

**Report of the RIBA visiting board
to the University of Nottingham Ningbo
China (UNNC)**

Date of visiting board: 21 & 22 October 2024
Confirmed by the RIBA: 8 January 2025

The Board expresses its thanks to the staff and students for the exemplary presentation of work.

1 Details of institution hosting course/s

University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC)
Science and Engineering Building
Department of Architecture and Built Environment
Faculty of Engineering
199 Taikang East Road
Ningbo 315100
Zhejiang, China

2 Head of Department

Wu Deng

3 Courses offered for validation

BEng in Architecture, Part 1

4 Course Director

Gaime Botti

5 Awarding body

University of Nottingham

6 The visiting board

David Howarth (Chair)
Alida Bata (Vice Chair)
John Ashton
Dr. Ruffina Thilakaratne (Regional representative)

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk – validation manager – in attendance

7 Procedures and criteria for the visit

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.

8 Proposals of the visiting board

On 8 January 2025 the RIBA confirmed continued validation of the following course:

BEng in Architecture, Part 1

The next full visiting board will take place in 2029.

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
- 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 (written by the School)**

At the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, the Department of Architecture and Built Environment (ABE) promotes a student-centred pedagogy that puts the learners' experience at the core of its activities. The Architecture programme benefits from interaction with ABE's undergraduate Architectural Environment Engineering (AEE) programme and the postgraduate MSc in Urbanism and Sustainable Environments, MRes, and PhD programmes. A rich offer of both curricular and extracurricular activities, including field trips, workshops, ABE Talks, career events, and student-led activities, complements the standard teaching delivery.

Research-informed teaching grounded in the local context

The identity of our programme is shaped by a pedagogy that reflects the diverse research activity of our staff, within a framework that mirrors the UK campus and thereby reflects the Themes *and Values* of RIBA. Our programme integrates different disciplines and knowledge, with three modules of Integrated Design in Architecture connected to the design studios through content and assessment, and input from colleagues teaching in the AEE and MSc programmes. Our research and teaching are rooted in the consciousness of the contemporary challenges we all face in front of the climate and biodiversity emergencies, and therefore of the role that educators and future architects should play. The solid research foundation on which our pedagogy is grounded, with staff leading innovative and internationally recognized research on a large array of topics, informs the proposed design themes, sites, and methodologies.

These approaches are visible in the outcomes of our Vertical Design Studio, in which students from Years 3 and 4 are separated into three distinct units. These units are dynamic containers of ideas and approaches that constantly evolve. During the past few years, Unit 1 (Mangi-Palmioli) inspired students to investigate the intricate dependencies between the built and ecological dimensions and develop research informed design strategies to shape resilient environments. A trans-scalar methodology recognises the seamless integration of ecology and adaptive reprogramming, bolstering conservation towards a carbon-neutral scenario. It encourages students to map and assess the landscape structuring elements (territorial scale), envisions design as a transformative force by emphasising the skilful interweaving of spatial adaptive reprogramming to restrain new construction and de-mineralise urban soils (urban scale), and promotes urban mining practices to creatively maximise reuse while integrating low-embodied carbon materials and sustainable technologies (building scale). Unit 2 (Xie) has continuously selected project sites in the region and explored topics related to Chinese history and traditional architecture/urbanism. Several projects were supported by local governments and benefitted from the contribution of local scholars and architects. In an idealistic way, the design briefs explore themes

addressing contemporary issues in urban China, such as water-sensitive design, gated communities, super blocks, heritage-led urban regeneration, and urban-rural fringe development. Unit 3 (Loo) has focussed on creative design from the perspective of the making of urban identity, memory, and heritage and their relationship with public space. As a critical response to the current urban landscape celebrating speed and efficiency, Unit 3 invites students to navigate contemporary contradictions –modern/traditional, fast/slow, global/local– to adopt sustainability as design thinking and explore the adaptive reuse and appropriation of existing spaces and buildings. Students are encouraged to see the city as a complex reality for generating a hybridised design to make joyful and active public places by enhancing and repairing sites. Projects consider the importance of reuse and repair for their immaterial values and to treasure the material resources embodied in their construction. The unit fosters critical and creative thinking through visions that intersect design theories, architects’ ideas, and urban memory based on concepts like “ruins” (Isozaki), “semi-city” (Schemata Architects), or “slow architecture”.

Community engagement

Our Vertical Design Studio’s activities are guided by a comprehensive vision that emphasises the interconnectedness of pedagogy, research, and practice within the academic domain and the broader community. This research-teaching bond is strengthened by a series of laboratories and events led by ABE staff with the active participation of over 110 undergraduate students through research placements. The activities of Unit 1 connect to the Urban Innovation Lab’s (Palmioli) ongoing research on the interdependencies of ecological transitions and built environments in the Yangtze River Delta. This led to the exhibition *Horizontal Metropolis Yangtze River Delta: Entangling Capitals* and to a consultancy project commissioned by the Nansongyan Local Government to revitalise its communal spaces (Palmioli-Mangi).

Unit 2 students developed their proposals for urban sites of historical value and defined their proposal on built heritage with connections to the Digital Humanities Lab (Xie), a cross-faculty/department cluster focussed on the history of Ningbo City, and the Photogrammetry & BIM Lab. The former covers Ningbo’s local history and aims to digitally reconstruct historical Ningbo, creating a resourceful, authoritative, and accessible platform. The latter is an interdisciplinary lab encompassing architecture, civil engineering, and geographical sciences, equipped with advanced workstations and software for the 3D scanning and modelling of heritage sites to explore digital means of cultural heritage preservation. Unit 3 has worked on themes related to the Ningbo Urban Memory Lab (Loo), a research-teaching platform proposing a hybrid pedagogy integrating the role of multiple agencies into architectural thinking and education. NUML explores how architecture is co-produced by multiple agents focussing on the investigation of various spatial agencies producing architectural memories and identity, and publicly disseminating its outputs. Since 2021, NUML carried out 4 exhibitions, 12 city walks, 10 workshops, and 2 documentaries.

Future careers and collaboration with industry

As consistently recognised by the external examiners, our graduates leave the University equipped with highly marketable skills. They have benefitted from the freedom to develop their individual design choices within an

environment that fosters creativity in a rigorous framework. Able to effectively communicate their ideas with high-quality visualisations, our graduates are trained to apply their research and analytical skills to investigate and solve real-world problems through research informed, context-specific solutions. Despite the challenging conditions of the current economic deceleration, our graduates remain competitive in a tight job market thanks to their preparation and our initiatives. To support students' careers, we mentor them and enhance their professional skills, and we continuously engage with the industry. As a result, while the overall employment indicator (which considers both postgraduate studies and work) has fluctuated between 94% and 89% (2021 to 2023), our students have secured jobs in top design firms like Broadway Malyan or Chapman Taylor –often starting as interns supported by ABE's network– and many have continued their studies in prestigious universities (UCL, University of Cambridge, Politecnico di Milano, University of Pennsylvania).

Our collaboration with practice represents an additional strength. Both junior and established architects from the region working across different types of firms are involved in our programme. Although they primarily contribute to studio teaching as part-time tutors and reviewers, they also collaborate in taught modules. Recently, ABE also appointed its first honorary professor, Prof. Paola Viganò (EPFL-IUAV and the Milan and Bruxelles-based firm Studio).

Welfare, wellbeing, and professional development

UNNC supports the wellbeing and development of its staff and students in a variety of ways. All staff receive training from the Centre for English Learning Education to achieve at least the title of Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, while Continuous Professional Development is recognised in workload planning. The University acknowledges physical and mental health challenges for staff and students and provides professional support, while students receive individualised pastoral care from staff. The UNNC community also enjoys the pleasant environment of the campus and its Sports Centre.

As a concrete implementation of UNNC Equity and Diversity strategy, ABE promotes a respectful and inclusive environment for all its stakeholders, while boasting one of the most international departments and programmes at UNNC. By acknowledging the financial burden that architectural education entails, we financially support students for a series of fundamental activities. Travel and accommodation costs for the Qualifying Year week-long field trip and all project site visits are fully covered. Additional short trips are partly or fully covered; students selected for optional field trips (Chengdu-Chongqing 2022; Hong Kong 2024; Tokyo, June 2025) have part of the costs covered. Most of our workshops (XJTLU-UNNC Suzhou, 2024; Deakin University, Australia, November 2024) do not require participation fees and students receive some financial support. A small sum is also provided to cover expenses for model making in our digital fabrication facilities, where students receive safety training and specialised support from technicians. In addition, most students' internships are remunerated in line with university policies.

11 Commendations

The Board commends the following:

- 11.1 The Board commends the School's positive and active engagement in the comprehensive and robust external examination process. This has clearly contributed to the continuous enhancement of the programme.
- 11.2 The Board commends the collegiate and ambitious staff team. In particular, the Board recognises their support of students and graduates which fosters a positive student experience and builds students' confidence.
- 12 Conditions**
There are no conditions.
- 13 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.
- 13.1 The School should explore more explicit engagement with the rich local context and project sites, and ensure that this is applied to and documented in design work.
- 13.2 Students should be encouraged to better evidence design through making, material experimentation and prototyping at all scales.
- 14. 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.
- 14.1 As part of the continuous development of the programme, pertinent challenges could be addressed directly and explicitly, including climate transition, AI, and the changing role of the architect.
- 14.2 In the vertical studios, staff are encouraged to review the scale and outputs of the project briefs to allow space for material research, design experimentation and critical thinking.
- 14.3 The Board encourages the School to maintain its international outlook when engaging new external examiners.
- 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.
- The Board confirmed that all Part 1 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the BEng in Architecture, Part 1
- 16 Review of work against themes and values**
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.

The Board confirmed that all RIBA themes and values were met by graduates of the BEng in Architecture, Part 1

17 Other information

17.1 Student numbers

Part 1 - 104

17.2 Documentation provided

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

18 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