

Building Surveying: A UK Phenomenon or a Profession with Genuine Global Appeal?

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SUMMARY

During the 1970s, a new profession emerged within UK Surveying; that of Building Surveying. These surveyors, originally technically minded general practitioners, developed and adapted their professional skills and knowledge to fulfil client needs and to keep pace with the changing market (RICS, 1994). Within the UK, the knowledge and expertise of the building surveyor is widely known and used in the property and construction markets, however Building Surveying remains little known overseas. In the global market there is much more familiarity with the profession of the quantity surveyor than building surveyor, however undoubtedly the work of building surveying is undertaken in other countries.

This research examines the professional knowledge and skills of the Building Surveyor in the UK context and illustrates the development and emergence of the profession. The knowledge and skills are evaluated in terms of adaptation to changing markets and demonstrate how Building Surveyors are able to adapt during changes in economic cycles. The potential future developments for Building Surveying are also investigated in this research project. Finally the question is posed as to whether the professional skills and knowledge of Building Surveyors are required in countries other than the UK.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, the profession of Building Surveying has emerged and consolidated within the UK, however since that time there has been little awareness of Building Surveying outside of the UK. As other built environment and property professions such as Architecture and Quantity Surveying are more widely recognized, they find it easier to offer their professional services outside of the UK. Furthermore due to the nature of building surveying, there is no doubt that the services they offer is being undertaken outside of the UK.

This research examines the history and growth of building surveying in the UK. The ability of Building Surveyors to survive fluctuating economic cycles is also discussed in the paper. The paper moves on to identify the research aims and objectives and then outlines the research methodology which was adopted for the research. The following section of the paper sets out the data analysis before moving on to discuss the conclusions that were drawn from the data. Finally some recommendations are set out for further work.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The emergence of Building Surveying in the UK

Within the profession there is some ambiguity about when Building Surveying emerged, whilst Fall (2002:22) commented 'In the 1970s the specialism of building surveying didn't really exist', the Building Surveying Division of the RICS claimed that two original founder members of the RICS were in fact 'building surveyors / quantity surveyors'. What is clear is that the division of Building Surveying in the RICS, now called the Building Surveying Faculty, was not established until 1973. However it can also be argued that the role of building surveying has evolved slowly since the establishment of the institution and has now separated distinctly from quantity surveying.

What services and knowledge can building surveyors offer their clients? According to the Building Surveying Faculty (www.rics.org.uk) typically offered services are noted in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Professional Services offered by Building Surveyors
Construction design and building works (including conservation of historic buildings)
Project management and monitoring
Planning Supervisor role under Construction Design and Management Regulations (CDM)
Property legislation advice
Insurance assessment and claims assistance
Defect investigation and maintenance advice
Building surveys and measured surveys
Miscellaneous services

The miscellaneous services include providing advice for energy efficiency in buildings, acting as an approved inspector in connection with Building Regulation (Building Code) Approvals. Building Surveyors therefore are able to offer a broad range of services for their clients. These services can be in connection with the purchase of property or during the life cycle of the building, equally building surveyors can be involved in new build project monitoring or the conservation of historic stock. Some of the services offered are highly specialized such as legal advice. For example, in the UK in some leased property tenants are liable for repairs during the lease term. At the end of the term, or during the term, the landlord may require the tenant to comply with the terms of the repairing covenants. If this is the case, the landlord can instruct a building surveyor to prepare, an interim, or a terminal schedule of dilapidations. The building surveyor interprets the repairing covenants in the lease and English case law to establish the extent of repair required, after the schedule is prepared and served, there is a negotiation with the tenants surveyor to agree the works. Overall the building surveyor possesses technical knowledge and expertise about buildings, along with legal and economic knowledge about property and construction.

Given the broad range of professional services offered by building surveyors, what skills are demanded? Often building surveyors are required to exercise problem solving skills, in diagnosing defects in buildings for example. Here, the building surveyor is required to diagnose the defect, often eliminating a number of possibilities, and then to identify appropriate remedial action. At other times, such as when dealing with building contractors on site negotiating skills are required to ensure the client's interests are best served. Building surveyors often have a number of instructions to work through simultaneously and therefore time management skills are necessary. Finally the traditional oral, written and graphical communication skills are also requisite in a building surveying career. Not only is a building surveyor technically knowledgeable, they are trained and educated in a broad range of skills which are adaptable and flexible and enable them to operate in a changing market place.

What type of clients uses the services of the building surveyor? The answer is many, from large to small. Clients can be public sector organizations such as Health Trusts, Local Authorities and Government Departments to private clients such as Pension Funds, Banks and high street retailers (Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury and so on). The clients can also be private individuals who wish to extend their homes or have advice on the purchase of a property. Building Surveyors work in private housing, public housing, private commercial, private industrial and public non-housing (RICS Construction Market Survey, 2002, Q3).

One suggestion has been posited; that building surveying is so broad that building surveyors have a little knowledge about too many areas and limited depth of knowledge. In English, this phenomena is sometimes called a 'jack of all trades', one aim of this research is to examine this proposition.

Whilst quantity surveying and valuation or general practice surveying is practiced widely outside the UK, building surveying has not enjoyed similar take up. In 2003, RICS membership stood at around 120,000 worldwide, with 26,563 members registered the Building Surveying Faculty. However in 2003, only 166 building surveyors work in the Oceania region (RICS, 2003). Why do so few Building Surveyors work outside the UK? Given the range of professional services offered, the range of technical knowledge and expertise and the range of skills possessed by building surveyors, clearly the work they do is being undertaken outside of the UK but presumably by other professionals.

2.2 Building Surveying and Economic Cycles

In the UK, construction accounts for 7% of national output and is often seen as 'a crude indicator of the well-being of the economy as a whole' (Cooke, 1996:13). In the UK approximately 60% of the population is a homeowner. When the property market is experiencing rising house prices, more property owners are encouraged to improve their properties and buy and sell property. This creates work for construction workers and home retailers. At a higher level, local authorities and government are encouraged to initiate major building and regeneration schemes. Conversely when the property market is slow or stagnant, fewer properties are sold, less improvements are made and major public schemes are postponed (Cooke, 1996).

The UK economy has experienced boom and bust cycles, this is where periods of high prosperity are experienced followed by periods of low prosperity and a lack of economic activity. The RICS has established clear links between these economic cycles and property market activity (Askham, Kellet et al, 1998). Since the late 1990s the UK economy has enjoyed a rapidly increasing cycle following the recession of the early 1990s. This activity has been mirrored in the housing market where house prices have increased significantly.

These fluctuations in the property market are mirrored in the amount of instructions received by building surveyors, however are they the same type of instructions? Building Surveyors like other professions are operating in a changing world;

As members of the [building surveying] faculty we are constantly faced with change.

The markets for our services are not static. The client base for our services is not static.

The services those clients require of us are moving. (Jones & Kirby, 2002)

In order to survive and prosper, it is necessary for professionals to adapt to change and to maximise the opportunities that arise from change. One of the biggest drivers of change in surveying during the 1990s was the emergence of information technologies (Harbour and Wilkinson, 2001). The Charlton Report (1999) and the Agenda for Change (1999) demonstrates that the RICS recognized the importance of, and need for, change in the profession. One of the aims of the Agenda for Change was to reorganise and restructure the

Institution in order to react more quickly to clients and practitioners changing needs and requirements. One of these needs was to provide a specific home for each specialism with the flexibility to mix with other faculties / members.

3. RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

A number of questions arise as a result of the literature review, this paper focuses on the question of whether the building surveyor can offer their professional services outside of the UK.

This research has a number of aims which were;

- To identify the nature of the building surveyors work and to establish whether it is a profession that is too broad.
- To gain a greater understanding of the current economic climate in the context of property and construction and to investigate any links to the types of services offered by building surveyors.
- To establish the possible short term future developments for the building surveying profession and analyse any relationship to the 'jack of all trades' position.

The limitations of the study is that it examines the perceptions and views of practising building surveyors based in the North of England only.

3.1 Research Methodology

It was established that the research question would be fundamental in determining the research method. Analyses of the nature of the research question concluded that the emphasis of the research question was on the collection of meanings, experiences and opinions of building surveyors practicing in the North of England. The subjective character of the research required the research to be qualitative in nature.

It was decided that it would be important during the study to express the impact of the current economic climate on the services provided by building surveyors. A quantitative research method would be unable to “*convey the importance and the special impact*” (Naoum: 2002, p.43) of the research findings.

The qualitative research method allowed the researchers to investigate new ideas and opinions. The study of the impact of the economic cycle upon the services offered by building surveyors required a research method that not only allowed the necessary spontaneity and flexibility but also enabled the research to discover and describe an area of investigation devoid of theories and hypotheses.

Once the research method had been established as qualitative, this had a direct effect on the method of data collection. Primary data would be utilised to provide the main bulk of the data for analysis. Naoum (2002) highlighted that “fieldwork” should be used for the collection. The appropriate method of fieldwork then needed to be selected. Interviews were considered more effective than questionnaires in this instance for the following reasons:

- Research had illustrated that interviews provide a complete set of high quality data (Draver:1995), (Naoum:2002).
- The need for flexibility and clarification with in the research had already been established. Interviews were able to provide these needs over other methods of fieldwork.
- The research, being the first detailed study of its kind, required an explanation in addition to the answers given. Interviews allowed greater scope for providing insight into the reasoning behind the answers obtained during the fieldwork.

The types of interview that could have been used for the fieldwork were many and varied. However, careful consideration had to be given to the selection of the nature of the interview as this would have an impact upon the results and conclusions of the fieldwork.

Merton and Kendal (1946) identified that semi-structured interviews could be distinguished by four characteristics. These characteristics were influential in the decision to utilise semi-structured interviews within the field work for this study. This type of interview was considered superior as it provided an element of control whilst allowing areas of interest to be probed and investigated further. The raw data collected by the interviews was then coded in order to provide a constant and effective method from which to extract the key themes and patterns from the study.

Building surveyors were selected from four property consultant firms. The characteristics governing the selection process provided firms ranging from international consultancies to localised practices with 2 offices. The surveyors selected to be interviewed, with the exception of 1, were all partners in the chosen practice and had been chartered for 5+ years. Although the sample was limited, it is envisaged that this would be balanced by the use of the detailed primary data. The analysis of the current economic climate of the construction and property market was conducted through secondary research of the leading property consultants' market reviews. This enabled an up to date and concise evaluation to be drawn.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Economic Climate

One of the fundamental principals of the study was to establish whether there are any links between the economic climate and the workload of building surveyors in the North of England. In order to discover whether any correlation existed between two the recent economic climate was investigated and the major trends in the main markets of the property and construction industry noted.

During the interviews the interviewees categorised their workloads through a period of high and low economic activity. A table was produced for the candidates that provided the types of services which they may have provided and two 5 year, periods during which their was a peak and a trough period. A definite connection between the economic climate and building surveyors' workloads indicated that the peaks and troughs of the economic climate of the

property and construction market are reflected by similar highs and lows in building surveyors' workloads.

An association was also found between the levels of contribution that certain services, offered by building surveyors, made to the overall workload of a building surveyor's work. It was anticipated that refurbishment and alteration work would provide a higher proportion of a building surveyor's work during a trough period in the economic cycle. This theory was upheld by the questionnaire completed by the 4 interviewees. However, it is interesting to note that many of the services offered by building surveyors involve some form of, or a connection to, refurbishment or alteration of existing buildings. For example, Party Wall and DDA advice can be applied to both existing buildings and new build projects. This suggests that the core work of many building surveyors is the refurbishment and alteration of existing buildings regardless of the economic conditions.

It became clear, during the interviews that the building surveyors that we recognise today originally developed out of quantity surveying and architecture. It was found that one of the interviewees originally started their career as an architectural assistant, designing building projects and undertaking contract administration. The interviewee's career development saw these skills in building design and contract administration still formed a significant part of their work. Many interviewees upheld the theory that building surveyors conducted some of the work traditionally seen as that of the Architect, work with an element of design.

The semi-structured interviews revealed that building surveyors have a wide background in their education and knowledge of property. This broad knowledge of the issues relating to property is the key to their adaptable nature. This extensive knowledge enables building surveyors to provide a wide range of services for an equally varied spectrum of clients.

However, the value of this knowledge may only be unlocked through effective communication. The interviewees highlighted effective communication as being a core skill required by all building surveyors. The vital combination of a broad knowledge of property issues and effective communication skills equip a building surveyor with the necessary attributes to provide relevant and expert advice to their clients.

This extensive knowledge allows building surveyors to adapt quickly to changes in the property and construction market. This may be a change in property legislation or a shift in the economic conditions of the market. A change in the economic climate will affect the services required by clients, which in turn affects the type of services offered by building surveyors.

It has been clearly demonstrated that building surveyors are able to adjust and redirect their services in line with the changing conditions of the economy. It is also evident that building surveyors are unable to '*survive as generalists*' (Simpson, 2003). Specialising in specific areas allows building surveyors to reduce competition for work and retain healthy levels of fees during both high and low economic periods. A specialisation is often found within a building surveying practice. However, the ability to adapt and change is retained by offering other services that may be expanded or contracted dependent upon the economic climate; '*we*

don't diversify to provide a full spectrum of services and will develop services as and when required.' (Simpson, 2003).

The image of building surveyors as a 'Jacks of all trades' is contradicted because of the specialist services offered. However, it is the 'Jack of all trades' knowledge that allows building surveyors to specialise and develop new niche areas within existing markets. Without this 'Jack of all trades' knowledge, building surveyors would be ill equipped to readily adapt their services to their ever-changing work environment. It is this 'Jack of all trades' knowledge that allows building surveyors to obtain the benefits of both the specialist market, whilst retaining the skills and knowledge to provide clients with the general building surveying services.

5. CONCLUSION

The UK construction market is often used as a rudimentary indicator for the condition of the overall UK economy. In turn, the construction market's economy can influence client's decisions regarding their property. When the construction market provides prospects that appear good, property owners are more prepared to improve their existing property or to buy and sell property. The review illustrated that fluctuations in the economy of the property and construction market affected the services and advice that clients required. It was evident that further investigation as to whether building surveyors did in fact see a change in the services required by clients during differing economic conditions was required.

Evidence was found that the economic climate of a market would instigate a need for change. It was proposed to research further the possibility that the seemingly flexible and adaptable profession of building surveying changed due to economic fluctuations within the property and construction market.

The broad nature of a building surveyor's work and services was confirmed by the study. The trends illustrated by the research also suggested that building surveying is indeed a 'Jack of all trades' profession. However, the 'Jack of all trades' knowledge possessed by building surveyors allows specialist areas to be exploited.

It was felt that the investigation into the evaluation of the economic climate required greater depth. However, the research was able to provide a general understanding of the current economic climate and clear links between the current economic climate and the types of services offered by building surveyors were established.

The uncertainty in the current economic market, at the time of the study, had made the forecasting of future services difficult, due to their connection to the economy. The implementations of building surveyors' future services are clearly connected to the economic cycle of the property and construction market. The uncertainty in the future path of the economy revealed the benefit of the 'Jack of all trades' position. The 'Jack of all trades' position allows building surveyors to readily adapt to changes in the market and even develop new services in specialist areas without having to rely on forecasts.

In summary, the research supports the view that building surveying is a 'Jack of all trades' profession; contradictory to the saying 'Jack of all trades, master of none', the building surveying profession is able to provide specialist advice on a wide range of subjects. It is not possible for building surveyors to survive as generalists and practices provide specialist services to avoid excessive competition in the market place.

The research shows that the 'Jack of all trades' knowledge is fundamental to the survival of the building surveying profession. It gives building surveyors the flexibility to adapt to changes in the economic climate, which includes providing specialist services to their clients. It is beneficial for a building surveyor to be a 'Jack of all trades' in the current economic climate. Yet the current economic climate has been shown to be somewhat irrelevant. The adaptability given to the building surveyor by their 'Jack of all trades' knowledge enables the building surveyor to react and adjust to exploit any economic conditions. It was also found that changes in legislation were often a catalyst for the building surveying profession to utilise their skills and knowledge of property and construction in order to develop new specialist services for their clients.

Clearly Building Surveyors possess the technical knowledge and professional skills to provide clients outside of the UK with valuable services, it remains to be seen whether changes to make the RICS a global professional body, proposed changes to EU working practices and globalisation will encourage more Building Surveyors to work outside the UK. This research demonstrates that Building Surveyors have much to offer.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Sara J Wilkinson is a chartered Building Surveyor. She worked in private practice in London during the 1980s and early 1990s before moving to Sheffield Hallam University. Her current research interests include – conceptual understanding of corporate social responsibility within construction and property, measuring utility in commercial buildings, the impact of RICS education reform on the Building Surveying profession, globalisation and building surveying and gender issues and surveying. Sara has also maintained contact with the RICS and has been a Chair of the professional assessment of competence panels for

several years. She has received a number of research grants from the RICS and FIG who are currently sponsoring the establishment of a global network facility for female surveyors to be launched in early 2004.

Tom Kibblewhite graduated from Sheffield Hallam University in 2003 and is now employed with Watts and Partners in Manchester England where is completing his professional training for chartership as a Building Surveyor. This research project is largely based on work undertaken during his final year.

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