

**Report of the RIBA visiting board  
to the Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University  
(XJTLU), Suzhou, China**

**Date of visiting board:** 24 & 25 October 2024  
**Confirmed by the RIBA:** 8 January 2025

- 1 Details of institution hosting course/s**  
Department of Architecture  
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University  
8 Chongwen Road  
Suzhou Dushu Lake Science and Education Innovation District  
Suzhou Industrial Park  
Suzhou  
P. R. China  
215123
- 2 Head of Department of Architecture**  
Dr Davide Lombardi
- 3 Courses offered for validation**  
BEng Architecture, Part 1  
Master of Architectural Design, Part 2
- 4 Programme Leaders**  
BEng Architecture, Part 1: Dr Jiawen Han  
Master of Architectural Design, Part 2: Giancarlo Di Marco
- 5 Awarding body**  
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University/ University of Liverpool
- 6 The visiting board**  
David Howarth (Chair)  
Alida Bata (Vice Chair)  
John Ashton  
Dr. Ruffina Thilakaratne (Regional representative)  
  
Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk – validation manager – in attendance
- 7 Procedures and criteria for the visit**  
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).
- 8 Proposals of the visiting board**  
On 8 January 2025 the RIBA confirmed continued validation of the following courses:  
  
BEng Architecture, Part 1  
Master of Architectural Design, Part 2  
  
The next full visiting board will take place in 2029.
- 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 Academic position statement (written by the Department)**

### **Introduction**

Founded in 2011, the Department of Architecture at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) forms part of a Sino-British university located in Suzhou, a city within the greater Shanghai area. With the opening of the University's South Campus in 2016, and in response of the ARC rapid expansion, the Department relocated to the state-of-the-art Design Building, equipped with world-class facilities.

Situated in China yet deeply connected with the University of Liverpool and the UK architectural education framework, the Department delivers a global model of architectural education. A defining feature of its Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD programmes is cultivating students' critical thinking abilities. In an era of rapid change, the Department, jointly with the departments of Engineering (CEN), Urban Planning and Design (UPD) and Industrial Design (IND), equips students to seize emerging opportunities, including the relatively new option of practising as a "liberal professional" in China—opening up novel pathways for current and future architects. As a relatively young and distinctively positioned architecture school, the Department is committed to advancing the importance of architectural education as a means of developing critical thinking skills essential for the profession's future.

### **Department Identity and Vision**

With faculty members bringing professional and research experience from over 20 countries, the Department of Architecture at XJTLU holds a unique place within China and also in comparison to UK Schools. It blends traditions and opportunities from both Eastern and Western perspectives, offering fresh insights on local contexts as well as global issues in architecture and urban design. As China continues to modernise, the Department recognises its responsibility to prepare the next generation of architects, who will face considerable challenges. Environmental sustainability, building tectonics, cultural heritage, and user-centred design are essential learning skills and competencies our graduating students must possess. In parallel, the growing recognition of the need to re-invest in the existing built environment, through urban regeneration and adaptive re-use, are areas our students are exposed.

The department embraces these pressing issues as both challenges and opportunities. Our approach focuses on fostering new, human-centred methodologies for learning, practising, and researching architectural design. The goal is to cultivate graduates who are critical thinkers and highly qualified young professionals, aligning with the new core competencies introduced by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 2021, emphasising health and life safety, climate emergency, and professional ethics ("The Way Ahead"), the 2030 RIBA climate challenge as well as UN Sustainable Development Goals. (SDG's) The Department's undergraduate and

postgraduate programmes are built around applied architectural design studio modules (50%), complemented by a balanced mix of humanities-based and technical modules (25% each).

### **Academic Agenda**

The following key points are based on staff views, student feedback, Design School strategy, internal University reports, and external reports by examiners and professional bodies:

#### *Exceptional areas of activity*

International validation of the BEng (Hons) Architecture programme at Part 1 level and the M.Arch. Des Master of Architectural Design programme by RIBA by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in October 2019. This makes the department the first in Mainland China to achieve part 1+2 international validation by the RIBA.

Excellent profile of an international faculty with experience in practice and research in more than 20 countries, directly supporting undergraduate and postgraduate learning. Initiatives such as workshops and lecture series with international guests, student competitions, summer research and competition projects, positively impacting the programmes' development. The Master of International Professional Practice in Architecture programme (MIPP), with its first intake starting in September 2024, will allow architectural practitioners and graduates to develop professional and interpersonal skills, take increased leadership roles, engage in entrepreneurial activities, and develop their knowledge in International contemporary practice.

The state-of-art of the FabLab (Fabrication Lab) allows an array of research led design and activities such as: 3D printing, CNC milling, laser cut, robotics, scanning and imaging. The most current addition includes one industrial robotic arm to complement the two collaborative robots.

#### *Individuality of the learning environment in the Chinese context*

Positioned in Suzhou, both a heritage (classical gardens recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Sites) and a highly dynamic city of 15 million people, now China's fourth largest concentration of economic activity in terms of GDP.

- Unique offering of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in English in China, taught by international educators.
- Excellent resources on a new campus, open to the vibrant life of one of China's flagship development projects, the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), within which the University and more than 100 Fortune 500 companies operate, offering a high quality of life.
- Excellent building resources supporting a vibrant studio culture, with dedicated spaces for design studios, reviews, physical modelling, and a materials' library.
- Recruitment of students from amongst the top 5% of Chinese high school graduates and a progressive increase of international students.

#### **The BEng Architecture Programme**

- provides a clear sequence of design studios with the gradual introduction of ideas and skills, with a focus on the attainment of personal and professional confidence in order to take advantage of practice experience.

- benefits of the Extended Studies Scheme (ESS), a new form of education provision of XJTLU whereby students are provided with the opportunity to study credit-bearing modules that are not part of their enrolled programme of study, and do not count toward the degree requirements of their enrolled programme of study. Through ESS, students can pursue academic interests in more expansive disciplinary areas to learn new knowledge and skills which would assist them in developing academic potential and career opportunities.
- also benefits from 2+2 scheme to study in Liverpool in the last two years; and 2+2+2 scheme with a direct entry to the MArch Des programme.
- further provides the students with the option of a one-year abroad in Torino (Italy), where they can continue their studies in the local Polytechnic.

#### The MArch Des programme

- fosters student autonomy and responsibility in pursuing individual interests in view of future professional career development opportunities, with the second year framed as a “research by design” year.
- serves as entry path for PhD, with recent cohorts that have seen a rising number of students transitioning from the PG Programme to the PhD one.
- connects with XJTLU’s Master programmes in Urban Planning and Urban Design (with the Urban Planning and Design Department) in year one creates unique possibilities for interdisciplinary design research. The collaboration with the School of Film and Television Arts has resulted in a series of exhibitions and high-impact workshop outcomes.

#### *Relevance to professional practice*

Design studio themes are strongly connected with real-world problems and necessities in China and beyond; lecture courses and coursework are related to contemporary issues and current concerns.

Practising architects in Suzhou and Shanghai contribute as part-time tutors and visiting critics, present guest lectures, lead site visits, and offer internships for students.

The **Design Research Centre (DRC)** seeks to actively involve staff, students, and local practising architects in developing competitions and projects. A blend of local and international tutors leads the DRC operations and its involvement in competitions locally and globally.

#### *Creative criteria for delivering course content*

Innovative learning environment that fosters independent, creative and responsible designers with a thoughtful, research-led and imaginative approach to place-making. Close collaboration with the other Departments of the School of Design (Urban Planning & Design, Civil Engineering, Industrial Design) likewise with other schools in XJTLU (School of Cultural Technology) Flexible programme design, with the active participation of a dynamic faculty, delivering responsive, changing projects that complement and extend core learning whilst still maintaining criteria-fulfilling content.

MArch Des programme: connection with XJTLU’s Master programmes in Urban Planning and Urban Design (with the Urban Planning and Design Department) in year one creates unique possibilities for interdisciplinary design research. The collaboration with the School of Film and Television Arts has resulted in a series of exhibitions and high-impact workshop outcomes.

The Department's research concentrates its research areas via four research labs and enhances the student experience through active research-based learning: History, Theory and Heritage Lab, Digital Design and Fabrication Lab, Urban and Landscape Ecologies Lab, and the Cultural Innovation and Critical Histories Research Lab.

The Department is also committed to Research by Design, an experimental form of research specific to the architectural discipline, with less traditional research outcomes, such as prototypes, projects, buildings, components, and exhibitions.

To this end, the Design Research Centre has been established to facilitate small-scale pilot projects. It has a flexible staff structure and involves several full-time faculty members, along with local professional architects who will contribute their specific competencies in architectural design, planning, and construction.

In the next few years, the Department of Architecture will focus on advancing key areas such as digitalization, heritage, and sustainability, leveraging both local and global perspectives. Locally, the department will contribute to China's efforts to preserve architectural heritage while integrating cutting-edge digital tools and sustainable practices. On the international front, the department will deepen its collaborations with leading global institutions and expand its influence in Southeast Asia, further strengthening its academic and professional networks. In response to evolving educational needs, more flexible teaching approaches, such as a broader range of electives, will be introduced, allowing students to tailor their learning experiences to emerging challenges and interdisciplinary opportunities in architecture.

## **11 Commendations**

The Board commends the following:

- 11.1 The board commends the international and regional outlook of the Department and the diversity and expertise evident in the staff and student body.
- 11.2 The board recognises the University's and School's support of the Department and the provision of extensive workshop facilities and generous studio spaces.
- 11.3 The Board commends the quality of teaching, breadth of content and program structure of the Part 1 course, reflective in the student work.

## **12 Conditions**

There are no conditions.

## **13 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.

- 13.1 The Board acknowledges the efforts taken to provide both printed and digital samples of student work. However, the next Board will need to see a clear and concise synoptic exhibition illustrating the structure of the BEng Architecture, Part 1 and Master of Architectural Design, Part 2, and the academic and pedagogical position of the Department.
- 13.2 The School should review the use of External examiners, beyond their primary role as module moderators to overview the programmes at Part 1 & 2.
- 13.3 At MArch Des ( Part 2 ) the Department should review the structure, content and pedagogy of the programme in order to address the following;
  - Clearly evidence the embedding of meaningful sustainability and climate literacy in the academic portfolio.
  - More clearly evidence the integration of technology, commensurate with a level of sophistication expected at Part 2 level.
  - Promote independent critical thinking and design rigour in student design projects through less prescriptive and repetitive briefs.
- 14. 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.
- 14.1 As part of the continuous development of the programme, current challenges should be addressed directly and explicitly, including ecological responsibility, AI, and the changing role of the architect.
- 14.2 The Board encourages the Department to harness the expertise of the wider staff group in order to contribute to the academic vision of the PG program.
- 14.3 The Board encourages the department to take full advantage of external examiners experience and expertise in the ongoing development of the course. The external examiners should be in dialogue each other, staff and students.
- 14.4 The Board is encouraged by the programs engagement with AI and the use of advanced 3d modelling tools. However, at Part 2 students should be encouraged to better evidence design through making, material experimentation and prototyping at all scales.
- 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.
- 15.1 The Board confirmed that all graduate attributes for Part 1 were met by graduates of the BEng Architecture, Part 1 programme.



- 15.2 The Board confirmed that all graduate attributes for Part 2 were met by graduates of the Master of Architectural Design, Part 2

**16 Review of work against themes and values**

It should be noted that where the visiting board considered themes and values to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or themes and values clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested themes and values were particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

The Board confirmed that all RIBA Themes and Values were met by graduates of the BEng Architecture, Part 1 and Master of Architectural Design, Part 2

**17 Other information**

**17.1 Student numbers**

BEng Architecture, Part 1: 298

Master of Architectural Design, Part 2: 23

**17.2 Documentation provided**

The Department provided all documentation as required by the Validation Procedures.

**18 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 institution
- Meeting with external examiners
- Meeting with staff