



**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Report of the RIBA Full visiting board  
to Northumbria University  
5-6 October 2023**

**Date of visiting board: 5-6 October 2023  
Confirmed by the RIBA: 24 April 2024**

**1 Details of institution hosting courses**

Department of Architecture and Built Environment (ABE)  
 SUB 020  
 Sutherland Building  
 Northumbria University  
 Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK

**2 Courses offered for validation**

Architecture BA (Hons)	Part 1
Architecture M Arch	Part 2
L7 Apprenticeship	Part 2

**3 Head of School**

Professor Ashraf Salama - Head of Department  
 Paul Ring - Head of Architecture

**4 Awarding body**

Northumbria University

**5 The visiting board**

Kate Cheyne	Academic / Chair
John Ashton	Practitioner
Jack Dunne	Academic
Luke Murray	Academic
Jaime Solloso	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 24 April 2024 the RIBA confirmed unconditional validation of the following courses:

Architecture BA (Hons)	Part 1
Architecture M Arch (Full time)	Part 2
Architecture M Arch (Apprenticeship)	Part 2 & 3

The next visit to Northumbria University will take place in 2028.

**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)**

At Northumbria University, our approach to architectural education focuses on developing graduates with the skills, knowledge, and attributes that are valued by employers and society. We emphasize design creativity, encouraging our students to apply their learning to the unique social, cultural, aesthetic, and theoretical opportunities found in the North-East region. Context is the overriding driver for our teaching and research activity; we see this concept in a holistic way with shared interests in place, critical regionalism, genius loci, adaptive reuse, and traditional craft. The North-East region offers diverse and beautiful landscapes, including coastlines, forests, hills, and significant historical sites; there are also large areas characterised by deindustrialisation, dereliction, and industrial blight. These juxtaposed landscapes are the backdrop and inspiration for many of our projects, often drawn from our relationships with local charities, NGOs, and practices. The North-East region has the highest poverty rating in the country, with huge socio-economic issues; the importance of people, and how architecture can contribute to social benefit, are key values in our approach.

Architecture at Northumbria has been recognised by previous visiting boards for its outstanding making and studio culture. The university completed our Page/Park designed architecture facilities in 2019, just before the pandemic emerged. Our studios were closed during each full lockdown, resulting in substantial interruption to resources and we were able to provide partial, rotational access for students during periods of lockdown easing. Despite our outstanding resources, students have slowly become reacquainted with studio working since the pandemic and we have made a concerted effort to promote the values of studio education, peer learning and our unique community of learning. Recent National Student Survey (NSS) results and league table positions have been adversely impacted as a result and we are pleased to see this year's NSS results are recovering to pre-covid levels. Affirmation of our culture of making and creative practice has been led by the staff and through engagement with local creative practitioners, with many staff contributing to a series of masterclasses for the students. These have included techniques on printmaking, casting, digital fabrication, collage, graphic representation, sketchbooks, and hand drawing. Our technician colleagues (some with model making backgrounds) have relocated to our studios for one day a week to provide guidance and advice on student modelmaking, printing and photography, and to bridge the gap between studio and workshop. Over £150K has been invested in 3D printers and rapid prototyping facilities in the last two years. These remain free to use by the students (reflecting our commitments to reduce student debt), who have increasingly embraced their capabilities. A student led communications surgery places Part II students in the BA studios one day a week for analogue, digital and 3D communication drop-in support; this strengthens vertical connection between the programmes. We are delighted that cultures of experimentation and making have returned to the studios, encouraged by our hybrid approach of traditional and digital making, and through the interventional measures put in place, post pandemic, to reinvigorate studio-based learning.

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Since the last RIBA visit, the university has continued to promote research activity. Currently, 70% of the full-time staff now have doctorates, amongst the highest percentage for architecture courses in the country. There is an expectation that staff expertise drives research informed teaching with departmental research groups mirroring research practice; we continually seek opportunities to collaborate with students as part of an integrated academic community that promotes architecture's role in society, and that engages with critical environmental issues. Our pedagogic approach and studio culture promotes peer-learning and assessment, fostering autonomy and self-direction. As students' progress through their education, projects become increasingly complex, encouraging and rewarding attributes such as self-direction, independent research, and professional development. At Northumbria, we strive to transition students from didactic teaching delivery towards active independent learning. We gradually reduce scaffolding as students' progress through the curriculum, encouraging our postgraduates to develop their own briefs based on contextual influences and personal career interests. Academic modules are constructively aligned with design projects activity to promote an integrated understanding of learning. In the Part 2 course, tutors act as facilitators of knowledge and design, fostering critical, reflective, and innovative practices.

Our approach values authenticity, by way of actively engaging with local sites and issues, collaborating with councils, NGOs and charities on projects and briefs that can make a difference to people's lives. Authentic 'live' projects are integrated into studio design teaching, engaging students with creative re-use, public policies, and co-professionals. By working closely with charities, not-for-profit organizations, and public agencies, our students gain valuable employability skills, and can contribute positively within wider and diverse architectural practices. Such collaborations can minimise additional expenses on travel and materials for students, supporting deep inquiry and active engagement with communities beyond the institution. Our ethos of multiple interpretations of context has led to various research and enterprise initiatives. Many of these projects, particularly in the field of design research, have resulted in rich teaching opportunities, as well as being returned in the REF as design portfolios by architecture staff. Collaborative building projects undertaken by staff and student teams include the *Humbledon Hill Houses* and the *Land of Oak Visitor Centre*; exhibitions of work such as *Community of Change*, *Seeds of Idea* with the National Trust; artefacts such as the *Tethered Cloud* installation at Kielder Sculpture Park and *Anteroom* at Seaton Delaval Hall. Although many of these projects are located within the region, we believe that our ethos of architecture as a social and inclusive art embeds transferrable knowledge skills and attributes that can apply equally to other locales and regions.

An emphasis on autonomy and choice helps prepare our graduates to adapt flexibly to a changing profession, and to identify entrepreneurial opportunities in the modern workplace. We believe our graduates are well-prepared for the world of work, developing the confidence to pursue diverse career paths. We believe in educating our students to become architects; however, we equally support and celebrate the achievements of those who choose alternative careers. We are advocates of constructivist and authentic learning approaches; this inspired us to set up the first-Degree Apprenticeship of Architecture Pathway in England to be accredited by the ARB. This pathway

is one of the largest in the UK, with two graduating cohorts having successfully completed the Part 2 and Part 3 components. We remain committed to supporting students in the profession who are deterred by the economics of five years of study. The apprenticeship is a very important development in architectural education, providing students with opportunities to earn and learn without incurring additional student debts. Our support for students and apprentices has yielded excellent employment statistics, despite the region having a limited number of graduate jobs in this field. After over twenty years since the inception of our Part 1 course, many of our graduates are now major employers, leading and establishing successful practices at local, national, and international levels; others have ventured successfully into doctoral studies and education, and many continue to contribute to our courses as critical partners in our students' learning journeys.

## **10 Commendations**

- 10.1** The Board commends the School on its excellence in the teaching of contextually responsive architecture as a design method that can be a transferable skill beyond the region.
- 10.2** The Board commends the quality of pedagogic practice, supported through active teaching methods and excellent documentation. The School's understanding of their students' needs is evident in the design and delivery of a curriculum that supports all to succeed.
- 10.3** The Board commends the strong and vibrant collaborative learning environment ably supported by staff and studio space. Readiness for practice is a strong feature notably through the apprenticeship route.

## **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 should articulate, celebrate and disseminate their existing good practice.
- 12.2** The School should prepare for a forthcoming University wide digital transformation strategy and its implications for architectural education and industry.

## **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 encourages integrating research-informed practices across all briefs, modules, and courses.

- 13.2 The Board advises exploring innovative uses of studio spaces to enhance cross-cohort learning environments and knowledge sharing.
- 13.3 The School has highlighted that Covid has disrupted a collaborative studio culture and the completion of live projects. The Board suggests a structure for authentic live projects is reinforced.
- 13.4 The Board encourages the School to strengthen ambitions for adaptive reuse and ethical practice as drivers for tackling design challenges surrounding the climate emergency, using research as a springboard.

**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 BA (Hons) Architecture.

**Graduate Attributes for Part 2**

The Board confirmed that all of the Part 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the Master of Architecture MArch, Part 2 and the Architecture M Arch (Apprenticeship) Part 2 & 3.

**Part 3 professional criteria**

The Board confirmed that all Part 3 professional criteria were met by graduates of the Architecture M Arch (Apprenticeship) Part 2 & 3.

**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 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 Master of Architecture.

**Themes and Values for Part 2 and 3**

The Board confirmed that all of the Themes and Values were met by graduates of the Architecture M Arch (Apprenticeship) Part 2 & 3.

**16 Other information**

**16.1 Student numbers (from the School)**

Part 1 BA (Hons) Architecture (Part 1): 264

Master of Architecture (Part 2): 26

L7 apprenticeship (Part 2): 61

**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 architecture budget holder and course leaders
- Meeting with students
- Meeting with Head of Institution
- Meeting with external examiners
- Meeting with staff