



**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Report of the RIBA Initial Visiting Board  
to the University of Staffordshire**

**Date of visiting board: 3 – 4 July 2025**  
**Confirmed by RIBA: 28 August 2025**

- 1 Details of institution hosting course**  
Department of Creative Industries  
School of Digital, Technology, Innovation and Business  
University of Staffordshire  
College Road  
Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 2DE, UK
- 2 Head(s) of Department**  
Rachel Heeley - *HoD Creative Industries*  
Dr Islam Abohela - *Course Leader*  
Dr James Robertson - *Senior Lecturer*
- 3 Courses offered for validation**  
BArch (Hons) Architecture
- 4 Awarding body**  
The University of Staffordshire
- 5 The visiting board**  
Frazer Bufton – *Chair & Academic*  
Samantha Hardingham – *Academic*  
Athena Moustaka – *Academic*  
Jon Phipps – *Practitioner*  
Joshua Brooks – *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](http://www.architecture.com).
- 7 Proposals of the visiting board**  
On 28 August 2025, the RIBA confirmed initial validation of the following course(s):  
  
**Part 1 - BArch (Hons) Architecture**  
  
The next RIBA visiting board will take place in 2030.
- 8 Standard requirements for validation**  
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

## 9 Academic position statement (written by the School)

### ***A Civic and Collaborative Approach***

*As one of the most deprived areas in the UK (25th most income deprived of 316 local authorities in England, according to the Office for National Statistics) and, having historically suffered from underinvestment and devaluing of its distinct cultural and architectural identity on a practical level, our position is to challenge the persisting negatives associated with Stoke-on-Trent through actively developing relationships with local stakeholders, built environment professionals and, of course, the next generation of such professionals who are both curious and caring of this unique place.*

*Through our institution's approach as a civic university, our continuing ambition is to be a conduit for our local and regional community, providing and engaging in dialogue and opportunities related to architecture and the built environment. As beneficiaries of the university's Civic and Community Impact Award, that aspiration was recognised through our work with St. Modwen Homes, North Staffordshire Society of Architects, Burslem Regeneration Trust and Stoke-on-Trent City Council for the proposed reinstatement of a war memorial at the former Royal Doulton Factory site, through the vehicle of a vertical live studio.*

*Our offer is a curriculum underpinned by these concerns and approaches and is focused on professional skills that we hope will empower students to engage with their community, to take full advantage of Stoke-on-Trent as a location of significant architectural possibilities and to elicit gradual and meaningful change within the city and its hinterland.*

### ***Teaching and Learning***

*With the course being specifically designed to have an impact on the locale, the city, and the wider region, our aspiration is to attract students who have a particular interest in regeneration, community engagement, and sustainability. The course responds to its locale and to the current actioning of the Levelling Up agenda in Stoke-on-Trent with a special emphasis on retrofitting and repurposing of buildings, as well as intervening with new development to 'stitch' together a fragmented urban fabric. As such, we feel that this affords us both a serious responsibility and a special opportunity to develop a holistic approach to professional competencies through a variety of programmatic contexts, integrating both the technology, and history and theory-based modules with the design-based modules over the three years of the programme. Taking into consideration specific characteristics associated with the city such as post-industrial landscapes, sustainable re-use, and polycentricity, we envisage a multi-dimensional approach in terms of subject teaching, with design, history, technology and sustainability often being different but interconnected facets or questions connected to the same urban location.*

*Many of our studio briefs feature live projects and present opportunities for students to engage with stakeholders from the public and private sectors, to explore regeneration strategies in the city and region.*

*We have, for example, worked with national and local cultural, educational and community interest groups, and organisations, such as the Cedric Price Network, British Ceramics Biennial (BCB), Portland Inn Project, Burslem Port Trust, Urban Wilderness CIC, and Brilliant Bamboo; collaborations that have encouraged students to consider design ethics, user experience, and to explore strategies for community-led design. These projects are supported through an interdisciplinary environment where staff, students, and technicians from other areas of the university provide our students with a multidisciplinary approach to architectural design, for example, staff and students from the BA (Hons) Automotive & Transport Design course supporting our Level 4 cohort in their first foray into architectural design, with Automotive students' knowledge of small, ergonomically designed spaces, and 1:1 modelling. Other examples include sustainability lecturing from our Professor of Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Systems within the School of Digital, Technology, Innovation & Business, and technical training in photography. We would like to think that this approach to teaching and learning awakens a consciousness of future responsibility and professionalism in students' practice. Notwithstanding our focus on Stoke-on-Trent as the logical starting point to our course explorations, we envisage the accrued experience translating or comparing to related international contexts, for example post-industrial landscapes, polycentric cities, or cities with notable craft and design heritage.*

*Through our connections with the community around us, we see our pedagogical attitude as embracing both empirical as well as theoretical methodologies, where learning through exploration with a 'grassroots' emphasis is at the heart of our approach. Many of the aforementioned partnerships, for example, have given us the opportunity to explore learning approaches that are not solely based in the physical studio, but directly in the field or in the learning spaces of the collaborating partner, reflecting Cedric Price's ethos of place-appropriate learning and interdisciplinary collaboration, using the advantages of networks rather than a singular, fixed node. Examples of this, in addition to our own institution's craft workshops, are our use of BCB Studio on the former Spode ceramics site, in addition to external test-build spaces on the same site, The Moony Club in Longton, home to Urban Wilderness CIC, the site office of Wilmott Dixon, located on campus to oversee the university's Student Village project, and facilities of Stoke-on-Trent College. Whether through direct engagement with others, or through established pedagogies such as 'flipped classroom' sessions, we believe that students should be given the benefit of learning through doing and making – and from each other – as well as through informed discussion with staff. Informally, we recognise the importance of effective communication and debate of current issues that affect society, and so encourage discussion and interaction between cohorts, often prompted by students' interests in architecture and regeneration and a sense of concern for both the global, and the specific – and often home – context of Stoke-on-Trent.*

*We have also as a course focused on professional skills; the close connections that we have fostered with local architectural practices through the North Staffordshire Society of Architects (NSSA), and with other design and construction practices, have been invaluable. We host monthly meetings with society members in our studio space, attended by practitioners, architecture staff and student representatives.*

*Accordingly, local practices feed into our curriculum with, for example, Level 6 students spending a period of time with such practices as an integral part of our Professional Practice module. This module, along with the university's Careers team, supports students in the development of their CVs, portfolios, and interview preparation. Local practices also input into the course in a very practical way by offering positions to our students when available, and by contributing to design sessions through reviews or tutorials. Our relationship with the NSSA, however, is very much of mutual benefit, as in addition to a focus on student development (recognised, for example, in the annual Drawing Award offered by the society), we have been able to extend our activities to the university community and beyond. For example, in early 2025, we were able to realise an ambition to host a symposium exploring collaboration as a catalyst for a more sustainable built environment, as part of the society's RIBA Local Initiative Funding (LIF) proposals, as well as securing funding from the Staffordshire Centre for Renewable and Sustainable Engineering. The event featured contributions from both practitioners and academics and foregrounded a three-part exhibition focusing on the architectural journey from student to practitioner, with contributions from students, local and regional practitioners, and original work of Cedric Price, via our membership of the Cedric Price Network. The mutual desire to develop a visible and active architectural community in Stoke-on-Trent then developed from the symposium, as a collaborative lecture programme between the course and the NSSA.*

*As part of our responsibility to support and promote well-rounded future professionals and citizens, we are passionate about providing an open and diverse learning environment for our students, that promotes and practices equity, diversity, and inclusion. As a reflection of the diversity of both our students and staff, we aim to ensure parity within the curriculum, such as a global, multicultural approach to the history and theory of architecture within the Design Cultures module. On a pragmatic level, we also accommodate students who have caring responsibilities by offering hybrid teaching and learning opportunities during school holidays. As a method of charting personal growth and professional development, throughout the course, students are expected to keep a reflective diary and sketchbook as a record of their architectural enquiries and curiosities; be they through lectures, tutorials, observations, or other ideas for exploration. Along with the portfolio, this offers an opportunity for continuous reflection and progression.*

*All permanent academic staff are research-active, implementing research-led teaching into the curriculum. As an example, a recently successful Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) to decarbonise Lichfield Cathedral was implemented as a case study in the context of teaching Materials, Environmental and Technology to Level 6 students. Where possible, students are offered opportunities to collaborate in research projects led by staff, with the Staffordshire Undergraduate Research Scheme (STARS) scheme providing such opportunities through provision of student bursaries for Level 4 and 5 students to support staff in these endeavours, such as for the staff research project, Film, Architecture and Science Fiction. This initiative also offers students the chance to engage with interdisciplinary research, as they are able to apply to work on projects including, but not necessarily limited to, the field of architecture.*

*Further opportunities for curricular and cultural enrichment have, for the first time, been able to be offered this year with the start of our student exchange programme. In September, we welcomed a student from Breda University of Applied Sciences, whilst sending out our own student to ENSA Nantes in the second semester. We are looking forward to reciprocating when we host a student from Nantes next academic year.*

### **Approach to Modern Practice**

*We have benefitted through ties with construction companies with local presence, such as St. Modwen Homes, Wilmott Dixon, Capital & Centric, and H&S Construction, with whom we have nurtured opportunities for regular site visits across the three years of the course, in addition to more involved live project partnerships, for example with St. Modwen Homes. Our close relationship with the university Estates department has both enabled us to visit completed campus buildings, such as the award-winning Woodlands Nursery (recent recipient of the Sustainability, and Client of the Year awards at the RIBA West Midlands Regional Awards 2025), focusing on the implementation of net-zero strategies. It has also been possible to visit those currently under construction, such as the University of Staffordshire Student Village, where students were able to engage with Wilmott Dixon through both a site visit and interactive day featuring talks from building professionals, and the opportunity to take part in a design competition based on material and cost efficiency. Another example is the visit to Biddulph Valley Leisure Centre to understand more about net-zero ambitions; this time the decarbonisation of an existing building from the perspective of Local Authority policy.*

*Equally, live project participation, both with British Ceramics Biennial and Brilliant Bamboo, has provided cornerstones to our curriculum, through studio project briefs in consecutive years. It has offered students the opportunity to work with arts organisations and community interest companies on specific community regeneration projects involving use of innovative materials, the opportunity to work in partnership with practising design professionals, as well as obtaining hands-on experience of the construction of prototype structures. Our ongoing work with British Ceramics Biennial has seen consultant architects, Tuckey Design Studio, incorporate student project ideas into the design for a 'rammed earth playscape', to be built in time for the next biennial in September 2025. In preparation, our students have recently had the privilege of the invitation to collaborate in a pilot build, testing modular elements of the design.*

## **10 Commendations**

- 10.1** The Board commends the strong culture of collaboration and collegiality that exists throughout the School. The Board was particularly impressed by the student mentoring facilitated through the vertical studio model, which effectively promotes cross-year learning and peer support.
- 10.2** The Board commends the School's ambition in encouraging the use of a wide range of techniques and materials, made possible by its impressive workshop facilities and the generous support provided by technical staff.



**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 strongly encourages the university to fully support the architecture provision by ensuring resources are adequate and aligned with the current programme, its anticipated cohort growth, and future development ambitions. Additionally, the Board recommends that the university establish and routinely monitor a five-year recruitment plan to maintain appropriate staff-student ratios.

**12.2** The Board strongly recommends that the School reviews its current learning outcomes to ensure a clearer and more explicit alignment with the RIBA Themes and Values. At present, it is not always evident how the outcomes reflect the requirements set out by these Themes and Values.

**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 advises the School to review its academic position statement to more clearly articulate how the specific architectural characteristics of the region can be applied to teaching and translated to other global contexts.

**13.2** The Board advises the School to explore sustainable ways to secure financial support to enable both national and international study trips. Providing equitable access to these opportunities is essential for enriching the student experience.

**13.3** The Board recognises the School's strong civic engagement and its commitment to local regeneration, for example the British Ceramics Biennale. It strongly encourages the School to build on this solid foundation and explore how these strengths might inform projects and partnerships beyond the region.

**13.4** The Board acknowledges the importance of effective communication. Whilst recognising the dominance of software which in some cases affects the legibility of representation, the Board advises the School to consider providing students with greater support in graphically representing and editing their work, particularly in relation to setting up presentations and documentation.

**13.5** The Board advises the School to make greater use of the University's existing relationships - particularly with civic bodies and city leadership - to enhance the ambition and relevance of site selection. Aligning projects with the city's priorities and strategic planning could foster a positive reciprocity between academic work and the wider urban context.

**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 BArch (Hons) 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 BArch (Hons) Architecture, although attention is required with regards to action point 12.2.

**16 Other information**

**16.1 Student numbers (from the School - 2024/2025)**

The School enrolls approximately 45 students across the three years:

**Part 1**

- Year 1: 18
- Year 2: 17
- Year 3: 10

**16.2 Documentation provided**

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

**17 Notes of meetings**

These notes will not form part of the published report. The full set of notes will be issued to the next full Visiting Board:

- Budget holder and course leaders
- Students
- Head of Institution
- External Examiners
- Staff