

Thematic sessions

Architects and bureaucrats:

centralised governments and the administrative pre-conditions of building before 1750

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The way bureaucratic procedures govern the planning of architecture strikes us as typical modern. It is generally considered as a development that set in with the changing role of the state in the commissioning of public works and in the regulation of architectural production in the 19th century. However the origins of such procedures go back to the Late Middle Ages, when pivotal administrative reforms by the central government were introduced. The hypothesis of this session is that this change was not only a financial reform, but also laid the foundation of many “modern” characteristics of present-day practice. New bureaucratic procedures necessitated the recording of decisions and agreements that were previously left implicit. The new bureaucracies not only led to increasing documentation, but also created a common administrative culture in which accounts and documents were standardised. Studies on the building administrations usually only treat a single administration. The establishment and organisational transformations of these institutions have not been compared systematically. It remains unclear whether such centralised bodies developed rather autonomously, responding to local conditions and requirements, or were influenced by each other. A strong indication for international exchange is that the centralised Royal Building Administration in France and the King’s Works in England were established in the same decade in the late 14th century. There are other examples, like the Habsburg administration, which introduced a Burgundian centralised governance for the royal sites in Castile.

This session brings together scholarships on the early development of these organisations as a first attempt to compare them on a pan-European scale. In addition, for a better understanding of how administrative requirements affected construction across geographical areas, this session aims to include comparable cases beyond Europe, such as the centralised administration of the imperial court in China, which produced the *Yingzao fashi* (1103), a magnificent construction manual compiled during the Northern Song dynasty by the assistant director of the office of public works.

This session invites papers that address the structure of these institutions, the people involved and their bureaucratic planning procedures. Did such centralised bodies contribute to a common administrative culture, in which accounts and documents became increasingly uniform? And were terminology and notation systems in drawings and textual documents standardised? We are particularly interested in the way architecture was encoded in the building process, either in individual documents or through their interrelationships. In what way did cost estimates, specifications, contracts, bills of quantities etc. play a role in planning and controlling of construction? What kinds of histories are made available through their exploration and how might these documents offer openings for questions in construction history and theory that may otherwise remain under-explored?