

# High performance

26 November 2018

**With its high property values and land prices, Hong Kong has a significant demand for surveyors. Franky Wong looks at the range of the profession's work in the territory**

---

The Nobel laureate Milton Friedman once praised Hong Kong as one of the freest markets on earth. In such a market, the legislative and public administration system is set up to encourage individualism and competition, and participants have the greatest freedom to pursue their best interests.

Given this background, Hong Kong has produced the most Asian billionaires of any region on the continent, with the top few, significantly, having amassed their wealth from the property market.

*In Hong Kong, the legislative and public administration system is set up to encourage individualism and competition*

Hong Kong is also one of the most expensive cities in which to live. This is partly a result of the high land price, which typically accounts for 60-70% of total development costs. To minimise the time taken to pay back any financing for the land, property developers are driven to complete their projects speedily, while maintaining a high standard of services and ensuring the quality of built products.

This fosters a culture of high performance among all project team members, including building surveyors.

## Professional training

In the 1960s and 1970s, graduates of building-related diplomas, higher diplomas and advanced diplomas in Hong Kong – courses mainly offered by the Hong Kong Technical College, later the [Hong Kong Polytechnic](#) – who wished to become chartered surveyors could take examinations to join RICS. These exams were the forerunners of the present [APC](#); there were also certain exemptions for candidates who had already taken the higher and advanced diplomas.

To earn bachelor's degree qualifications, however, Hong Kong residents had to study abroad, usually in the UK, or take distance learning programmes by correspondence, such as those offered by the [College of Estate Management](#).

With growing demand for building surveyors in subsequent years, more programmes at degree and sub-degree levels were set up at different universities and educational institutions in Hong Kong. In recent years, overseas universities have also set up campuses in the city to grasp the opportunities for education services arising from the upsurge in the Chinese and South-East Asian markets.

Building surveyors receive training in diverse areas of expertise, including economics and finance, land law, building contract law, building regulations, town planning, property valuation, building technologies, building services engineering, structural engineering, environmental science, material science and management, so can take up various positions throughout the project lifecycle.

## **Professional bodies**

In 1997, Hong Kong's sovereignty passed from the UK to mainland China, which is generally seen as the watershed for the development of the 2 professional surveying bodies there, the [Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors](#) (HKIS) and RICS.

In the past 20 years, HKIS has been gaining wider recognition across the city, and a growing number of local practitioners opt to take their first surveyor qualifications with it rather than with RICS, perhaps as many government positions only specify HKIS membership as a recognised professional qualification.

As elsewhere, building surveyors play a broad range of roles in property development in Hong Kong, including project management services from the feasibility stage onwards. They also prepare development proposals that meet the criteria of different government departments for property development.

When it comes to detailed design, surveyors ensure that the documentation, including building and other plans, meets statutory requirements, and that works commence on time. During construction, they monitor progress and liaise with other professionals to fulfil project goals. After completion, building surveyors carry out regular maintenance and are involved in property and facilities management.

In performing these tasks, all surveyors must abide by the professional rules of conduct and meet the relevant professional and personal standards.

## **Specialisms**

Building surveyors have 2 core competences: project management and building maintenance. They are all-round building professionals, which makes them ideal managers for projects of any kind from new developments to alterations, extensions and refurbishments. They can oversee projects by coordinating a multidisciplinary team of stakeholders and professionals to work out the most feasible development proposals and have them completed to clients' satisfaction.

To become project leaders with statutory powers and obligations, some also undergo assessments to be qualified as Authorised Persons, the designation for legal agents who assume almost all leadership, supervisory and coordination responsibilities in private developments.

Building surveyors also specialise in diagnosing defects and regulatory deficiencies. They

advise clients on building management, maintenance and rehabilitation to boost built assets' value. In addition to their core specialisms, they can ? given their broad knowledge and skills ? develop their careers into other professions, such as arbitration or town planning consultancy.

## **Private sector**

Building surveyors are employed in both the private and public sectors. In the former, they provide consultancy services to various types of client, for example property developers, contractors, private firms and the government, as well as quasi-governmental organisations. These services include project planning, design and management for different kinds of property, building surveying, property management and building maintenance.

Usual duties include different project stages: meeting clients; coordinating with different stakeholders; carrying out site visits to collect data; and preparing and advising on building designs, working drawings, bills of quantities and specifications for new developments, as well as for alterations and additions.

*It is important that clients' requirements are satisfied, ultimately maximising profits and achieving business growth*

Other duties include maintenance and fitting-out works; project planning and scheduling; tendering, appraising tenders and selecting suitable contractors; conducting on-site supervision and monitoring progress; dispute resolutions; preparing statutory submissions; participating in payment evaluation; and writing up technical reports.

Private practice surveyors offer their expertise for professional fees. It is important that clients' requirements are satisfied, ultimately maximising profits and achieving business growth.

## **Public sector**

In the public sector, some building surveyors work in the Hong Kong government's [Buildings Department](#) to prepare and enforce development controls for private properties.

They are responsible for checking the submitted plans of proposed developments, and also carry out other professional tasks to ensure buildings comply with regulations and the associated legislative requirements, by, for example, conducting condition and structural surveys for ageing buildings.

There are also maintenance surveyors in other government organisations such as the Housing Department and the Architectural Services Department, who carry out property and facilities management for public housing and government premises respectively.

Building surveyors working in public organisations have a very different mentality to their private-sector counterparts. Their main concern is not the financial feasibility of a project. Instead they focus on the accountability of their roles in performing professional tasks, and adopt a prudent approach in discharging these functions. They must understand their

respective duties and responsibilities, and stick to relevant departmental guidelines and manuals.

For instance, if government officials require building owners to take specific remedial actions such as demolition of unauthorised building works, they must state clearly what the supporting regulatory provisions are. Likewise, the authorities never use the word 'approved' to grant permission for building plans, but only implicitly suggest that they have 'no objection', possibly in order to avoid potential legal disputes.

## **Active players**

To conclude, building surveyors are active players in development in Hong Kong. They are particularly knowledgeable about the legal aspects of property development and specialise in building management and maintenance. Their comprehensive understanding of other areas of expertise in a multidisciplinary project team also enables them to serve the industry and the community at large in a variety of capacities. Some have even moved beyond their professional arena to be nominated or elected as lawmakers, or become independent non-executive directors in listed companies.

In the future, building surveyors can be expected to continue to contribute to the local economy in different ways. As part of Hong Kong's response to China's One Belt One Road initiative, which aims to improve connectivity and cooperation across Eurasia, their consulting and professional services will be exported to other countries in South-East Asia, Northern Asia and the Middle East to earn them wider international recognition.

**Franky Wong MRICS is Programme Director at the School of Professional and Continuing Education, the [University of Hong Kong](#)**

## **Further information**

- This feature is taken from the [RICS Building Surveying Journal](#) (October/November 2018)
- Related categories: [APC and AssocRICS](#) , [Building surveying](#)