

**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Report of the RIBA Full Visiting Board  
to the University of Ulster**

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- 1**      **Details of institution hosting course/s**      **(report part A)**  
 University of Ulster  
 Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment  
 Belfast Campus  
 York Street  
 Belfast  
 BT15 1ED
- 2**      **Head of School**  
 Neil J Hewitt
- 3**      **Course/s offered for validation**  
 BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1  
 Master of Architecture MArch, Part 2
- 4**      **Course leader/s**  
 Aoife Wiberg                      professor in architecture  
 Martina Murphy                director of studies (Part 1 and II)  
 Paul Clarke                        professor in architecture
- 5**      **Awarding body**  
 University of Ulster
- 6**      **The visiting board**  
 Karim Hadjri                      chair / academic  
 Layton Reid                        academic  
 Anthony Petrilli                  practitioner  
 Albená Atanssova                practitioner  
 Sophie Bailey                      RIBA validation manager
- 7**      **Procedures and criteria for the visit**  
 The visiting board was carried out under the *RIBA procedures for validation and validation criteria for UK and international courses and examinations in architecture* (published July 2011, and effective from September 2011); this document is available at [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com).
- 8**      **Recommendation of the Visiting Board**  
 On the 19 September the RIBA Education Committee confirmed that the following courses and qualifications are awarded full validation
- BA (Hons) Architecture, Part 1**  
**Master of Architecture M Arch, Part 2**
- The next RIBA visiting board will take place in 2024.
- 9**      **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

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- 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

**10 Academic position statement**  
(Statement written by the school)

Through innovative architectural education we seek to help build, support and shape a sustainable shared society, which is globally relevant, while locally authentic. Our approach prioritises proactive, creative and socially responsible research, learning and agency. At Ulster we seek out collaborations and engagement across diverse sectors and with many different stakeholders, in order to achieve social value and relevance in both our work, and in shaping the practitioners of tomorrow. Ours is a broad-based, inclusive and non-elitist approach to all aspects and stages of design, and its strategic agency. We believe this is fundamental in shaping architectural graduates who will contribute to the common good and well-being of all levels of society, the environment, the economy, and the wider world.

**Context**

Historically the original, and oldest architecture course in Northern Ireland, through direct association with the Belfast School of Art, Architecture at Ulster continues to develop this long and distinguished legacy, in positioning architecture amidst a holistic education of design, craft, science and artistry, which has forged such a vital role in the industrial and artistic growth of the city.

The University's Greater Belfast Development (GBD) -where architecture is located- presents a considerable investment in state-of-the-art facilities in a prime city centre location, and at a scale of educational provision unique to these islands. Architecture is confidently and assuredly positioned in this context: co-located by adjacency with the creative energies of the School of Art and strategically within the research led School of the Built Environment. The investment and civic renewal of the city through this dynamic new city centre campus evidences the importance and value placed on the role of education in contributing to a sustainable and shared society for Northern Ireland. Widening access is at the core of what we do in building a knowledge ecology to make tertiary education available to a whole new community of learners.

**Consolidation and Collaboration**

2017 brought a new level of Construction Industry focus to the course, with the merger of the Belfast School of Architecture with the School of the Built Environment. This consolidates and widens the existing range of scholarship, research, expertise, and knowledge, by bringing into closer alignment such disciplinary areas as: sustainable technologies and energy systems, planning and real estate, construction and project management, disaster management, and the world leading fire safety engineering, while maintaining the creative adjacencies, collaborations

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and the dynamic of the School of Art's expertise in all areas of the fine art disciplines.

Responding to the specific nature of Northern Ireland's educational and social context: the post-industrial and post-conflict conditions, the funding deficits in relation to the GB universities, and the educational reforms set in motion by the RIBA, the School has been proactive in responding creatively to these challenges and has positioned itself critically and actively in developing a new educational model, structured to integrate the teaching of Part I and Part II, and leading towards the full integration of Parts I, II and III in the immediate future. We are the first UK school to create a vertical teaching structure (SuperStudios) across undergraduate and postgraduate provision by addressing the challenges faced by the profession: by embedding more business skills, taking a more holistic and creative approach to technology and sustainability and that of the whole construction industry and built environment, capitalising on the creative adjacencies of the Art School, focusing on the importance of social agency and inclusiveness, and by bringing practice and academia into closer alignment, and by actively cultivating the potential of inter-peer learning.

With the university positioning itself as provider of professional education by focusing on employability, transferable skills and professional knowledge, a creative, responsive and innovative pedagogy has been developed. This we have done by recognizing the post-recession implications for the construction industry, the creative potential of the wide expertise available in the School of the Built Environment, and by strengthening and building on the school's core values of the ethical position and the social responsibility of the architect to society, and on our emphasis on the importance of the craft of things: in thinking, in making, and in doing.

### **The SuperStudios- Pedagogy as Practice**

We have developed our unique SuperStudios to be student centred, vertically organised, and thematically based, which looks to the innovations of practice as an educational model. This creates a unique supportive framework within which individual positions and personal learning journeys and trajectories are developed and which creatively explore and evidence the RIBA/ARB professional criteria.

Through the SuperStudios, we consider the unique urban problems, post-conflict conditions, and the social needs in the city of Belfast, the wider region, the island of Ireland and beyond. Inwardly aware and contextually specific, while outwardly looking. Internationalisation begins by addressing your own immediate context. Visiting schools of architecture from across the world set up studios and engage with us, interested in the very issues we seek to address, while offering unique international insights. We seek civic and social connectedness at every level, through live studio projects and collaborations working with different communities and stakeholders, with engagement in all aspects of industry and the profession.

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**Research Led**

Research is at the core of our intellectual and philosophical approach. It drives the teaching through the SuperStudio's framework which is directed by expertise in either practice or academic research. It is the level of research focus that in part distinguishes the shift from Part I to Part II. While Part I is all about skill, knowledge and confidence building, in focused, sequential, development relevant to each educational level, Part II is about shaping critically reflective, more independent, research driven practices, in order to enable each student to confidently position themselves in relation to the diverse range of opportunities that exist across the profession. We promote, support and cultivate a diversity of ideas and positions. We promote team working and collaboration, and seek to foster a strong sense of lasting community and agency between our students and staff.

The high level of Investment in the quality of studio space provision (dedicated individual workspaces) and associated workshops, provides some of the best and most generous architecture studios across the UK and Ireland. The research themes set in each of the SuperStudios act in parallel in a dialogue of different contexts and methodologies in which each one constructs their own environment, while building a greater sense of collective discourse, and community across school.

Events and activities such as the whole school visits to the Venice Biennale, the Archi-Bus trips to meet clients and their buildings, the SuperCrits and lectures by visiting international architects, and the lunchtime Tech Talks all explore different approaches to learning: formally and informally and to cultivate a greater sense of a shared, collective culture and exchange, across the whole school. As the undergraduate student grows through a more skill focused and confidence building education in the early years, to that of a more critically reflective, independent, and research based learner, the construction of a continuous ecology of learning, research and scholarship, is framed and facilitated by the energy and dynamic of the SuperStudios. Individual ownership for the responsibility of learning, and the development and discipline of professional attitudes, we see as vital in defining our graduates.

Our distinctive pedagogy offers a new model: reflective of how innovative practice operates, and with the aim to innovate and engage with the most challenging aspects of societal need, and the changing nature of the profession.

**Practice as Research**

Practice focussed research, working with local, national and international practitioners, through collaborative research projects, research funding applications, and Part III integration, we see as a critically important growth area. By embedding key organisational and business skills and in developing a future fully integrated course we aim innovate and to address what has often become perceived as a skills gap in the profession.

With the school being relatively young, our alumni profile is continually building with many successes in prizes, and awards, which is

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strengthening a greater sense of the culture and community within the school and importantly developing wider networks with employers internationally. With all of our PT staff working in practice, and our FT staff acting in consultancy, research and on advisory panels, this in-depth engagement with the profession becomes key as we further innovate in developing a fully integrated course.

**The Best of Both Worlds**

Architecture at Ulster is contextually and philosophically rooted in its artistic and cultural legacy. Enriched by the creativity of the Belfast School of Art by adjacency, and strategically and operationally by the research esteemed and science based School of the Built Environment. This we see as having the best of both worlds, in order to inform and give identity to what we do as architects, and where science and art connect, in multi-disciplinary exchange, collaboration, innovation and creative adjacency.

**11 Commendations**

The visiting board made the following commendations:

- 11.1 The Board commends the School’s culture of making and craft through model making.
- 11.2 The Board commends the collaborative atmosphere and sharing of learning within the SuperStudios and the research and liveness underpinning these.
- 11.3 The Board commends the organisation of the RIBA validation visit, the quality of the documentation and the comprehensive portfolios.

**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. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

- 12.1 In line with the new “best of both worlds” ethos, the Board encourages the University and School to pursue this by maintaining the links with Art & Design and capitalising on the new opportunities offered by the Built Environment merger. The Board looks forward to seeing this strengthened and developed in support of the student experience.
- 12.2 The Board suggests that more clarity is provided when mapping the criteria for the SuperStudios, particularly highlighting the level of attainment at BA(Hons) and M Arch level.
- 12.3 Given the recent development in technology teaching and learning, the Board looks forward to seeing evidence of its application within portfolio design projects through creative exploration and experimentation and through model making and other forms of media.
- 12.4 The Board recommends the architecture workshop is enhanced to include cutting edge equipment and improved access. Additionally, students could benefit from unrestricted access to the art workshops

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and facilities to broaden the range of processes and materials available to them in pursuit of their project outcomes.

- 12.5 The School should improve the communication and access to online resources via the VLE platform. This is to ensure that students can view and download course documentation and learning resources.

**13. Advice**

The visiting board offers the following advice to the Department on desirable, but not essential improvements, which, it is felt, would assist course development and raise standards.

- 13.1 The Board advises that the leadership of the discipline is strengthened through the appointment of a Chair in Architectural Education or Design.
- 13.2 Given the establishment of the vertical learning through the SuperStudios, the Board suggests that learning events such as reviews and crits are organised at year level.
- 13.3 An appropriate level of induction and preparation should be provided to those entering BA(Hons) and the M Arch.
- 13.4 The School should engage further with the profession through increased use of part-time teaching practitioners to enhance the delivery of the SuperStudio agendas.
- 13.5 The School should take advantage of its alumni network and its relationship with the profession to further develop its approach to employability and enterprise. The School should capitalise on the PEDR innovation involving the alumni in knowledge exchange in teaching and learning events.

**14 Delivery of academic position**

The ACP is more than 2 pages long (which is the required length set by the RIBA). The structure with the use of sub-headings is very helpful although some of these can be merged. It needs to articulate better the 'best of both worlds' argument and be more ambitious with future plans.

**15 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 Parts 1 & 2**

The Board confirmed that all of the Parts 1 & 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the BA (Hons) Architecture and the M Arch Master of Architecture.

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**16 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.

**Graduate Criteria for Parts 1 & 2**

The Board confirmed that all of the Parts 1 & 2 graduate criteria were met by graduates of the BA (Hons) Architecture and the M Arch Master of Architecture.

**17 Other information**

**17.1 Student numbers**

Year 1	33 students
Year 2	27 students
Year 3	30 students
March	7 students

**17.2 Documentation provided**

The faculty provided all advance documentation in accordance with the validation procedures.

**On request, the RIBA will issue a copy of the minutes taken from the following meetings:**

- **Budget holder and course leaders**
- **Students**
- **Head of institution**
- **External examiners**
- **Staff**