



Royal Institute of British Architects

Report of the RIBA Full visiting board to Ulster University

Date of visiting board: 21 – 22 November 2024
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 15 April 2025

1 Details of institution hosting courses

Ulster University
Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment
Belfast Campus
York Street
Belfast
BT15 1ED

2 Courses offered for validation

Part 1 - BA (Hons) Architecture
Part 2 - Master of Architecture MArch

3 Head of School & Course Leads:

Prof Neil Hewitt
Head of School

Dr Neale Blair
Associate Head of School

Prof Paul Clarke
Subject Lead and Coordinator of ALT

Dr Niall O'Hare
Associate Course Director

Dr David Coyles
Course Director and ARG Lead

Dr Martina Murphy
Professional Practice Lead

4 Awarding body

Ulster University

5 The visiting board

Paul Jones	<i>Chair/Academic</i>
Bernadette Donohoe	<i>Academic</i>
Steve McIntyre	<i>Practitioner</i>
Jillian Jones	<i>Practitioner</i>
Joshua Brooks	<i>RIBA Validation Manager</i>

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 15 April 2025, the RIBA confirmed continued validation of the following courses:

- Part 1 Bachelor of Architecture with Honours in Architecture
- Part 2 MArch Architecture

The next visit to the University of Ulster will take place in 2029.

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)

A Geography of Place

Context and social purpose are the bedrock on which the Belfast School of Architecture and Built Environment is founded. The unique geography which defines the city of Belfast is an ever-present, raw, urban landscape, one in constant change, which surrounds our architecture studios. It informs everything we do, bearing witness to the nature and diversity of the built environment on which we reflect, explore, design and shape.

Ulster University operates a multi-campus portfolio across different cities. But it is Belfast that provides a very distinctive, modern campus that draws the greatest number of students in the university's ambition to increase widening access and recruitment from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. As a result, Belfast has taken the biggest investment and growth overall in the university's recent development.

Belfast: Effecting Change in a Changing City

Belfast is a rapidly changing city. It is still awakening from the legacy of its strong industrial past and continuing to deal daily with the challenges of its post-conflict condition and a divided society. Numerous interface areas, over 30km of peace walls, and some 97 major separating structures which divide communities, signal the need for architecture to be at the centre of this change.

The original Belfast School of Art (BSA) was founded at the same time as schools in Manchester, Glasgow, and Birmingham, and it was where architecture in Belfast was first established in 1901. It remained at BSA until the late 1960's when architecture was transferred to Queens University Belfast. The re-establishment of the discipline in the early 2000's with the first graduates in 2006 was to re-connect to this strong historical legacy of architecture as the Belfast School of Art celebrates its 175th anniversary in 2024.

The Greater Belfast Development (GBD)

The completion of the award winning £350 million development at the heart of the city centre has been transformative for the city, the university, and the architecture programmes.

Witnessing its development was part of the educational experience for our students and GBD brings new urban life and energy to a neglected part of the city. The relocation of the Jordanstown campus to Belfast brought the Built Environment disciplines onto one campus. The state-of-the-art teaching facilities, the new central library, and extensive IT suites, enable an outward looking community of learners to accelerate social and urban renewal. Buildings as embodiments of urban sustainability, and social value are the best educators.

A Context for Design

Architecture as a discipline is strategically positioned amidst a creative and innovative Art School and an Engineering Faculty where its construction wide expertise in the Built Environment is underpinned by a strong science and research base. GBD has enabled 'the best of both worlds' as it has brought colleagues and students from related disciplines into direct contact, collaboration and discourse in a way that was previously impossible. We see the importance of this now, as shaping the principal identity and ethos of the courses, in tandem with our vertical studios.

In the relatively short period since the subject's re-establishment in 2000, the University has explored several structural, spatial and management approaches. An enriched sense of Art and Science interwoven, matched with our belief in craft and making, and in turn the relevance of this to modern practice, is central to the ambitions of our teaching team and our graduates.

Subjects previously based at Jordanstown such as Planning and Architectural Technology, who have their own studios and spaces directly connected with architecture allow connections, skills, and practices to be shared. An expertise in digital skills, including 360° scanning are facilitating a shared digital laboratory space that is being currently developed and consolidated. The construction industry disciplines such as surveying, real estate, construction management and all forms of engineering provides and enriches the knowledge base for the integration of design, technology, and construction. BSABE's world leading research centres such as the Centre for Sustainable Technologies (CST) and Fire Safety Engineering (FireSERT) feed directly into the architecture courses. Our resources and physical space provision is of a very high order, with modern studios supported by workshops and laboratories, enabling our studios to be the critical place for discovery, learning, collaboration, and design.

A Unique Pedagogy

The Vertical Teaching Studios, as innovated and developed at Ulster, is the central distinguishing feature of the architecture programme. Since its inception in 2018, its evolution has created a unique identity for architecture and distinguishes our graduates in their ability to collaborate and work collectively. It has been commended by Examiners, the previous RIBA Visiting Board, employers, and that of the profession at large.

We are the only course that links teaching across all year groups and across undergraduate and graduate courses in the UK and Ireland, creating student communities that work and learn collaboratively, building confidence and independent learning.

Our approach to teaching requires an understanding of the potential of inter-peer learning and socialised learning, and the scale of the architecture programme at Ulster has made this both possible and highly focused.

Electing to work at a smaller scale by comparison with other architecture programmes, this offers a strong sense of interconnectedness, of community, and one to one teaching. At the previous RIBA revalidation visit (2019), Architecture provision was split over the two floors of Block BA. Aligning with the vision of connected teaching and learning, Architecture is now consolidated on Level 05 of Block BA which strengthens the interrelationship between all of the vertical studios.

During Covid, the programme remained open and was one of the very few courses to do so. This allowed our students to continue being supported in their work and to avoid any sense of isolation. Much was learned during this period such as on the balance of Hybrid teaching and the importance of maintaining the social group in bonding, especially in relation to the first-year group. Building an overall community within the programme and facilitating a diversity and richness in the 'SuperStudios' -as we call the- the aim is to discover and share ideas, skills, methods, and research, through an informal mentoring approach of socialised learning. Inter-peer learning has been identified as critical to developing independent learners, which is central to our whole teaching structure.

The master's level at Part II is based primarily on research through the structure of the IDEAS LAB module and subsequent dissertation module. The cultivation of positions, values, and ethics through a deeper research enquiry is at the core of the MArch. Students must position and inform their work in relation to contemporary knowledge at an advanced level and with an awareness of critical factors such as climate, sustainability, ethics, inclusive communities, conservation, and project leadership through design. Staff research informs and guides the master's written dissertation with the design thesis set in the context of each studio's research agenda.

The teaching model we have developed allows studios to work under a defined research theme, such as Housing, Hidden Barriers, The waterlands of the wider Irish Landscape, and Irish towns and settlements, to develop into a body of work. Within each studio, specific year group projects are set and supported to attain degree, professional and prescription requirements, while recognizing the specific needs and learning paths of every student. Critical to this approach are the dedicated horizontal modules for each year group in technology, history and theory, and the professional context strands. These modules also generate year group student connections and provide the underpinning for the MArch where a synthesis of these areas combine through research.

Connections and conversations across studios and year groups are further strengthened by cross studio crits -often student led- field trips for the whole programme such as to the Venice Biennale and Paris, and Studio X which is designed specifically for first years. Students elect to join studios at the start of each year and are free to move between them on a yearly basis.

Finally, pedagogic and action research combine through a growing cohort of PhD's and staff research interests to both enhance and consolidate the student learning experience.

Education as Practice

Professional knowledge is embedded throughout our courses and across all levels. New modules have been introduced to enhance Professional Context such as 'Project Leadership for Architects' (Yr6) and 'Professional Practice Management' in order to develop higher levels of professional and business skills, entrepreneurship, legal and regulatory knowledge, and to deepen and enhance the emphasis on professional knowledge and conduct. Central to this are the soft skills so critical to the profession and modern practice which are gained in the Vertical Studios where the value of collaborative working is constantly reinforced. The development of the vertical teaching structure was based partly on the collaborative nature of the architect's office in which all levels of skill and experience work together concurrently to achieve a common goal.

The programme has built on a distinguished Alumni profile who have pursued ambitious and diverse career paths, from local origins to national and, often, international platforms including Hong Kong, South Korea and Dubai, working for many different clients including Prada. The work of one of our local alumni, Micah Jones, has been profiled on the Channel 4 programme 'Grand Designs' to much acclaim. These achievements not only reflect their individual talent but also the solid foundation provided by our programme. Their success stories also serve as inspiration for our current students, encouraging them to realise their potential and embrace impactful careers. To strengthen this connection, we regularly invite alumni to return as guest lecturers, reviewers, and mentors.

The programme maintains strong ties with the professional bodies including the Royal Society of Ulster Architects (RSUA), where our staff participate in council and committee roles, ensuring ongoing collaboration with the local professional community. Our staff are also actively involved in prominent organisations like SCOSA, APSA, AAE and the EAAE, enhancing the school's presence and voice on national platforms. At a local level, the school engages closely with architects to provide students with essential networks for practical training and employability. Key initiatives include the Professional Insights Programme with RSUA, UU, and QUB for second-year students; a Practitioner Networking Event for third years; and the PEDR Professional Short Course for Part 1 year-out students, all of which create valuable opportunities for professional engagement and development.

Architecture as Research

The Architecture Research Group (ARG) was established in 2021 to enable a specific focus on the nature of architectural research amidst the Built Environment Disciplines. It is part of REF Unit of Assessment 13 (Architecture, Built Environment and Planning) where one-third of our research outputs are world-leading (4), 100% of our impact case studies have been judged as having outstanding or very considerable impacts in terms of their reach and significance (joint ranked 1 within UK), 100% of our research environment has been judged as being conducive to producing research of world leading and internationally excellent quality and enabling*

(joint ranked 1 within UK), overall, 91 % of our research is world-leading and internationally excellent and we are ranked 8th overall in the UK for research power.

Future Strategic Vision

The school seeks, through the development of vertical teaching, a strong emphasis on practice skills, and emerging studio and staff research to be well positioned for the future evolution of Architecture. Through our diverse studio themes, our high-level of practitioner involvement, working together with academics with strong research profiles in order to capture critical thinking and the translation and impact of this into reality, our future vision is to further enhance this relationship through for example greater involvement in REF portfolios, where practitioner experience is working directly with research expertise to provide research impact and value to inform all of our teaching.

10 Commendations

The Board made the following commendations:

- 10.1** The Board commends a strong educational community, which underpins the provision of an excellent student experience.
- 10.2** The Board commends a unique pedagogical model of vertical studios that has facilitated an excellent studio culture, mentoring and support between the student cohort.
- 10.3** The Board commends the commitment to the region, as seen in the focus of the vertical studios, staff research projects and outreach activity.

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 recommends that a senior member of staff be given overall responsibility for delivering consistency in the vertical studios. To include studio briefs, output schedules, and assessment feedback templates. This will ensure parity in teaching ambition and student experience. This important role should be allocated the requisite time and resources to be implemented.
- 12.2** The Board recommends that the identity and ethos of each vertical studio be more clearly articulated; this should improve communication within the student body, the wider school, and beyond the institution.
- 12.3** The Board recommends that the architecture programmes takes advantage of its position at the interface between the disciplines of art and the built environment, to foster stronger interdisciplinary opportunities.

The university should support and encourage students and staff to access the resources and expertise available in these other areas.

- 12.4 The Board recommends investment in the architecture workshop to provide a broader range of model-making techniques to support the culture of testing through making.
- 12.5 The Board supports the delivery of the BA and MArch programmes using the innovative vertical studio structure. However, the clarity of the integration of the horizontal modules should be strengthened, with inputs and outputs clearly articulated for each year group. An example of this is the cross-studio embedded technology diagram introduced for 2024/25. A similar strategy should be developed for all modules.
- 12.6 The Board recommends better alignment between the school's research themes and the vertical studios to enhance both teaching and research outputs.
- 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 strongly advises that the school takes steps to ensure all documentation prepared for future visiting boards is thorough, well-organised, and legible. This includes refining the academic position statement to accurately highlight and represent the school's unique qualities and strengths. These improvements should be addressed in preparation for the next visiting board.
- 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 BA (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 - Master of Architecture (MArch).

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 - BA (Hons) 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 - Master of Architecture (March).

16 Other information

16.1 Student numbers (from the School - 2023/2024)

The school enrolls approximately 193 students across both years (part 1 & 2)

Part 1

Year 1: 75

Year 2: 56

Year 3: 36

Part 2

Year 1: 13

Year 2: 13

16.2 Documentation provided

Please see Advice point 13.1.

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