

Podcast: How has COVID-19 changed building surveying?

Andrew Belt: [00:00:00] COVID-19 has changed the world we live in but one of the few positives to have come out of the pandemic is the way we have adapted to this new reality. How we work and interact with one another has changed, and industries have had to adapt too.

In this new series of podcasts, we will be looking at different professions and how they have adapted in these circumstances. First up is the man responsible for this new series, James Ritson, who, as UCEM Programme Leader for our Building Surveying programmes, suggested we discuss how COVID-19 has changed building surveying.

Hi James.

James Ritson: [00:00:36] Hello Andrew.

Andrew Belt: [00:00:41] How are you?

James Ritson: [00:00:40] I'm well, adapting as everybody else is.

I've been working over the weekend to create my shed into a new workspace because everybody's now working at home. So, we're all adapting.

Andrew Belt: [00:01:02] Yes. And that's the key topic of this podcast. And thank you for the suggestion.

I asked you about what you would like to talk about for this podcast and you suggested a look into how building surveying has changed since March, particularly in this country, when we went into lockdown as the result of coronavirus and changed everything as we know it.

So, looking in more detail at an industry and what they've had to do is a great idea and one which we'd like to take forward and look at other industries which relate to the built environment.

The first question is: how has building surveying changed in the COVID world?

James Ritson: [00:01:56] Typically [those working in] the built environment are often the ones who are most effected whenever there's an economic change in circumstances. However, building surveyors seem to be going through a bit of a renaissance. They were very quiet in the first weeks of the lockdown. Certainly, my students were able to focus on their studies.

There seems to have been a few weeks of adaption and then they suddenly got busy and it was quite amazing to see the various roles that buildings surveyors were working in. One example would be a team of building surveying students who were working for large built environment bodies, such as shopping centres and the NHS Trusts themselves.

And of course, they have been working on major adaption projects whether it be to create a separate wing for COVID patients within the hospital or making shopping

centres COVID-safe. The students ended up being busy and one of the reflections that I'm getting from the industry is that it's dramatically changed the way we are working. We're not in our offices. I'm not speaking to you face-to-face in Horizons [UCEM's HQ] in Reading. You're at your base and I'm in my shed in the garden. I think that that's a reflection of how some of these things have fundamentally changed.

Our role has become very busy and building surveyors seem to be taking a lead on how we begin to adapt our built environment. One thing that has changed is how we conduct ourselves; it must be incredibly professional. Just doing a simple building inspection, a house inspection, onsite inspection, we're used to being well-presented to meet the client or going onto a building site, making sure we all have our hard hats, jackets and boots. Now we're just as concerned about making sure that we are hygienic for the people we're working with. We've made sure that we've got face protection and things like that. And again, those kinds of impacts we're not just seeing in the built environment, we're seeing it in every environment; but it's quite reassuring to see how surveyors have stood up to the challenge and are really being part of the changing scenarios that we're living in.

Andrew Belt: [00:04:51] So of course, none of us could have ever prepared for such a scenario, which we're still living through. How equipped do you feel building surveying was to adapt during the pandemic?

James Ritson: [00:05:17] It was varied. Some people did carry on as normal. And I think that they could, in the sense that they were in a position where they were socially distancing, but they were doing surveys, they were doing inspections and so forth which was a relatively isolated role. They weren't necessarily always in the office. I think that they're quite used to remote working because of the nature of what they do; they weren't inspecting remotely, they weren't doing work from an office, they would go into building sites.

So I think that they were relatively easily able to adapt. I think the adaptation question was waiting to know what we needed to adapt to and I don't think that was fundamentally down to building surveying. From the responses that I've seen. People have been incredibly busy but a lot of the delays were due to surveyors wanting to know what they could do. What would the desired outcome be? And I think those decisions, as with every crisis, were sometimes confusing and sometimes difficult. I think what is very interesting now is we're seeing a complete change of dynamic to what was predicted.

It's really interesting seeing some of the suggestions that are coming through about how the built environment might adapt and how building surveyors are now really at the centre of the built environment rather than being the GPs in the medical sense, the general practitioners of the built environment. We're now really taking the lead in many of the adaptation processes that are going on.

I think we've adapted quickly. A lot of practices have been very quick to bring in these new processes. I've seen the guidance about going to sites and doing building inspections. As with a lot of other professions, we are also prepared because we do

have to take certain precautions. We do have to be aware whenever we may be dealing with toxic or hazardous substances so, we're quite used to dealing with the regulations that you have on site. I think we've adapted to the new COVID regulations quite quickly.

And what is interesting now, the most required thing on a site visit is not just a hard hat, but it's your hand wash and face mask. So, it was an addition to what we did that we were able to adapt to and I think that's why we have become so busy responding to the crisis.

Andrew Belt: [00:08:06] So in some ways, certainly in comparison to other professions, building surveying was in a better place after the pandemic set in, eight months on from the initial lockdown.

If you're thinking that you want to get into building surveying, what kind of a working life can you now expect if you're entering the profession for the first time?

James Ritson: [00:08:37] I think that what we have seen is that there has been a big uptake in firms that would typically have only sent real estate students that are now sending building surveying students.

I think that that is really down to what I talked about earlier which is the need to adapt. We are already talking about office capacity being radically reduced and people working from home. Personally, I've had a minor adaption of my house so it can create a complete at-home work office away from everybody else.

And I think that that's the type of thing that we're going to see a lot more. We're going to see a lot more adaption and that's where building surveying has always been really strong, whether it be adaption on dealing with the existing built environment, a new client or a new set of requirements, or a physical change. It may be alteration and we're beginning to see that. Not only can we see that in building surveying, but we're beginning to see that in policy.

We've already had the announcement of the extension of the admitted development right by the changes to planning. And again, that's a really interesting one. We've got someone coming in to talk to the students next week, a building surveyor who specialises in neighbourly issues. That's the type of thing we're going to see a lot more of because people are extending their properties much more. Neighbourly issues, neighbourly disputes are known to increase or at least need to be resolved, shall we say. I think that that's a really interesting part, what we now know is the biggest challenge we face is not the new builds, it's how we adapt to what we've already got.

That was said about sustainability, but the same is true in the post COVID world. How do we adapt to that? Do people still want the very large major office in Canary Wharf or London City, or do they want a series of remote satellite offices as well? And that's a really interesting discussion as building surveyors are part of managing the change in the built environment.

So, if you were saying, what would you expect a new graduate to be doing? They will be managing that change, whether it be client changes as in the new occupants' dilapidations, house-buying, things like that. Or it could be physical changes, having to adapt an office, the conversion of a space into another type of space change. It's an interesting one.

It's going to be a few months and maybe a considerable number of months until we know what the state of our high streets is going to be. That's going to be an interesting one because again all of those will need building surveying type work done to them. And if we adapt then we can change that.

So, it's certainly a buoyant time in the sense of work but challenging in the sense of what we must do. I think that that's really what I would say. If you are coming into the profession now, you're going to be part of managing that change.

Andrew Belt: [00:12:14] That's a great point and anyone who would be entering the profession will be at the forefront of that change. So, that's a great amount of responsibility can be taking on. If you're someone who enjoys problem-solving, it's these kinds of problems you can really sink your teeth into and try to understand all of these changes, as well as all the policy changes you mentioned as well, and making sure that our buildings are as safe as they possibly can be and also as suitable as they can be.

It's these things which will be in the work of building surveyors and, and you touched upon it there with the policy changes, but longer term, how do you think COVID will change the built environment?

James Ritson: [00:13:16] I think what we will do is we will start looking at the area that we live and work in in much more detail. One of the constants that I've been seeing is people are really valuing their local environment more, whether that be their work or, more typically during the lockdown, the home environment. The access to nature is so much more in demand. We are seeing a huge surge in the requests for purchases of properties in the countryside.

The two questions that estate agents are getting are: has it got access to nature and has it got an internet connection? And I think that's just an indication of what people are seeing their future being. I don't think that will be definitive in the long-term with everyone working remotely.

I think what we will probably have is what we normally see in the built environment. There will be the rebound effect. People will start getting nostalgic for wanting to come back to the office. So, I think what we will probably see is a hybrid of what we've had before.

We will see much more working at home. I think that's obvious for people who can, but let's not forget there are professions where you can't work from home. I think that we will see the built environment hopefully adapt in a much more sustainable way but I think also we will see an improvement in the quality and I think that may be the biggest shift that we may see in the built environment in the long term. We'll see much more focus on quality of spaces and the use of spaces rather than just the

quantity. For far too long, we've had economic drivers underpinning the number of houses built and things like that.

What we may start seeing much more of is the number of houses available on the market and the quality of those houses. I think that will be an interesting one because we've already seen criticisms of some of the new policies to get us out of this economic situation that's been caused by COVID has been the relaxing of regulation to do with things like planning permits, developments, and so forth.

At some point we do have to make sure that what is being created is sustainable and it is of good quality because I think people are valuing that much more now. I think we'll also see a much greater shift from a physical infrastructure to digital infrastructure. That's another one that we will see and that's not an easy task. It's not just the positioning of more 5G towers and radio mass and things like that. There's going to be a much greater focus on our digital infrastructure security-wise and so forth. That kind of infrastructure, it requires quite a lot of physical change and building surveyors are involved in that.

Every year we've got someone from one of the big utility companies and communication companies and infrastructure companies, sending a number of graduates onto the building surveying course because we have to manage that change. Before this crisis I described building surveying as the GPs as in the general practitioners, the family doctors of the built environment. I think now we really are the managers of change.

I think that that's what our role will be, trying to bring back a better quality of our built environment and hopefully a much more sustainable built environment in the future.

Andrew Belt: [00:17:25] Relating back to your BSc and MSc Building Surveying programmes, have the new challenges in the profession been reflected in the programmes? And if not just yet, are there plans to add this to the curriculum in the future?

James Ritson: [00:17:39] Well, rather uniquely, UCEM has adapted really well to the crisis. We teach remotely, we're used to teaching remotely and in fact, our model has been copied by many other universities. What is quite interesting this year is how many students are transferring from face-to-face universities onto our courses, because if they are going to be remotely taught, they want someone who knows what they're doing.

In the reality of how we're adapting, one of the things that was absolutely the highlight of the Transform Project [UCEM teaching enhancement] and along with Antonia [Lindsay – UCEM Research Assistant – Sustainability & Education] and the Research and Sustainability team was making sure that we bring in what the requirements for a sustainable built environment are. We've got the NUS Responsible Futures accreditation [accreditation for institutions who are audited by students on their sustainability credentials]. Sustainability isn't just about reducing carbon emissions. It's about meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals and I think that's an important one that the students and the new generation of all built environment professionals, from architects through to real estate, through to

construction managers, through building surveyors and quantity surveyors need to understand the importance that sustainability now plays in our shared future.

That has been embedded into the curriculum along with subjects that we never really perhaps traditionally thought were sustainability. Things like health, wellbeing, the quality of space and the effect of its occupants. The students this year, for example, have just been talking about some of the documents that are being produced by London Greater Assembly about creating spaces for wellbeing within the whole planning framework. Our students are being exposed to that as soon as it's been published. So, I think that's a really interesting one that wasn't led by COVID, but it's definitely going to have an impact on the post-COVID world.

Andrew Belt: [00:20:09] Sustainability is clearly something which has been talked about even more so in this post-COVID world.

Just finally to wrap up, you mentioned it a few times, why do you think someone should consider a career in building surveying?

James Ritson: [00:21:12] Never more have we needed people to be able to manage change and that's what building surveyors are really taking the lead in now. Regardless of COVID we are going to need to be changing our built environment.

We are seeing this with the necessities from climate change, environmental change, city population growth. The numbers of people worldwide that are moving to cities is just phenomenal. We must find a sustainable future and that sustainable future isn't just in new build, it's adapting what we have. Building surveyors are uniquely placed.

So, why would you do it? You're going to be part of that solution would be my simple answer. To create a sustainable future for all of us, we need to create a sustainable built environment.

And that is going to mean adapting what we already have. Building surveyors are uniquely placed as any other profession that is, but our main driver now will be about managing that change, whether it be change of client, owner or physical change or managing a project of change.

That is what building surveyors are now really shining and showing what they're capable of doing. Handling sensitive client issue disputes all the way through to physically understanding what needs to be changed within the built environment. A wonderful Venn diagram that we often see of what triple bottom line is: environmental, cultural and economic. Surveyors are uniquely skilled to be able to analyse all of those. Whether or not they are specialists in all of them, they can understand the criteria from all of them.

That understanding, being able to come up with a solution that respects that, is a uniquely building survey thing, and I think will be such a valuable need in the future.

Andrew Belt: [00:23:31] Fantastic. Thank you for your time, James. If you want to be in that unique position and drive the change within the built environment and by doing

that, extend your knowledge in building surveying, then why not take a look at James' programmes. Head to our website, ucem.ac.uk, select 'Study with UCEM' on the left-hand side menu and choose 'Undergraduate' if you're interested in the BSc (Hons) Building Surveying Programme, or 'Postgraduate' if you are interested in our MSc Building Surveying programme, which is a conversion course so you may not have any understanding of buildings surveying before going into it but if you already have an undergraduate degree, you can go straight onto that one. So, thanks for your time again, James. And thanks for listening.

James Ritson: [00:24:20] Thank you very much everybody. Stay safe. Thank you.