RIBA

Royal Institute of British Architects

Report of the RIBA Full visiting board to Robert Gordon University - 2023

Date of visiting board: 22-23 June 2023
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 23 October 2023

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1   **Details of institution hosting courses**
    The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture & Built Environment
    Robert Gordon University
    The Sir Ian Wood Building
    Riverside East
    Garthdee Road
    ABERDEEN AB10 7GJ

2   **Courses offered for validation**
    Part 1 BSc (Hons) in Architecture
    Part 2 MArch of Architecture

3   **Head of School**

    Professor Peter Exley – Dean of School
    David Wilson – Associate Dean (Academic Development and Student Experience)
    Bassam Bjeirmi – Associate Dean (Economic, Social and Cultural Development)
    Course Leader Part 1 – Gillian Wishart
    Course Leader Part 2 – David Vila Domini

4   **Awarding body**
    Robert Gordon University

5   **The visiting board**
    Andrew Wilson   Academic / Chair
    Albena Atanassova   Practitioner
    Ian Shepherd   Academic
    Simon Gratton   Practitioner
    Jaime Solloso   RIBA – Validation manager

6   **Procedures and Themes and Values for Architectural Education**
    The visiting board was carried out under the RIBA Procedures for Validation and Themes and Values for UK and international courses in architecture (published September 2021, and effective from September 2022); this document is available at www.architecture.com.

7   **Proposals of the visiting board**
    On the 23 October 2023, the RIBA Education Committee confirmed that the following course and qualifications are unconditionally revalidated:

    Part 1 BSc (Hons) in Architecture
    Part 2 MArch of Architecture

    The next visit to the Robert Gordon University will take place in 2028.

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)

Our multidisciplinary school is a product of its geographic context at the epicentre of the UK transition from fossil fuels towards renewable energy. Concurrently we are connected to the landscapes of the Grampian mountains, the unique culture of the North Sea coast and to the island communities to the north and west. The study of Architecture in Aberdeen exploits this context and the conditions this unique situation presents; we are interested in the city and shire, communities and the economies that fuel them, the diverse landscapes which those communities inhabit, and the rich cultures that grow out of this.

Community and context are central to the focus of the school. We prioritize equipping our students with theoretical, ethical, and technical knowledge, and the skills required to make positive contributions to the profession and to society. The communities we work with are built on a close connection with nature. This demands that our students address emerging issues around climate literacy and biodiversity.

The focus of the course aligns with the university strategy and has undergone substantial enhancement to address the imperatives of the climate emergency, health and life safety obligations, and the integration of digitisation. The course encourages our students to adopt a mixed approach to their studies, combining traditional drawing and modelling with digital modelling, CAD, BIM, and simulation. We aim to progressively integrate energy and carbon modelling alongside these tools from early in the programme. The school has four PassivHaus accredited designers on staff and supports continued staff development to reinforce teaching of climate, environment, carbon, retrofit, and digitisation.

As one of eleven schools within the family of Robert Gordon University, our school and course have enjoyed collaborations with other schools and courses; for instance, lecturers from the law school participate in our professional practice modules, and cohorts from occupational therapy have joined architecture students to explore accessibility. Although some activities have been paused since the pandemic, we anticipate that the renewed university commitment to interdisciplinary teaching will bring fresh opportunities.

Our own learning community is central to the school. We are a compact and friendly school which encourages good communication. We operate an open-door policy where staff from all courses are accessible to students. Relationships formed in year 1 continue to year 6 and beyond. We count many graduates of the school amongst our full time and visiting staff. The result is a strong staff / student community. Our student society, 57.10, brings an enviable list of national and international speakers to our School, many of which are working within the same peripheral communities which interest us. The society serves as the catalyst for social events throughout the year, bringing together students and staff from across the school.

Cross-school connections extend into teaching and learning, Studio teaching regularly involves staff from our Architectural Technology course, while lecturers specialising in Quantity surveying engage with stage 6 students to discuss cost and value. Our dissertation students have the opportunity to be supervised by lecturers from different disciplines. Collaborative projects between different courses have been successful, exemplified by the recent partnership between stage 3 Architecture and Architectural Technology students.

Learning takes place within a modern, purpose-built facility equipped with studios, classrooms, offices, IT labs, and workshops. Our studios are light-filled, open-plan facilities overlooking the river Dee. Here, local, and international students are encouraged to collaborate, learn together, and receive support from studio tutors. Stages 1, 2 & 3 have their own dedicated space within the largest studio.

A further studio is shared by stages 5 & 6. Every student has their own desk, available to them throughout the academic session.

The course is structured as an integrated, undergraduate Masters; students enrol on the MArch programme from the start. There are two graduating points: students receive a BSc and exemption from RIBA/ARB Part1 after completing stage 3, while MArch and exemption from Part2 are gained on completion of stage 6. Students in stage 4 is encouraged to undertake a period of professional experience, which the school recognises as supportive of their professional and personal development.

Working within a wider community requires responsibility. We place a strong emphasis on the professional, legal, and ethical responsibilities of an architect, with modules dedicated to professional practice and the study of codes and standards of conduct. By instilling the values of professional integrity, honesty, and competence, we ensure our students understand the significance of these attributes in their future careers. At a personal level, the course provides a framework for students to take responsibility for their own personal professional development. Starting in stage 1. Students develop skills and awareness of contemporary practice to shape their own professional identity and sense of agency in their career development. Links with practice permeate the course and include mentoring from professionals, visits to architecture practices, and a rich contribution from practitioners into teaching. Through this, our graduates have secured positions in leading practices in the UK and internationally, as well as in the local area.

Part 1 focuses on foundational knowledge and the development of skills through a structured set of modules covering four key threads: Design, Technology, Theory, and Practice. Design skills contribute 50% of the course credits and are developed through a series of studios rooted in our context. Briefs for stages 1 to 3 ask students to consider sites within the city and shire and often allow collaboration with community groups on a local and regional level. The companion threads provide context and a framework to support design studio work. We are interested in developing the practice of architecture through the integration of technology with the art of building.

The MArch supports greater independent enquiry into culture, context and community and is organised around thematic Design Studio Units exploring varied architectural problems. Each is led by prominent practitioners and supported by staff with diverse expertise. Each unit is anchored in locations representative of urban and rural

environments. Our unique hinterland serves as a laboratory for architectural speculation within a framework of situated practice and local and peripheral communities.

With the appointment of our new Dean of school and an affirmation of a strong ethical direction to address the existential threat to our planet and society presented by the climate emergency, the course is strongly positioned creatively, critically, and geographically to address the exigencies of climate change.

10 Commendations

10.1 The Board commends the School for the commitment of the staff to the student experience and the creation of a supportive learning environment. Students work actively across year groups and create a strong studio culture.

10.2 The Board commends the exemplary provision of physical resources, including high quality and accessible studio spaces, and model making workshops, which enable a strong culture of modelmaking to flourish across all courses.

10.3 The Board commends the School for establishing a positive and committed ethos across the student body in response to climate change and sustainability in architectural education.

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 requires the School to look at improving creativity and deeper exploration of spatial quality within Part 1.

12.2 The Board requires the School to extend and deepen the fire and life safety and health and safety modules within the course and to improve their relevance and integration in the design projects, particularly at Part 2 for all levels of attainment.

12.3 The Board requires the School to review the balance of content between technology and spatial design at Stage 3. At present there is a high degree of overlap and repetition of technical design in Stage 3 portfolios, at the expense of creative spatial design.

12.4 The Board acknowledges the importance placed on technical design in the Part 1 and in this context considers that technical skill in construction detailing can be improved in Stage 3 design projects.

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 to offer a more ambitious portrayal of what it has to offer and to rewrite the Academic Position Statement to look at promoting the School in a more confident way.

13.2 The Board encourages the School to explore a greater breadth of reference across its course, to help reinforce/enforce its localism and distinctiveness.

13.3 The Board advises the School to allow students wider opportunities to explore a range of typologies, scales and contexts within the new Part 2 projects beginning in 2023.

13.4 The Board advises the school to provide further instruction and support to students in presentation and communication skills for the final stage 3 projects. This is to help them to produce a more comprehensive body of architectural information and achieve a higher quality of presentation quality.

13.5 The Board encourages the School to be more ambitious with the MArch dissertation subject matter in terms of critical thinking and explore the potential to explore RIBA themes and values in this work. This would extend to include alternative and more sophisticated means of presentation.

13.6 The Board advises the School to better distinguish and advance the students demonstration of professional practice at Part 2 level and to again further align this to the RIBA themes and values and opportunities for addressing alternative or progressive models of practice.

13.7 The Board recognises the efforts made by the School during recent challenging years to support students into and through stage 4 and advise the School to extend this wherever possible to increase the benefit of a year in practice to the students and the School. This point is pertinent given the integrated 6-year offer made to students.

13.8 The Board advises the School to review their marking of all associated modules in order to promote and achieve the improvements recommended in the action and advise points noted above.

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.

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

Graduate Attributes for Part 2

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

15   Review of work against Themes and Values

It should be noted that where the visiting board considered the Themes and Values to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or a T&V were clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested a T&V was particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

Themes and Values for Part 1
The Board confirmed that all of the Themes and Values were met by graduates of the Part 1 BSc (Hons) in Architecture.

Themes and Values for Part 2
The Board confirmed that all of the Themes and Values were met by graduates of the Part 2 MArch of Architecture.

16   Other information

16.1   Student numbers (from the School)

BSc (Hons) in Architecture **(Part 1):** 129
MArch of Architecture **(Part 2):** 81

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