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Know Your Limits (or rather, that of your building surveyor)

At the outset of a career as a chartered building surveyor there is an onus to become what we might refer to as a jack of many (if not all) trades, they know quite a bit about a lot of stuff. It is perhaps for this reason why the process of becoming a chartered building surveyor requires a candidate to have a broad understanding of a myriad of technical, legal, ethical, administrative, financial and environmental issues.

Most building surveyors will throughout their careers continue to be engaged for inspection, analysis and reporting on all parts of a building on the basis they generally have a thorough understanding of the full range of building elements and how they are 'put together'. As a property investor, developer, landlord or tenant, freeholder or leaseholder as a client and employer you may at some time need to call upon the services of a building surveyor. This may be for contract administration, pre-acquisition surveys, defect analysis, feasibility study, or another bespoke surveying service.

In many circumstances some clients, and you may be one, are unable (or unwilling) to fund instruction of a specialist for each element for which they require advice and it is often left to the surveyor to use their experience and knowledge to provide their opinion on such parts. It is therefore inevitable that surveyors will often provide advice on disciplines for which, whilst they may have a general understanding, they are not specialist in the way that say a structural engineer, or mechanical and electrical consultant would be.

One area this issue particularly relates to is the inspection of electrical installations, which, without full testing by a competent approved electrical contractor (such as NICEIC), is going to be difficult to be fully assessed.





So what should a surveyor know? A chartered building surveyor ought to be generally aware that for most domestic, or small commercial units, supplies will be a single phase 230v arrangement, whilst non-residential, or larger commercial properties are likely to be on a three-phase 400v supply. But is that it? And do you expect more?

When providing advice on an electrical system it is important that the surveyor provides as much detail as possible, but without specifically reporting on the system in terms of compliance with regulations, or condition. As the client you need to understand that a surveyor will use his or her experience to comment upon an electrical installation but the extent of advice and comment will depend upon the individual.

So how can you feel more comfortable about the skill of your surveyor? What you may consider insisting on is receiving a checklist of the items that your surveyor will use as a guide. This might include items such as smoke and heat detection, socket and general power provision, type of light fittings, provision of emergency fittings, age and location of meters, fuse type and type of fuse board and other more obvious items such as presence and sufficiency of earth bonding.

You may also wish to consider checking that the surveyor is geared up to carry out a document-check. This would include reviewing and commenting upon available 5 year fixed wire electrical test certificates, PAT (Portable Appliance Test) certificates, fire alarm inspection certificates, emergency lighting inspection certificates and passenger lift Insurance inspection certificates. Whilst these highlighted areas are not exhaustive, it is useful in providing a client with a good overview of what a competent building surveyor ought to be capable of commenting upon. But please do bear in mind that having a list and a process, no matter how good it might be, is no substitute for expertise.



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Similarly, it is often requested that a building surveyor incorporate electrical design into a specification where there appears to be only minimal electrical design required. This is an area where an employer and client (and surveyor) should exercise caution. If an electrical design specification is to be provided, this must be procured correctly to ensure full design responsibility lies with the appropriate party, usually the contractor. This can be achieved using the Design Supplement under a JCT Contract. It is also absolutely imperative that any appointed contractor is experienced and qualified to undertake such design works and that they hold adequate professional indemnity insurance for design. It would be pointless, negligent and high risk to client and surveyor (and the contractor) if the design liability was given over to a contractor who is ill equipped and under insured to do so.

In summary, a client ought to be able to rely on a building surveyor to provide a high level of service. However, it is vital that both surveyor and client are both aware and accept the limits of the surveyors' skill and knowledge. A surveyor should therefore be able to report on those items that we have described in this update but should not risk themselves and others by reporting on areas in which they are not expert.

If one thing experience will tell you, it's know your limits (and that of your surveyor)!

For further details and information including a Surveyors Electrical Checklist contact Shaun Harris or Ben Anderson:

shaun@harrisassociatesuk.com

ben@harrisassociatesuk.com

0203 195 0851



Harris Associates, Hammer House, 113-117 Wardour Street, London, W1F 0UN. Tel: 020 3195 0851
Harris Associates, Pantiles Chambers, 85 High Street, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN1 1XP. Tel: 01892 506853

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