustainability Institute reinforces and informs cross-disciplinary teaching. This integration further brings into focus the acuteness of the contemporary environmental, ethical, geopolitical and social crises, and fosters the catalytic role of our graduates in redesigning the planet, by re-editing it and co-authoring it with and for communities. This is the firm foundation on which our MArch will be established.

#### *Geo-Location*

Most of our students are regionally based in the wider Anglian region, and we recognise that one of our core responsibilities and aims is to serve this local demographic and regional community, as this need has been addressed by the RIBA Local Branch.

Our geolocation is privileged by being, at the immediate scale, 32 mins away from the stimuli of the metropolis. The proximity to London encourages frequent day visits, field trips and workshops for Histories and Theories modules that do walking tours with specialists, live drawing and photography classes, visits to exhibitions, and end-of-year shows. At the local scale, our premises are next to the natural reserve of the River Chelmer, and at its peri-urban scale within the rich landscape of Essex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, and the East coast.

Above all, the capital and the local landscapes are together a valuable well-balanced and intellectually significant experience. Our location specifically offers our architectural curriculum a microcosm of all the design challenges and opportunities facing the next generation of architects - such as declining agricultural communities, coastal erosion, flood risk, population rise, ageing populations, suburban sprawl, de-carbonisation challenges, green infrastructure, and empowerment of communities that manage and maintain their local environments - with and beyond digital technology, under the broad umbrella of sustainability, climate emergency and safety.

These five distinct elements are integrated into each of the three years of the BA (Hons) Architecture at ARU:

Year 1 (Individual and Space: Human Scale) delivers a 'learning-by-doing' pedagogical experience in the studio that acts as a 'baptism of fire' and exposes students to the entire breadth and complexity of architecture. The Year addresses fundamental questions encompassing the arts, or the poetic – conceptual and abstract creations and their representations – integrated with the crafts, or the poetic – real-life scenarios of sustainable design, and building a 1:1 pavilion, sponsored by industry. The studios are supported by: thinking, through modules on Histories and Theories; crafts for experimenting, expressing-representing-communicating; Technology modules; and Essential Skills. The Live Brief is in collaboration with Timber Research and Development Association, and the Timber Trade Federation.

Year 2 (Individual as a Community Member and Urban Life: Community Scale) develops independent learners able to elaborate on the topics of domesticity and public buildings in a dense, urban context. Investigating and questioning the boundaries between privacy and publicity, students develop briefs and integrated projects of growing complexity from the scale of the

sustainable single household to that of sustainable collective living. The Histories and Theories module sustains these investigations by reviewing housing in relation to the dramatic urbanisation of the last century. Crafts, beyond their embedment in the studio, are further supported through the Technology modules, which integrate design, building technology and the environment. The Live Brief is in collaboration with the Housing, Regeneration and Planning Office at Haringey Council, North London.

Year 3 (Communities and Urban Life: Urban Scale) is research-led and related to design towards sustaining contemporary resilient communities and their urban life. The themes focus on the interface of architecture with important global issues such as the continued over-harvesting, pollution, and destruction of non-human habitats, in disregard for nature's complex interrelationships, and the omnipresence of networks, Big Data, and AI augmenting life in contemporary cities. Students articulate their responses to the need for architecture to act catalytically in changing attitudes and habits at a global scale – including their own attitude and ethos – towards redesigning, editing and crafting the urban environment. Design is integrated with thinking from additional modules on Project Evaluation and Development, Professionalism, Values and Ethics, and with crafts, through Technology embedded in the studio. The Live Brief in collaboration with the Royal Docks Development Group is underway.

Our aspiration is to prepare our graduates to engage morally, ethically, politically, aesthetically, sustainably and technically with both practice and with their pursuit of Part II, and ultimately to play a key role in confronting the contemporary ongoing crises and uncertainties related to the built environment. The blend and relevance of our graduates' skillsets render them attractive to contemporary practice (Employers' Advisory Group, summer 2019), with 90% of graduates in work or further study six months after graduation (Unistats, 2019 dataset). Our working relationship with the RIBA East and the local Chapter bridges academe and practice. Our inclusive recruitment policy – following Ruskin's mission to bring positive change by transforming the many – ensures a diverse cohort of mostly regional and international students with rich qualities of background, skills, ethnicity, gender and age, as well as commitment, passion and enthusiasm.

We, at ARU, are firm believers in the pedagogic challenge and the power of transforming people through a purposeful education, which is evident in our students' portfolios and our underlying ethos.

## **10 Commendations**

- 10.1 The Board commends the dedicated staff team for their commitment to a widening participation agenda, their efforts to deliver a high standard of teaching in the context of the pandemic and the support offered to students.
- 10.2 The Board commends the School on the clarity and quality of the course information provided and recognises the significant efforts in addressing the advice and action points of the exploratory visit within the span of a year. In particular, the Board commends the significant investment in physical space, equipment and staff resources in support of the School's ethos and ambitions.

- 10.3 The Board commends the School on reflecting on global issues at a local level and at a scale applicable to Part 1 level.
- 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 While the Board acknowledges the transitional structure in place and recognises the ambition of the new structure, the School should consider a consistent approach in formulating briefs across the different modules.
- 12.2 The Board would like to see more evidence in the student portfolios of engagement with the fine arts, their relevance and impact on design and how this might inform students' work through different media and techniques of representation.
- 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 School should continue to provide appropriate staffing and support in line with the planned growth of the School to ensure that the quality of the student experience is not compromised.
- 13.2 The Board encourages the School to continue to develop opportunities for peer learning and explore the potential of working with other built environment & creative arts disciplines where students are presented with a rich and diverse set of opportunities to learn from each other.
- 13.3 The Board advises the School to encourage students to explore further structural and environmental factors as design drivers in architectural design studies.
- 14.1 Part 1 BA (Hons) Architecture**  
The Board confirmed that all Part 1 graduate attributes were met by the graduates of the BA (Hons) Architecture programme.
- 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, BA (Hons) Part 1**

73

**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 examiners
- Meeting with staff