



Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA Full visiting board
to the University of Plymouth - 2022**

Date of visiting board: 28 & 29 April 2022
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 12 October 2022

1 Details of institution hosting courses

School of Art, Design and Architecture
Plymouth University
Roland Levinsky Building
Drake Circus
Plymouth
PL4 8AA

2 Courses offered for validation

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

3 Head of School

Acting Head of School of Art, Design and Architecture: Prof. Katharine Willis

Course Leaders

BA Arch (Hons) Programme Leader: Andy Humphreys
M Arch Programme Co-Leader: Prof. Robert Brown and Dr. Mathew Emmett

4 Awarding body

University of Plymouth

5 The visiting board

Professor Kate Cheyne – Chair
Luke Murray – Vice Chair
Michael Howe
Neil Emery – regional representative

In attendance:

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk – RIBA – validation manager

Observing

Alberto Villanueva, Associate Programme Director and Course Leader
Department of Architecture, Ravensbourne University

Jaime Solloso – RIBA staff

6 Procedures and criteria for the online 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.

7 Proposals of the visiting board

The Board recommends to the RIBA Education Committee continued validation/s appropriate of the following courses:

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

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)

Since its earliest days, the city of Plymouth has been outward facing. During its history it has been the city from which Cook, Darwin, Drake, the first ship to travel to Japan (the Clove), and the Mayflower all set sail. It has equally been home to Antarctic explorers Scott and Bickerton. Echoing this spirit, the University of Plymouth has long advanced its own outward orientation, being committed to social mobility and opening up greater access to higher education through its widening participation agenda; this outward orientation is also reflected in its engagement with the region over its 150-year history, and more recently being one of the 30 initial institutions to sign up to the Civic University Agreement pledging to work with local communities. Also like the city's historic explorers, the University has long been concerned about the well-being of the sea and landscape and is a world leader in the environmental and marine sciences.

The ethos of the Architecture School at Plymouth is equally framed by its outward orientation, and championing, exploration and implementation of a co-joined social-civic-ecological agency. This agency is not newly emergent, extending back beyond 20 years. It continues to frame teaching content, project briefs, and student work within the School. It is further reflected in research activity of staff, and in the types of students and staff who we attract.

Moreover, it is how we are recognised by others as reflected in comments from our external collaborators, external examiners, the architectural press, and national and international awards (e.g., RIBA MacEwan Award 2020, the Creative Conscience Awards 2018-2021; "you celebrate working with the everyday with real issues and make it extraordinary"). This co-joined social-civic-ecological agency remains central to our pedagogy and is a primary focus of Design Studio work in both the BA Arch (Part 1) and M Arch (Part 2) Programmes and is underpinned in parallel by co-joined Technology modules; further exploration of these issues is encouraged in Critical Context coursework, stimulated by lectures which examine relevant theoretical discourse and professional practices. Civic

engagement is present through all years of the School and at a range of scales from small-scale co-designed, built projects on behalf of external partners in the BA Arch, to urban scale propositions in the context of live urban regeneration projects with external partners and in dialogue with University partners.

Increasingly central to this work is a focus on climate change responsiveness, introduced with vigour in 2017, particularly around themes of global sea level rise and recycling. This focus has fostered links with external collaborators on live projects across the School, for example with Plymouth City Council on the Future Parks Accelerator Project. It has also generated further outcomes, such as an invited presentation by selected M Arch students and a studio tutor at a Government of Macau international conference on coastal development.

Both underpinning and enabled by this ethos is the development of independent learners able to identify, pursue and follow through on student-led critical inquiries. It is a hallmark of teaching across the School, and the absence of a distinct house style has long been commended by external examiners, and by M Arch students who come to us from other universities. This commitment to enabling, rather than enculturation, is central to our pedagogy. “The students greatly value the opportunity to find their own voice and point of entry into the world of architecture.”

Intrinsic to fostering these student-led critical inquiries is allowing for a critically balanced professional and discursive approach that aims to “(re)consider architecture and architectural praxis. The mode by which this is accomplished is as distinctive as it is innovative.”⁴ This student-centred pedagogy evidences Disraeli’s proposition that “the greatest gift you can give to another is not just to share with them your own riches, but to help them to reveal their own”. This is further evoked in our use of the validation criteria. We acknowledge the RIBA advocates not directly using the validation criteria; at the same time, we value that they have a purposeful ambiguity. In referencing the validation criteria in our learning outcomes, we are embracing their ambiguity and aim to foster a creative interpretation by our students in their response to the criteria and understanding of how the criteria apply both to their architectural praxis and their daily learning practice.

Within this shared pedagogy there are a number of distinctions between the BA Arch and M Arch programmes. At an overarching level within the BA Arch, students’ development and resultant work aims at clarity of intention, in

¹ Though not used by the University within its own lexicon, the term School has been utilised here to describe the BA Architecture (Part 1) and MArch (Part 2) Programs owing to its common currency outside the University and to align with the RIBA’s lexicon.

² BA Arch External Examiner Dr. Rosie Parnell.

³ M Arch External Examiner Dr. Jonathan Charley.

⁴ M Arch External Examiner Dr. Nathaniel Coleman.

⁵ Acknowledgement is due here to Peter Salter.

which work has coherence, comprehensiveness and convergence; the latter reflects an aim of students bringing together both development of pertinent knowledge and skills relevant to the design studio and non-studio elements of the curriculum. This includes not only an expressive communication, but also an integration of technology, a grounding in history and theory, and understanding of the professional context in which their work would be generated / situated. In the M Arch, students’ development and resultant work aims at orientation; this work should point students towards future practice. Integral to this is that the work should advance some form of agency beyond the work itself, and that it is pursued as part of a sustained critical (i.e., research-led) inquiry.

Other distinctions between the BA Arch and M Arch are reflected in propositions of increasing scale and complexity as they move from BA Arch Year 1 (small

dwelling structures) through BA Arch Year 2 + 3 (buildings within a neighbourhood context) to the M Arch (buildings within a wider urban strategy). Similar gradation is present between the co-joined spring semester BA Arch Year 2 + 3 and M Arch Year 1 + 2; the lower years in each instance focus more on knowledge and skill acquisition, while the latter year in each emphasises the application of that knowledge and skills. Civic engagement is present throughout all years, though there is equally gradation in the scale of engagement; i.e., from direct engagement with a specific client in BA Arch Year 1 (e.g., a local nursery or primary school), to a client and a number of other stakeholders as well as input from another University partner in BA Arch Year 2 + 3, to a range of clients and broad range of other stakeholders and University partners in the MArch. Team working also transitions from assigned groups in the BA Arch (to afford a range of skills and knowledge within a team) to students having a choice of working in a team of their own choosing in the M Arch. The nature of Design Studio practices represents another shift, with a focus on the articulation of a design proposition (with development of the design process) in the BA Arch to a focus on the identification and pursuit of a research informed critical inquiry (i.e., a design praxis) recorded within a critically reflective document in the M Arch. This is reflected in project presentations that shift from an emphasis on representation of the proposition in the BA Arch to an emphasis on the critical understanding and representation of a working praxis in the M Arch (note that converse is also present in each other).

The course provides skills relevant to modern professional practice beyond the criteria with a focus on five key themes. First, learning how to learn is advanced through students working with open-ended projects and coursework in all modules, encouraging students to take ownership of their work through identifying the focus of, and critically reflecting upon, their study. This is extended in the M Arch Program where students take ownership over the working program and practices of their study, as well as the running of events within the Design Studio.

Responding to change is crucial for future professionals, and students are afforded opportunity to gain experience of engaging with social and ecological change; the open-ended nature of projects and coursework exposes students to a fluid context in which work is set and dynamic circumstances that defy simplistic answers.

Engagement with discursive practices enables students to explore with and work a range of analytical methodologies, conceptualisation (through for example, dialogue with various stakeholders, referencing the fine arts, authoring theoretically grounded narratives, and/or acts of making), development practices and languages of representation. This is advanced in both studio and non-studio modules – e.g., the use of film in Design Studio and Critical Context modules, and a range of 3D making practices in the Design Studio and Technology, or the crafting of narratives in Design Studio and Professional Studies. Collaborative working both with colleagues (including from architecture and other disciplines) and external collaborators is enabled through live-project work, particularly in the Design Studio, but also in some non-studio modules. The team working of students is celebrated through an award that historically has been given by BDP to the best teamwork in the BA Arch Year 2 or 3 and MArch Year 1 or 2 cohort. Leadership is enabled through the collaborative working noted above, including in inviting students to take on leadership positions within the Design Studio; this includes for example students taking on responsibility for communal studio activities in the BA Arch

Year 1 community-based project design and construction (e.g., construction manager) to BA Year 2 / 3 within collaborative live build projects in Technology to MArch Year 2 acting as thematic inquiry leaders during the initial stages of projects.

The sense of ownership over their own praxis and learning we aim to enable is paralleled by the co-joined social civic-ecological agency students pursue in their work. We identify and celebrate this agenda, but it is really the students who enact it in their own outward orientation toward the world and their future praxis within it.

10 Commendations

- 10.1 The Board commends the school /subject for its history of impactful live projects. This includes the depth of staff commitment to long-term working relationships with the City and its communities.
- 10.2 The Board commends the studio culture and community across all years and between students and academics. Mutual respect and trust have led to a collaborative architectural environment resulting in a critically engaged, well-rounded and empathetic student body.
- 10.3 The Board commends the exemplary and extensive nature of collaborative work across all years and modules that support students to become mature future professionals.

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 Board encourages the celebration and dissemination of school/subject's ongoing live projects. This work should form the basis of future pedagogic research, with the growing body of case material forming a basis of study.
- 12.2 In order to ensure students across all years are prepared for their professional responsibilities regarding RIBA 2030 climate challenge, the school/subject must commit to fostering innovation and avoiding generic solutions.

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 encourages the school/subject to ensure that student design portfolios, across all levels, fully capture creative exploration and experimentation to demonstrate clear hierarchies between key stages of design projects and the final synthesis.
- 13.2 With the imminent expansion of criteria from the professional body, the Board urges the university to closely support the architecture team's live projects that are part of Plymouth's unique offer. Human and material allocations need to be resourced effectively to become sustainable.
- 13.3 The Board commends the strength of the existing staff community but urges the University to better support staff welfare to ensure a resilient and sustainable workforce.
- 13.4 The Board suggests that the school no longer use PSRB criteria as module learning outcomes, whilst retaining a comprehensive mapping document. Reducing the number of outcomes associated with each module allows for better clarity and student understanding.
- 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.
- 14.2 Part 2**
The Board confirmed that all Part 2 graduate attributes 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.
- 16 Other information**
- 16.1 Student numbers (from the School)**
BA Arch (Part 1): 226
M Arch (Part 2): 39
- 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.**

18 Notes of meetings

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