

Thematic sessions

Experts and building assessments.

An international comparison. 13th-20th century

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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.

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 four 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).

How did contractors, architects and engineers distribute their activities between building and surveying? Was expertise a way to gain access to an order? Did experts play a key role in the normalisation and theorisation of building rules through treaties and handbooks? Were they involved in building innovation?

In this session 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 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.