

Gary Evans describes the challenges and obstacles to working as a building surveyor in the US

The view from America

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Two of the most common questions I hear are “What brought you to the United States” and “What is a building surveyor”?

How I got here is a testament to how getting involved with RICS at a local level can completely change your life.

It all started in December 1999 at the RICS Christmas curry party in Bristol, to which the University of the West of England had invited two representatives from a US-based engineering company. I found out they were in the UK recruiting graduates so cheekily asked, “Hey, how about someone already chartered?”

Following up in the New Year, I visited for a week in February at my own expense, and received an offer to go and work in the US. It did not take me long to decide to give up my job as a chartered building surveyor in Bristol, obtain a work visa, sell my house, and take the plunge. Making the move was one of the best decisions I ever made.

While I had a good idea of what would be involved, having spent many vacations in the US, the culture shock was immense. My last survey in England was of the smallest rural police station in Wiltshire. By contrast, my first US assignment was a condition assessment of a high-tech, 14-storey office building in the Washington, DC area. Things are much bigger in the US.

In addition to the size difference, there were also the language and method of measurement differences. I recall asking for a crash course on how to use an imperial scale rule when reviewing my



first drawings. We also created a dictionary of building terms that translated ‘pavements’ into ‘sidewalks’, ‘ironmongery’ into ‘hardware’ and ‘downpipes’ into ‘downspouts’, for example. Completing the green card and naturalisation process took many years, but I am now happily settled and set up my own company about four years ago.

Nobody really understands what a building surveyor is in the US, but most people can relate to what we do. To overcome this lack of recognition, I found that I needed to be able to describe quickly who we are and what we do. In other words, I needed an ‘elevator pitch’.

After introducing myself as a building surveyor, my description starts with “everything to do with existing buildings...” I make sure to emphasise ‘buildings’, de-emphasise ‘surveyor’ and throw in the word ‘pathology’ – what we do rather than who we are. This emphasis of activities over titles has been crucial to success.

Competitive edge

In the US, architects, engineers, cost consultants and project managers provide services performed by building

surveyors in the UK. However, RICS members bring a level of professionalism and consistency that clients are seeking.

For example, while ‘home inspectors’ prepare homebuyers reports, the qualifications needed are purely technical. They do not meet the standards required to become a chartered building surveyor.

Plenty of companies perform condition assessments of properties such as offices, schools, universities, airports and warehouses. They employ architects and engineers who do visual assessments using a variety of software applications and methods, but while some have employed building surveyors, or at least know about the skills we have, unfortunately, most remain completely unaware.

Although most of the world is adopting a more global way of thinking, many areas of the US remain insular and local. For example, the International Building Code was introduced in 1997 in an attempt to standardise building codes. However, each state has adopted different versions, and local jurisdictions often add their own requirements.

In my opinion, diverse standards help building surveyors to succeed across the

Atlantic. Professionals who provide services in a unfamiliar location need to research local requirements. Since the overall principles are the same, the building surveying competencies serve us well.

Explore the differences

Both the UK and US have their own peculiar activities. For example, the traditional UK concepts of dilapidations and party walls are unknown in the US. By contrast the terms 'reserve study' and 'facility condition index' (FCI) are much more common.

A reserve study is the term used by condominium and housing associations to prepare long-term renewal and repair budgets, based on visual assessments of future repair needs. Several building surveyors working in the US have become reserve analysts and specialists.

Coined in 1991, the FCI value is the ratio of repair needs to construction cost, expressed as a percentage or decimal score. These help large organisations to benchmark conditions and allocate funds. For example, federal government agencies report FCI values for more than 750,000 buildings and structures to the Federal Real Property

Profile each year. More recently, I have developed and used an age-based modelling technique to calculate FCI values where site visits are not practical.

Other services with which building surveyors may get involved are facility management consulting, software implementation and building information modelling. With additional qualifications we can also perform 'LEED-EB' assessments, which measure the sustainable operation of existing buildings. Unfortunately, due to licensing restrictions, opportunities to perform design work are limited.

Embrace the culture

About 10 years ago, I managed a team that helped to set up a maintenance plan for the Capitol Buildings in Washington, DC. The maintenance staff we worked with took great pleasure in pointing out the areas of the Capitol that the 'redcoats' burned down during the British-American War of 1812.

Despite the occasional jokes, a 'British' accent does sometimes help in business situations. However, in order to be taken seriously and avoid being considered 'quaint', I embraced the American way of life. This means celebrating Thanksgiving



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and Independence Day, and working during Easter. I have also become a professional 'soccer' coach.

For any building surveyors wanting to work in America, find a niche, be creative, persistent, and communicate the things you can do, since this is much more important than your job title. The US is still the land of opportunity for those with the courage to explore and the drive to succeed. ●

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