



What is a Building Surveyor?

In the latest of the What is Building Surveyor series, James Bundy reflects on the pragmatism and problem-solving required in the profession. It means that he sees himself and colleagues as the GP of the built environment.

When James Bundy first arrived in New Zealand in 2002, he found himself in a country where “building surveying,” as he had practiced it in the UK, barely existed.

Recruitment consultants didn’t understand his skillset, and the market for his services was scattered across architects, engineers, and quantity surveyors.

Yet from that gap, James helped build a profession that is now

well-recognised, with its own institute, training pathway, and growing presence across the built environment.

Today, James’ work stretches across New Zealand and Australia. He is regarded as both a pioneer of the profession locally and a thoughtful advocate for what makes a good building surveyor: a “GP of the consulting world,” equipped with broad technical knowledge and a pragmatic mindset.

James trained and qualified in the UK, studying in Bristol before beginning a career that spanned commercial property, healthcare, and education. After gaining Chartered status, he took a break for 12 months, dedicating his time to volunteer work in New Zealand.

“There was no such thing as building surveying as I knew it,” he recalls.

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"You had architects doing some things, engineers doing others, but not that integrated, investigative role of the building surveyor."

In 2005, alongside another Chartered Building Surveyor, James co-founded one of New Zealand's first RICS-regulated building surveying practice.

The firm grew to more than 65 staff across four offices, filling a vacuum in the market for defect analysis, reinstatement advice, and technical due diligence.

After selling his share in 2018, James shifted towards expert witness and insurance-related work, eventually establishing a practice that combined building surveyors and quantity surveyors.

Last year, it was acquired by a global consultancy serving the insurance sector, where James now oversees building consultancy across both New Zealand and Australia.

So, what makes a building surveyor? James' description of the profession draws directly from his UK training.

The first year of study, he explains, was shared with architects, engineers, project managers, and quantity surveyors.

"We learned a little bit of everyone's language."

The result was a generalist role, equally at home discussing material science, contract law, or structural performance.

"A good building surveyor is a GP of the consulting world.

"We understand how buildings are constructed, how legislation applies, and how materials behave in service.

"We're trained to work on the existing built environment, which makes up the majority of what's out there, and to grapple with how those buildings perform in an ever-

changing regulatory landscape."

That breadth is what differentiates surveyors from other specialists.

Where an architect may design, or an engineer may calculate, a building surveyor often bridges gaps, spotting where disciplines talk past one another.

"Sometimes it's about chairing the conversation, seeing the disconnect, and helping people land on a practical resolution."

James' own career shows a clear preference for certain fields: defect analysis, reinstatement after damage, and landlord-tenant law.

The common thread, he says, is problem-solving.

"I love when a client says: 'Can you explain this building to me in plain language?' Or when there's been a major event like a fire, a flood, an earthquake, and we need to scope out how to get it back into service.

"That's when you need someone who can think across construction, legislation, materials, and cost."

One project he recalls involved a 13-storey building damaged in an earthquake, with asbestos contamination, and subject to new legislative requirements.

"It was about finding a reinstatement strategy that didn't escalate costs unnecessarily, while still getting people safely back inside."

Other recent assignments have included post-flood remediation for an airport, reinstatement of film studios and hospitality venues, and forensic work for insurers.

Much of this requires expert witness skills, which means James often can't share details publicly.

Still, the underlying principle is clear: practical, durable solutions over perfectionist standards.

"The best surveyor isn't the one who applies the most rigid compliance lens," he argues.

"It's the one who can explain what needs to be done and take a pragmatic approach that genuinely adds value."

Working across both countries has highlighted for James how terms and traditions diverge.

In Australia, "building surveyor" generally refers to a compliance inspector, whereas consultants in James' mould are called "building consultants".

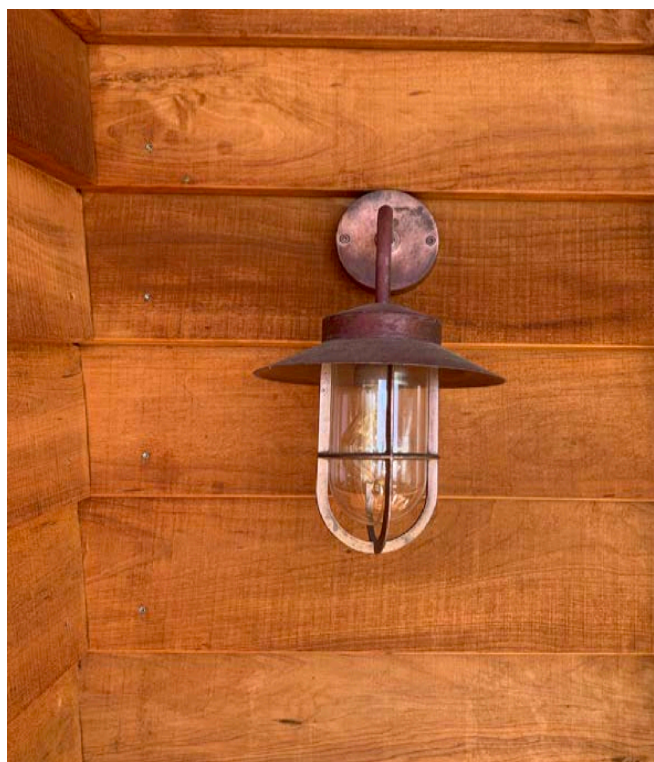
"It's really just who got there first," he says.

"In Australia, the regulators adopted the term for National Construction Code compliance inspectors. In New Zealand, the leaky building crisis in the early 2000s meant people were

already using it for surveyors that specialised in defect analysis.

"When we set up one of our businesses, we had to do a lot of education to explain the breadth of services a building surveyor provides."

Interestingly, James notes that New Zealand's painful experience with leaky buildings may now be an asset.



At a recent Sydney conference, he heard Australian regulators pointing to New Zealand's detailing standards, such as E2/AS1, as a model to emulate.

"It was the last thing I expected. But it shows how the profession here has matured, with NZIBS and RICS creating real pathways for people to enter and specialise."

Asked what lies ahead for building surveyors in New Zealand, James points to the issue of durability.

"There are still too many lightweight products on the market, designed for a short lifespan. If we're serious about sustainability, we need to build

for intergenerational use. Buildings should be maintainable and expected to last a hundred years."

He points to his own home in Northland, clad in regrowth tōtara, a native timber with remarkable natural durability.

"It was harder to source, and I had to justify it to council because it wasn't in the standards. But I wanted a material that would withstand the weather and be there for decades."

For James, that is the next frontier for building surveyors: advocating not just for compliance or remediation, but for long-term thinking in material choice and design.

"If we can help clients make those decisions now, we can save enormous cost and disruption for future generations."

This series in *The Journal* seeks to define a profession that, even now, is sometimes misunderstood. James' own career reflects both the challenge and the opportunity of that definition.

He came to New Zealand when the title was unknown, helped establish one of the country's first dedicated practices, and has since worked on some of the most complex reinstatement and insurance cases in the region.

Through it all, he has argued for the surveyor as a generalist with a pragmatic eye: someone who sees the whole picture and finds workable answers.

"The built environment is mostly existing buildings," he says.

"They don't just need architects or engineers. They need surveyors who can diagnose, interpret, and guide owners through the maze. That's the role, and it's more important than ever." ■