What Do the Building Economists Do? Some Results of an International Survey

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Abstract

Although building economics has been developing for at least a quarter of a century, it is still relatively poorly developed. The survey reported in this paper strives to capture what those who consider themselves to be building economists actually do and how they define the field. With 33 respondents from around the world, the survey offers a view of the field. Building economics appears to be understood rather differently by those from the British Commonwealth, who understand the field as connected to quantity surveying, and those from other environments, who understand it as a sub-field of economics. This may be perceived as a field's weakness, but it may also be one of its strengths.

Keywords: Building economics, International survey, Quantity surveying, Economic analysis of the building process

Introduction

Building economics began taking shape in the 1970s. Stone (1967, 1980) offers an early introduction to the subject. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of books on building economics appeared in print: Bon (1989), Ruegg and Marshal (1990), Johnson (1990), Raftery (1991). Still, the field is relatively undeveloped both in theory and in professional practice. The "What Do the Building Economists Do" (WDBED) survey was conceived as a step toward a better understanding of the professional underpinnings of building economics in different parts of the world.

The WDBED survey was conducted via the Cooperative Network of Building Researchers (CNBR) in July 1999. Some 50 volunteers have previously been identified on the Network. They have participated in shaping the survey questionnaire itself. Several additional responses were elicited from well-known building economists. As of August 31, 2000, 33 responses have been collected and processed. To ensure transparency of the research process, the interim survey results in the form of a spreadsheet minus the respondents' names and a survey summary have been distributed to the survey participants.

The files with the survey questionnaire (WDBED - Survey Questionnaire), the spreadsheet with results minus the respondents' names (WDBED - Spreadsheet), and the main findings (WDBED - Main Survey Findings) can be found on my website (http://www.construct.reading.ac.uk/info/staff/bon/index.htm) under WDBED. These files are part and parcel of this short paper.

The Structure of the Survey

The survey consists of five parts. Section A concerns the respondents themselves and is confidential. Section B offers definitions of building economics in the respondents' own
words. Section C provides stylized facts about building economics. In particular, it concerns the number of individuals who consider themselves to be building economists and the number of educational programs in this field. Section D consists of a number of statements about building economics. The respondents are invited to state the degree to which they agree or disagree with these statements. Lastly, Section D invites the respondents to state the degree of importance of different areas of knowledge and skill to building economics as a whole.

The Survey Respondents

The survey respondents come from a wide variety of countries and regions. In particular, eight respondents are from the UK; seven are from Australia; two each from China, Estonia, Japan, and RSA; and one each from Brasil, Canada, Croatia, Finland, Israel, Italy, Malaysia, New Zealand, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States of America.

The respondents come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Out of 33 respondents, nine have had their first degree in civil engineering; seven in surveying; six in building; five in economics; three in architecture; and one each in electrical engineering, law, and physics.

Seven out of 33 respondents state that they never introduce themselves as building economists, eleven do so rarely, ten sometimes, two often, and three always. There does not appear to be any relationship between the first degree of the respondents and their response to this question.

Main Survey Results

The analysis indicates considerable agreement between respondents on a wide variety of dimensions of building economics as a field. However, some disagreements are also in evidence. In particular, some responses to Sections D and E, concerning the development of building economics, indicate that the respondents come from two different populations. Although further investigation is needed, it is possible that these differences of opinion stem from at least two different conceptions of building economics, one of which is allied with economics proper, and the other of which is closer to quantity surveying. This is reflected in the geographic split between the respondents from the British Commonwealth and those from other environments.

Of course, this could be perceived as a weakness of the field as it now stands. However, it may also be perceived as its strength. Building economics as an outgrowth of quantity surveying offers a professional backbone to the field. Currently, no other professional discipline offers such an institutional foundation. Therefore, the future of building economics may depend on the path the quantity surveying profession may take in the future. This is of immediate interest to the countries in the British Commonwealth, but it will have repercussion on the field outside this grouping, as well.

Conclusions

As a field, building economics needs to look into itself and its own development. The WDBED survey offers only a glimpse at the field and needs to be extended by further research. Survey questions which indicate high levels of disagreement between the respondents need to be examined more carefully, perhaps by means of more detailed survey questions and/or structured interviews.
References


