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Royal Institute of British Architects

Report of the RIBA exploratory board to the University of Hertfordshire

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1   Details of institution hosting courses
School of Creative Arts
University of Hertfordshire
Hatfield
AL10 9AB UK

2   Course offered for candidate course status
Part 2 - Master of Architecture & Urbanism (MArch)

3   Head of School
Dr Luigi Pintacuda

4   Awarding body
The University of Hertfordshire

5   The visiting board
Sally Stewart   *Chair/Academic*
Gul Kacmaz Erk   *Academic*
Musa Garba   *Practitioner*
Joshua Brooks   *RIBA Validation Manager*

6   Procedures and Themes and Values for Architectural Education
The Exploratory Board operated under the RIBA Procedures for Validation 2021 (implemented 2022).

7   Recommendations of the visiting board
The Board was invited by the University of Hertfordshire to consider its Master of Architecture & Urbanism (MArch) for proposed candidate course for Part 2. The designation 'candidate course for recognition' implies that the programme is considered to have the potential to meet the RIBA Themes and Values, if implemented as anticipated. It is not, however, equivalent to recognition, which can only be granted once the standard of work produced by graduating students has been assessed and found satisfactory.

On 15th April 2025, the RIBA confirmed candidate course status be granted for the following course:

- Master of Architecture & Urbanism (MArch)

A full visiting board to consider the programme for RIBA Part 2 validation will take place at a date to be agreed between the RIBA and the School.

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).

The Architecture (Part 1 and Part 2) programmes at the University of Hertfordshire provide a robust and innovative design education that equips graduates for contemporary architectural practice in an evolving urban, suburban, and rural landscape. The programmes emphasise student-centred learning, fostering the development of critical, informed, reflective, and creative approaches to design. This is supported by a strong foundation in technology, sustainability, history, theory, and methods of representation, ensuring that students are well-prepared to navigate and shape the built environment.

Hertfordshire has long been a site of pioneering experiments in urban living, from the Garden Cities movement to the development of New Towns. With ongoing pressures related to housing demand and urban expansion — primarily due to its proximity to London — our programmes critically engage with these challenges at multiple levels. Students explore spatial and architectural conditions at the urban fringe, within suburban zones, and in areas experiencing rapid urban growth. With a strong focus on housing, the public realm, towns, and cities, the programmes tackle the pressing challenges of urbanisation and development. Through a global perspective, they interrogate regional issues, encouraging students to envision the future of architecture and urbanism while considering the broader social, political, environmental, and cultural implications of these models.

Teaching the next generation of Architects
The Architecture programmes at the University of Hertfordshire empower students to make a meaningful impact both locally and globally within the ever-evolving field of architecture and the broader built environment. These programmes embody the University's spirit of innovation, inclusivity, and enterprise, while championing social mobility. They provide students with the skills and knowledge to become future leaders, innovators, and entrepreneurs. The University's commitment to transforming lives is reflected in its diverse student body, with over a third being the first in their family to attend university, as well as in its vibrant community representing various ethnic backgrounds, abilities, and identities.

A diverse group of academics and professionals bring in-depth knowledge of the architectural profession's regulations and procedures, equipping students to translate design concepts into real-world buildings within the UK, while also addressing the complexities of the global architectural industry. This alignment with professional practice is maintained through constant engagement with industry professionals in programme delivery, continuous curriculum assessment, and student mentoring.

The new studio in the Mercer Building fosters cross-peer learning between undergraduate and postgraduate students, designed around a central "piazza" that facilitates interaction and collaboration.

This dynamic environment equips students with essential soft skills such as collaboration and coordination, enabling them to navigate the rapidly changing architectural industry. Academics who work across both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes ensure a cohesive learning journey, preparing for the introduction of the integrated Master of Architecture.

Cross-disciplinary connections with other built environment areas are also maintained through ongoing dialogue and collaborations with professionals and academics. At the core of the programmes are the Design Studio modules, with all other modules connected to them. This structure creates a consistent horizontal and vertical integration throughout the five years of study. In addition to studio work, students are exposed to histories and theories of architecture, design skills, and modules focused on technology, sustainability, and professional practice. The Design Studio is a space where students develop their creative inquiries, placing user and community needs at the heart of the design process. As they progress through the years, students take on increasing responsibility for their design direction.

Emphasising that diversity is a strength, the programmes do not prescribe any particular architectural style, instead encouraging students to experiment and engage with a wide range of architectures and media (from sketches and models to the latest technologies). Give architecture's significant impact on global carbon emissions, sustainability is a guiding principle of the programmes. From historical passive design strategies to cutting-edge technologies, students are taught to make informed decisions regarding materials and building life cycles. The curriculum emphasises responsible choices, with a particular focus on retrofit and adaptive reuse of existing building stock as key components in reducing environmental impact.

Engaging with Local Context, Communities and beyond
The School's mission is to create real-world impact and provide students with hands-on experience that prepares them for their future professional careers. Engaging with local context and communities is central to this mission, as it allows students to address issues that are relevant to the area. With the majority of briefs based on real locations, students have the opportunity to directly interact with communities, gaining a deep understanding of their needs and the challenges they face. In this framework, Architecture is conceived as an extension of the community, integrated into the urban environment. The architectural design process becomes a critical element in shaping the context in which it resides. As students progress through their studies, the scale of their investigations broadens from individual rural-suburban projects to encompass wider urban challenges. This culminates in the MArch programme, where Urbanism becomes a key point of the curriculum.

All modules within the programme are designed to help students develop a keen awareness of context, linking observational skills, theoretical knowledge, and practical application. This approach ensures that students are equipped to connect architecture with the broader context, making meaningful contributions to the built environment.

This ethos aligns with the School's overarching goals of increasing real-world impact, exemplified by the "Propeller" project o]ice. Propeller is designed to foster applied research within real-world scenarios, reinforcing the School's commitment to meaningful, community-focused architectural practice.

The connection between the University and the county of Hertfordshire is further strengthened through close collaboration with the Hertfordshire Architects Association (HAA), the local RIBA branch.
HAA plays an active role in the Architecture programmes, partnering with the University for events such as the "Life as an Architect" lecture series, where local architects share sincere insights about their educational and professional journeys. Additionally, HAA co-organises the annual "Art and Architecture" lecture, which has featured prominent speakers such as Bob Allies, Simon Alford, Jerry Tate and Chris Wilkinson in recent years. HAA members contribute significantly to the Architecture programme by participating in crits, teaching, and curriculum development. The University of Hertfordshire's Architecture community, including both staff and students, is represented on the HAA council, ensuring ongoing collaboration and connections between the University and the professional architectural community.

Moreover, HAA and RIBA East provide awards for final-year students and engage with the student body by offering support, internships, and job opportunities, further enhancing the professional development and employability of our graduates. With the goal of leveraging local experience in an international context, the Architecture programmes build on the diverse international profile of both students and staff. The programmes foster connections, collaborations, and contributions with institutions abroad. In this context, the department is signing various Memorandums of Understanding and is a member of the European Association of Architectural Education (EAAE). This network, alongside the University of Hertfordshire's wider franchise and international exchange network, exposes students to a broader global perspective.

Research environment
Both undergraduate and postgraduate modules cover a range of relevant themes connected to live research interests, fostering an environment of applied research and debate. Architecture staff contribute to various research centres across the University. These include Arch+ (the School of Creative Arts Architecture research centre), which emphasises interdisciplinary collaboration, and the Centre for Future Societies Research, with nearly 120 UH members addressing societal challenges like food, global economy, health and wellbeing, heritage, cultures and communities, information and security, and space. These two centres play a key role in connecting the Architecture group with other Built Environment disciplines across the University. Research often involves students working alongside staff, engaging with real-world scenarios and collaborating with relevant authorities and stakeholders. The Arch+ group is expanding extracurricular opportunities, which are designed to be affordable and often located near the University, making them accessible to a diverse range of students. This allows students to enhance their portfolios and skills while working alongside experienced staff and co-investigators. For staff and prospective students, research opportunities extend to PhD and DDes (Professional Doctorate) routes.

In 2024, the School of Creative Arts established Propeller, a project office that spans nearly the entire School's portfolio. Propeller acts as a facilitator and incubator for impact-driven projects, enabling staff and students to collaborate with communities and non-academic partners, among others. Building on the School's existing impact initiatives, Propeller provides an opportunity for staff to broaden their engagement while being supported with the necessary processes and procedures for successful project management.

10   Commendations
The Board made the following commendations:

10.1   The Visiting Board commends the move to the new facilities which is appreciated by both staff and students, and provides further opportunities to encourage connections between peer groups and across the communities within the programme.

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 School must consider how viable cohort sizes can be achieved, to ensure that students have exposure to a range of staff and student perspectives, and peer groups provide a healthy and diverse environment.

12.2   The School must fully engage with New Courses Group and provide at the soonest opportunity, a detailed schedule for the closure of the existing programmes (BA & MArch) and the validation of a new four-year integrated masters.

12.3   The School must establish clearer parameters and assessment criteria within the thesis module to ensure that the project's scope, ambition, and execution - along with the associated technical investigation - align with the RIBA Graduate Attributes at Part 2 and support the development of professional competencies.

12.4   The School must ensure that the mapping of programme content and assessments aligns with intended learning outcomes and industry expectations, and also provides a mapping of the RIBA Graduate Attributes at Part 2.

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13   Advice
The Visiting Board offers the following advice to the School on desirable, but not essential improvements, which, it is felt, would assist programme development and raise standards.

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13.1   The Visting Board advises the school explores the interdisciplinary collaboration between architecture students and other disciplines within the institution (e.g., business, civil engineering, planning, social sciences etc) to reflect real-world project dynamics.

13.2   The Visiting Board advises the school to support and facilitate staff and students to discuss the upcoming ARB reforms, and consider how the school, staff and students should best respond to these.

13.4   The Visiting Board advises that although students appreciate the pastoral support of the staff, the school ensures appropriate career support is available specific to architecture students, including clearer guidance on career pathways and alternative routes into industry.

13.5   The Visting Board advises the school helps to improve access to facilities such as the workshop, reducing long waiting times that limit hands-on learning.

13.6   The Visiting Board advises the school enhances its engagement with industry partners beyond online guest lectures, ensuring regular site visits and hands-on learning opportunities such as live projects and explore the potential for external mentoring for students who may have limited work experience.

13.7   The Visiting Board advises the school to be clearer on the programme's emphasis on the rural, suburban and urban contexts, and how the study of these and the other specific modules within the programme contributes towards the particular characteristics and opportunities of the thesis delivered in year two.

13.8   The Visiting Board advises the school to consider how the "Propeller" project office could provide a locus for students engagement with the regional profession and user centred design approaches, and make a meaningful impact locally.

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 the Part 2 - Master of Architecture & Urbanism (MArch). Please see action points 12.3 & 12.4.

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.

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Themes and Values for Part 2

The Board confirmed that all of the Themes and Values were met by graduates of the Part 2 - Master of Architecture & Urbanism (MArch).

16   Other information

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

Year 1 – 8
Year 2 – 6 (one part-time student)

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