



Thematic Session

# 7ICCH

Seventh International Congress on Construction History

12 - 16 JULY, 2021

LISBON, PORTUGAL



## TS11. Understanding the culture of building expertise in situation of uncertainty (Middle Age-Modern Times)

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In the building domain, only the three most common actors working in the art of building have been the subject of ongoing study - contractors, architects, and engineers. Even if these figures deserve considerably more research, the expert, or surveyor, is still widely unknown. He is supposed to help to take a decision in an atmosphere of uncertainty. His advice may be evaluative of a past or present situation, even predictive (to solve a crisis situation) or preventive (to avoid a disaster).

Experts serving as superior authorities gave their advice on situations either out of court, to appraise a piece of heritage or work, or in front of a court in the case of a trial between two or more protagonists. In the latter case, experts would assist the judge, who was not, a priori, a building specialist but was nonetheless required to decide. The tasks given to experts took three different forms: technical (to assess the quality of materials, a building process or proceedings at the building site); economic (to estimate the building for an estate, the cost of work relating to a building, or to approve the amount of wages or an architect's fees); and legal (to check whether a building complied with official construction, architectural and urban regulations, particularly in relation to alignment and easements).

In France, experts were members of building trades only. In all communities, there was an elite corps that was more learned than the other members of the community. Initially, they were elected by their peers and described as “jurés”, or “sworn”. In the 16th century, after their specific skills had been assessed, they had to acquire an “office” from the King. In 1690 the Corps was officially divided into two columns one of architects “bourgeois”, the other of contractors. However, the invention of experts in others “professions” with no official statute, such as architects or engineers, is in need of clarification. How did contractors, architects and engineers distribute their activities between building and surveying? Was expertise a way to gain access to architectural patronage? Did experts play a key role in the normalization and theorization of



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building rules through treaties and handbooks? Were they involved in building innovation? The analysis of the experts as a community could be very insightful, according to their expert work, or to their aggregation of functions, or to their social networks (family, sponsorship, partnership, clients), or to their wealth (financial activity, possession).

Though we are beginning to discover their statutes in France, we do not have a precise understanding of their real practice and know nothing about their statutes and importance abroad. We wish to gather contributions on building experts and expertise in different European countries, as well as in countries from different continents, over a long or short time period. This initiative should enable us to draw broad comparisons between the statutes, tasks and practices of different types of building experts, revealing their similarities and differences. This would bring to light the different kinds of sources that can be used to draft a history of expertise.



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