

Report of the RIBA visiting Board to the University of Edinburgh

Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (ESALA)

Date of visiting board: 15 & 16 December 2022
Confirmed by RIBA: 5 July 2023

1 Details of institution hosting courses

Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture
University of Edinburgh
20 Chambers St,
Edinburgh EH1 1JZ

2 Courses offered for validation

Bachelor of Arts in Architecture [BA], Part 1 – 3 years
Master of Arts with Honours in Architecture [MA (Hons)], Part 1 – 4 years
Master of Architecture [MArch] – Part 2

3 Head of the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (ESALA)

Dr Richard Anderson

**Programme Director, Bachelor of Arts in Architecture [BA], Part 1;
Master of Arts with Honours in Architecture [MA (Hons)], Part 1**
Laura Harty

Programme Director, Master of Architecture [MArch] – Part 2
Adrian Hawker

4 Awarding body

University of Edinburgh

5 The visiting board

Luke Murray
Aoife McGee
Robert Grover

The fourth board member was unable to attend due to illness. The Board remained quorate and continued with the agreement of the School and the RIBA Director of Education.

In attendance:

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk – RIBA – validation manager

6 Procedures and criteria for the online visit

The visiting board was carried out under the RIBA Procedures for Validation, September 2021. A copy can be downloaded from www.architecture.com.

7 Proposals of the visiting board

On 5 July 2023 the RIBA confirmed continued validation of the following courses:

Bachelor of Arts in Architecture [BA], Part 1 – 3 years
Master of Arts with Honours in Architecture [MA (Hons)], Part 1 – 4 years
Master of Architecture [MArch] – Part 2

The next full visit to ESALA will take place in 2027.

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 Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (ESALA) recognises architecture as a cultural, environmental, and societal practice—as a civic endeavour concerned with people and how they live. We build knowledge and expertise across a breadth of disciplinary concerns: design, technology, the environment, history, theory, and the fine arts. In both the curriculum and the School culture, we establish broad horizons in which a depth and intensity of work unfolds. We offer tools and techniques of inquiry, analysis, and projection for a rigorous engagement with contemporary and future challenges of architectural, urban, and landscape practices. ESALA is part of the Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), a School within the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (CAHSS) at the University of Edinburgh. ESALA operates at the intersection of advanced creative practice and a world-leading research environment, bringing the two together to enable critical architectural responses to the social and environmental crisis facing the contemporary world. Our ambition is to reimagine architectural education in the context of climate crisis by celebrating a diversity of voices, practices, and forms of knowledge. We strive to educate ethical practitioners, thinkers, and creators who will make a positive social impact.

The strength of ESALA's educational portfolio draws on the research expertise and specialisms of our staff, which includes architects, landscape architects, interior and spatial designers, artists, engineers, computer scientists, historians, geographers, philosophers, and cultural theorists. We educate our students to navigate, skilfully and with care, through historical models and contemporary conditions, preparing them to evaluate both the performance and consequences of design. Advanced studios enable thematic inquiry, and they are articulated by the concerns of staff research and practice. The School's distinctive profile draws on its engagement, through teaching and research, with the complex, fine-grained, stratigraphic context of the city of Edinburgh. Our staff and students bring perspectives from Scotland, the UK, and internationally, creating a vibrant and engaged community. ESALA's students benefit from the outstanding range of facilities offered by the workshops and digital infrastructure of ECA, and we nurture an ethos of critical thinking through making. ESALA's studio courses are complemented by notable strengths in the history and theory of architecture and urbanism, conservation, landscape architecture and landscape studies, interior and spatial design, and fine art. ESALA is an exceptionally rich environment for the exploration—through design and critical reflection—of architecture's capacity to improve the communities it serves.

ESALA offers three professionally accredited architecture degrees: the **Bachelor of Arts in Architecture [BA]** is a three-year, full-time undergraduate degree; the **Master of Arts with Honours in Architecture [MA (Hons)]** is a four-year, full-time undergraduate degree; the **Master of Architecture [MArch]** is a two-year, full-time postgraduate degree.

The undergraduate courses that form the basis of both the BA and the MA (Hons) degree pathways establish a shared understanding of core competencies, histories, technologies, and environmental principles in the first and second years. These are tested through engagement with sites in Edinburgh and, in second year, at an international site. At the end of the second year, students can choose to follow the BA route—allowing them to obtain Part 1 through a 360-credit, accredited degree in three years, similar to the typical English model. Students following the MA (Hons) route take an enhanced pathway to Part 1, comprising 480 credits, which is a Scottish honours degree. This includes an embedded period of professional practice experience or the opportunity to study abroad in year three. MA (Hons) students undertake a significant piece of scholarly research and writing in the form of a dissertation. They also take an additional advanced elective, which draws on the expertise of staff from ESALA, ECA, and CAHSS. These elements provide external contexts that inform and enrich design work in the final stages of the degree. While the paths diverge, both BA and MA (Hons) students take the same 40 credit design studios at award level, integrating learning across the programme via a series of studio units aimed at demonstrating tectonic resolution.

The MArch degree (240 credits over two years) offers a research-led educational experience. It focuses on architecture and the city, and its studio units follow lines of thematic inquiry informed by staff research and practice. Students select either a one-year or a two-year design thesis pathway. Edinburgh often acts as an initial laboratory and exploratory archive that enables students to test ideas that prompt further exploration in other metropolitan contexts. Students are required to demonstrate a synthesis of their projects in complex site and environmental conditions; to create self-directed briefs; and to take work to a level of sophisticated technical resolution. The design studio combines flexibility with rigour for deep design and research inquiry. Courses in contemporary theory, technology, management, practice, and law develop core professional competencies. A design report and summative portfolio enable students to position their work, skills, judgment and decision-making in a broader academic and professional context. The MArch provides a route for students to continue into research degrees as well as progressing to an ARB/RIBA Part 3 examination, following suitable work experience.

ESALA aims to be an international locus for public discussion and debate on architecture, landscape, and urbanism. We regularly host the most interesting, influential, and respected scholars, practitioners, and thinkers in our disciplines. We curate advanced seminars in design, architectural research, conservation, and history/theory, as well as exhibitions, workshops, and open reviews. These events benefit both students and the wider public. In summary, our academic ethos seeks:

- to offer an education that nurtures agile, deeply informed architectural thinkers and makers
- to encourage productive and surprising interdisciplinary conditions and exchanges on issues of space, place, the environment, the city, culture, and society
- to nurture an ethical approach to practice that recognises diverse perspectives, positions, and forms of knowledge on architecture and the built environment
- to prepare our students to engage with planetary challenges facing architecture and the world

10. Commendations

- 10.1 The Board commends the strong sense of collective ambition shown by staff and students, evidenced by a clear research-led architectural agenda which engages with contemporary critical dialogues.
- 10.2 The Board commends the culture of making in the School and the diversity of representational techniques that this affords to encourage model-making as a tool for creative exploration across all courses.
- 10.3 The Board commends the School for their studio module work which engages with the local community. This offers an excellent opportunity for students to develop their communication skills, confidence and knowledge of physical, social and cultural aspects within Edinburgh.

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 For the next Visiting Board, the School must ensure a wider representation of students and External Examiners at each respective meeting, either in person or remotely. This is to ensure that the feedback captures the student voice across all cohorts.
- 12.2 The Board advises the School to clearly communicate programme structures and potential pathways throughout all course stages giving students an ongoing understanding of their learning journey.

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 Building upon commendation 10.3, the Board advises that the School further develop strategies for widening access to architectural education by

enhancing engagement and participation with the local community, seeking potential students under-represented within ESALA.

- 13.2 The Board advises the School to promote greater student engagement with programme operations ensuring transparent decision-making and giving more weight to the student voice.
- 13.3 The Board advises that the School conducts the future External Examiner visits in-person as far as practicable to enrich the examining process by creating the opportunity for the examiners to physically experience the high level of exhibited work and to fluidly discuss opportunities for the School to improve.
- 13.4 The Board advises the School to develop and enhance their cross-disciplinary teaching and research opportunities across ECA and the wider University.

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.

14.1 Part 1

The Board confirmed that all Part 1 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the following programmes:

Bachelor of Arts in Architecture [BA], Part 1 – 3 years
 Master of Arts with Honours in Architecture [MA (Hons)], Part 1 – 4 years

14.2 Part 2

The Board confirmed that all Part 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the following programme:

Master of Architecture [MArch] – Part 2

15 Review of work against criteria

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 made no further comments.

16 Other information

16.1 Student numbers

Part 1: 450 (BA and MA Hons combined)
 Part 2: 150

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 mid-term panel and the next full visiting board.**

- Meeting with budget holder and course leaders
- Meeting with students
- Meeting with the head of college
- Meeting with external examiners
- Meeting with staff