
Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA Initial Visiting Board
to the University of Westminster**

BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design

Date of visiting board: 14 April 2021

Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 07 July 2021

- 1** **Details of institution hosting course/s** **(report part A)**
School of Architecture and Built Environment
University of Westminster
35 Marylebone Road
London
NW1 5LS
- 2** **Head of Architecture**
Harry Charrington
- Course Leader**
Stefania Boccaletti
- 3** **Course/s offered for validation**
BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design
- 4** **Awarding body**
University of Westminster
- 5** **The visiting board**
Bob Brown chair/academic
Albena Atanassova practitioner
Jeremy Diaper practitioner
Sophie Bailey RIBA validation manager
- 6** **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.
- 7** **Recommendation of the Visiting Board**
On the 07 July 2021 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed that the following course is unconditionally validated:
- BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design**
- The next RIBA visiting board will take place in 2022 alongside the other RIBA validated courses.
- 8** **Academic position statement**
(Statement written by the school)
- Our school began in 1891 at the Polytechnic Institute on Regent's Street. Now part of one of the world's most diverse universities, we maintain the inclusive Polytechnic ethos of making an ambitious, transformative higher education accessible to all. We continue to build on the innovative teaching, research and practice of our student and staff alumni from Ralph Erskine to Robin Evans. In REF2014 65% of our research was judged as world-leading or internationally excellent, and our students have won major international awards; including in the RIBA Presidents' Medals for the past six years.

School of Architecture + Cities

The School of Architecture and Cities works in environments from interiors to regional infrastructure. We view our portfolio of courses as less sharp-edged and distinct than as heterogeneous and interdependent. While we necessarily specialise, we explore synergies and share staff through an approach of inter-disciplinary studies and cross-disciplinary practice. The pandemic has been remarkably difficult but shown our resilience and pedagogical adaptability, and we have experienced an evolutionary jump in our digital capabilities. The crisis has shown it is possible to suspend assumptions, and our challenge is to hold on to the things we've learnt and to experiment with new ways of doing things in addressing the unfolding crises we have inflicted on the conditions of our existence. The School's commitment to diversity and inclusion, resilient and strategic design, reflective and ethical practice, environmentally responsive place-making, and innovative low-carbon building have never been more important.

Who we are

Our students are super-diverse; a mix of perspectives and intersections that is a major factor in the distinctive heterogeneity of our work. We sustain a critical mass of students at every level of architectural education, Parts 1, 2 and 3. Our commitment to each stage reflects our duty of care to all facets of an architect's education, from opening-up the possibilities and disciplines of architecture, through nurturing a creative commitment that balances experimentation with rigour, to developing ethical and innovative forms of practice. Each course shares common studio spaces and facilities, as well as many of our tutors. Our student Westminster Architecture Society WAS flourishes, and in the pandemic our OSW openstudiowestminster platform became our virtual home. NSS scores are the highest in the university, with the BArch (Part 1), BScAED and MArch Part 2 recording 90%, 92% and 95% overall satisfaction respectively.

Where we are

Our School is characterised by a triangulation of teaching, research and practice, and defined by its external links. Our level of professional engagement, familiar in other parts of Europe, is unusual in the UK. The majority of architectural staff are part-time, and, together with permanently contracted visiting lecturers, engage students with live practice. In turn, we offer practitioners an experimental academic space in which to explore things that are important to practice – but which practices can rarely afford. All BArch and BScAED students undertake a 2-week practice placement in Year 3, as well as mentoring by local practices. Our end-of-year exhibition OPEN and catalogue promotes our students' work.

Where we work

Our exchange network, and diverse staff and students, fix us in a global architectural education network. London, in all its complexity, is our laboratory. Our purpose-built studios are expansive, robust and flexible. Our Fabrication Laboratory enables our students to exploit advanced fabrication and prototyping technologies in combination with analogue techniques, and material- and environmental-testing. We have use of

Ambika P3, a world-leading exhibition space. The affordances of all these resonate through our students' output and our research.

What we do

We see that learning is ontological as well as epistemological, and the diversity of who we are extends into the diversity of our approaches to architecture. The democracy of the open-ended project lies at the heart of our pedagogy, and we encourage the practice of design as an informed artistry that can contribute to architecture's distinct ethical and environmental responsibilities. We don't see architects as supplicants, and we cherish risk and experimentation – innovation and testing – in both the formulation and execution of projects. Grounding and supporting this are rigorous standards, formative assessments, and the peer and tutor groups of the Design Studios which we maintain and resource two-days-a-week.

Alongside the design studio, our teaching offers students the opportunity to develop their practice within a context of continually expanding theoretical and critical knowledge. In structuring these studies, we do not try and integrate everything with the Design Studio – which might limit a student's exploration of an area of study to the limits of their design ability. Rather, we aim for a synthesis, in which our teaching of technical and environmental studies, fabrication, cultural context and professional studies enables students to research and substantiate discrete pieces of work which, as well as informing studio work, have their own value. We compliment regular semester-based teaching with events and intensive-workshops.

Architecture Course structures

BArch (Part 1) progresses from educating students in architectural concepts and competencies to developing creative and reflective practice. Year 1 undertake shared projects that dovetail with cultural and technical sketchbook-based studies. Year 2 participate in elective design studios stressing architecture's formative physical and social contexts, complete a live site diary, and engage critically with diverse architectural cultures. Year 3 take responsibility for a specialist design studio project, its technical research and substantiation, and writing an extended essay (dissertation). Fabrication and representation workshops are woven throughout.

BScAED (see Section 2, School Course Appraisal) is complementary but different to the BArch, and reflects the School's aim to offer diversity in its architectural education portfolio. The course runs a common first year with the BArch, and then establishes itself through an evidence-based design method that emphasizes quantification as well as principle. MArch (Part 2) builds on students' diverse practice and UG experience. Students join a 'vertical' Design Studio with its own way methodologies and priorities to research through design and making. The Dissertation, arranged into seminar groups, enables students to match their creative achievements with a reflective research project. Students forge a culminating academic portfolio containing their design and reflective theses, combined with technical, environmental, representational and professional studies.

PGDipPP (Part 3) educates 38% of architects in this country through unprecedented reach into the profession. 40 practitioner-tutors guide students in critically investigating and reflecting upon their engagement with the *sui generis* discipline of architectural practice in the workplace.

Research

As practice informs our teaching, so does our research. In turn, Design Studios generate critical positions that test research and explore practice, as our Studio as Book series evidences. Staff research activities include large-scale funded awards such as Monsoon Assemblages and the Active Travel Academy, personal scholarship, books, fabrications, exhibitions and film, as well as collaborative and inter-disciplinary projects. In March 2021 the School will be making its submission to UoA 13 in REF2021. Our submission is the largest by number of papers and percentage of staff in the University, and is one of only a few schools of architecture to include research by design portfolios. Professor Lindsay Bremner took over as Director of Research in January 2021 and is leading the creation of our post-REF research and knowledge exchange landscape based around 5 collective themes (Design and Practice, Environmental Humanities, Mobilities and Connectivities, Place and Experience, and Territorial Transitions) and individual research plans and mentoring. We are developing a PhD by Design and Practice programme aimed at reflective practitioners wishing to engage in high-level research.

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
- 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 Commendations

The visiting board made the following commendations:

- 10.1 The board commends the creativity and resilience of staff in utilising available resources in the context of restricted access during the pandemic.
- 10.2 The board commends the spirit and implementation of cross-disciplinary working, which was evidenced through discussions with students, staff and programme leaders. The complementary nature of the course ethos and identity within the school is highly pertinent in the context of contemporary professional practice.

- 10.3 The board commends the attitude and proactive approach evidenced by the students both through their work and extracurricular activities.

11 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.

- 11.1 In the context of the course's evolution, one can see the emergence of how the course is addressing the socio, cultural and political underpinnings, implications and meanings of climate change and sustainability more generally. The board would however, like to see more evidence of this in the student portfolios.

- 11.2 The board would like to see more evidence in the student portfolios of engagement with the fine arts and to how this might inform student's work, not only cultural context, but also in design, technology and professional practice.

12. 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.

- 12.1 The board acknowledges that the initial visit was undertaken during the pandemic, which restricted access to student work. However, it would be beneficial for future visiting boards to have access to evidence of process work.

- 12.2 The board recognises the efforts of staff to deliver a high standard of teaching in the context of the pandemic. We would encourage the university to recognise the value of situated learning, notably through informal and formal face to face interaction in the design studio and on field trips. This is integral to insuring a positive student learning experience.

- 12.3 The board recognises the commitment of staff to deliver a high standard of teaching in the context of additional administrative duties during the pandemic. The board would encourage the university to consider the long-term sustainability of the programme and staff wellbeing as the course matures.

13 Delivery of academic position

The board look forward to seeing the updated academic position statement when The University of Westminster host their cyclical full visiting board in 2022.

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 BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design.

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.

Graduate Criteria for Part 1

The Board confirmed that all the Part 1 graduate criteria were met by graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architecture and Environmental Design.

16 Other information

16.1 Student numbers

2019-20

Year 1 – 36

Year 2 – 22

Year 3 – 12

2020-21

Year 1 – 34

Year 2 – 36

Year 3 – 18

16.2 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**
- **External examiners**
- **Staff**