

RIBA 

Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA Full visiting board
to Royal College of Art London**

Date of visiting board: 6-7 March 2025

Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 7 May 2025

1. Details of Institution hosting courses

Royal College of Arts London
Darwin and Stevens Buildings
Kensington Gore
London
SW7 2EU

<https://www.rca.ac.uk>

2. Courses offered for validation

MA Architecture (Part 2)

3. Head of School & Course Leads

Head of Programme	Beth Hughes
Associate Dean	Sandra Denicke
Dean School of Architecture	Adrian Lahoud

4. Awarding body

Royal College of Art London

5. The visiting board

Harbinder Birdi (Chair)	Practitioner
Dr. Athena Moussaka (Vice Chair)	Academic
Peter Williams	Practitioner
Dr. Rob Grover	Academic
Tracy Flanagan	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 7 May 2025, the RIBA confirmed continued validation of the following course/s:

MA Architecture (Part 2)

The next visit to the Royal College of Arts London will take place in 2030.

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 of the annual statistical return issued by the RIBA Education Department

9. Academic position statement (written by the school)

The RCA encourages an ambitious re-imagining of architectural practice through design education. As the leading postgraduate art and design university in the world, the RCA is an exceptional home for architectural studies, fostering a space for experimentation among a diverse and inclusive student cohort. The environment of an art college encourages interdisciplinary freedom, exploration, and an open, collaborative culture among students and staff. Students benefit from the small size of the School of Architecture and the RCA overall, which creates an intimate and attentive environment for learning.

Architecture as a discipline and practice is increasingly called on to respond to social and climate crises, as well as the associated environmental and social degradation. In this context, there is an urgent need for architecture schools to engage with intergenerational challenges and to respond to the global entanglements architecture is implicated in. The RCA encourages students to take on these contemporary challenges through dedicated architectural design studios. Each studio adopts a distinct research-focus, encouraging students to rigorously develop, test, and build new knowledge through propositional and speculative forms of architectural practice.

Research topics and methods are tailored to the questions we as a community have identified as the ethical challenges of our time and to the ways of working that we believe will find traction in these contexts. Students and staff are deeply attuned to material, place, community, and culture. There is a considered deliberation on where, when, and how to act, for whom, in everything we do. We are not preoccupied with the successful repetition or perfection of existing practice, rather we critically engage industry in order to identify alternatives and to shift the trajectory of the discipline.

Alongside the critical freedom of studio teaching is a series of modules that equip students with skills and knowledge to work confidently and expertly through design. Teaching methodologies encourage hands-on and engaged learning through history and theory, scholarly research and writing, digital tools, material experiments, design prototypes, and more. The core teaching provides students with robust professional and technical knowledge that encourages experimentation and innovation.

Uniquely at the RCA, students have access not only to the School of Architecture, but also the entirety of the College, with interdisciplinary units of study across programmes and schools. Students are encouraged to use the full array of specialist technical facilities and workshops available at the College, whether for fashion and textiles, physical computing, film, VR and gaming, future materials, metal and glass, or print and ceramics. The varied modalities of technical, critical,

and artistic knowledge provide a rich student experience that is fused with, and animated by, creative energy and new aesthetic languages. Design is understood as a site for radical ideation and exploration in speculative and physical worlds.

Rigorous design research is supported by a vertical structure in the design studios, fostering collaboration and peer-to-peer learning between first- and second-year students. The first year is structured to ensure students acquire core knowledge, laying the foundation for a more independent second year. Students are encouraged to switch studios each year, creating a diverse learning experience further enhanced by the pass/fail degree structure, which incentivises experimentation.

Each studio is taught by architects, but we also consciously recruit artists, anthropologists, engineers, curators, set/film designers, and art directors as instructors. This broad approach mirrors the cooperative nature of industry practice and provides students with an expanded perspective on the value of an architectural education and the diverse career paths it can lead to. Students are supported to identify their own practice and use the two years of the master's degree to test the possibilities, language, and focus of their work, projecting beyond the horizon of their studies. Students go on to work in and occupy a variety of spaces and positions, stretching and extending their architectural education out into the world. Entrepreneurship, business acumen, and invention are further supported through research labs and centres and the Innovation RCA incubator. There is a long history of students forming collectives, activist practices, partnerships, and collaborations; the school nurtures a strong sense of independence and ambition in the cohort.

The RCA is committed to providing a discrimination-free environment where everyone is treated with respect and dignity. We actively reflect and work on these ideals in the School of Architecture, regularly taking stock and exploring what it means to be 'leading' in the context of inclusion, diversity, access, sustainability, and care, and how we can be ambitious in these spaces. This demands a recognition of how the Institution sits within its environment and what it means to build community within the neighbourhood. The RCA offers outreach programmes, scholarships, hardship funds, and ongoing curriculum reviews to promote diversity and inclusion. Several of the design studios in the School of Architecture are explicitly dedicated to questions of material and resource extraction, toxicity, food systems, climate emergency, sustainability, and decoloniality.

Exhibitions, live projects, field trips, engagement with practice, and real-world collaboration with external partners expand the scope of the architectural education and student experience. Schoolwide lecture series and seminars respond to the key research themes of the school. In addition, the growing PhD cohort, including alumni from the masters programmes, contributes to various events and is essential to a rich school research culture. Research in the school is practice-led and interdisciplinary, with a series of strategic projects that address the climate emergency, aim to prevent biodiversity collapse, and promote anti-racism, equity, and diversity. The small specialist nature of the RCA makes it a truly

unique place. We offer a secure space for students to test new and creative approaches with the critical support necessary to offer sensitive and considered work back out to the world. We aim to cultivate a community of architects who are attentive to people, place, and ethical questions, and who share our vision and ambition to move positively towards the future.

10. Condition

No conditions given.

11. Commendations

The Board made the following commendations:

- 11.1 The Interdisciplinary nature of the programme which has a unique offering within the UK architectural education
- 11.2 The board commends the commitment of staff and the quality of the facilities.
- 11.3 The board commends the school's diversity and creative outputs of studios and within the Architecture Design Studio (ADS) units offered to the students.

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. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

- 12.1 Improve the clarity of the unit briefs by providing a greater overview of the unit which will ensure greater accessibility for all students. This should include clear guidelines, expectations, and resources to facilitate their understanding and engagement.
- 12.2 Formalise the assessment process for documenting formative and summative feedback to enhance transparency.
- 12.3 To better integrate structural, environmental and life safety investigation evidenced through the technical module and the design studio.

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 To ensure resilience in the staff cohort for any future changes that are anticipated for the architectural profession and higher education.
- 13.2 To develop business and entrepreneurial skills to support the creative spirit of the students in finding their future career path.

13.3 The Across RCA unit is adequately resourced and delivered by the cohort staff during its restructure to align to all the programmes in the college which will benefit the architecture students.

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 2

The Board confirmed that all of the Part 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates of MA Architecture (Part 2)

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 2

The Board confirmed that all of the Themes and Values were met by graduates of the MA Architecture (Part 2)

16. Other Information

16.1 Student numbers (from the school) 2024/2025

Year 1 = 92
Year 2 = 85

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 next full visiting board.

- Budget Holder
- Course Leaders
- Students
- Senior Management Team
- External Examiners
- Staff Members