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The Building Contractor. New Perspectives (Middle Ages–Twentieth Century)

As an introduction to the volume as a whole, this article outlines the main objectives of the issue: (1) to examine the figure of the building contractor over a long period of time (from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century); (2) to focus on the entrepreneur rather than on the enterprise; (3) to pay more attention to “small entrepreneurs” (*petits entrepreneurs*); and (4) to identify the different types of occupations undertaken by the contractor through the acts of the practice.

The first part of the article recalls the main reflections developed since the 1980s in relation to the concept of the entrepreneur. After that, the authors’ contributions are examined in the light of recent historiography. The long-term approach reveals several interesting points.

The first such point concerns how the contractor has been studied in France. Until recently, medieval and modern historians did not pay the same attention to the figure of the entrepreneur. For source-related reasons, specialists of the Middle Ages used to trace the careers of masters or groups of masters. The two contributions concerning medieval Spanish contractor Berenguer Portell and French master mason Pos de Peyraficha reconstruct their professional, social and geographical trajectories through careful documentary research. Paradoxically, contractors in the early modern period, who became more active than ever as cities grew denser and larger, have received little attention, either as individuals or as groups. Little work has been carried out on the most important of them: “king’s entrepreneurs” (*les entrepreneurs du roi*) or “expert juror entrepreneurs” (*experts jurés entrepreneurs*). The three case studies presented in this issue about master masons Guillaume de La Vergne (?–1710), Jean Chauvet (1734–1811), and François Guireaud de Talairac (mid-18th – mid-19th century) reflect a new tendency to reconsider the personality, culture and knowledge of the modern entrepreneur.

The second interesting point to highlight concerns the nature of the innovations introduced by entrepreneurs. In recent decades, inventiveness in business management (production, labour, market, financing) has been more closely observed than technical and formal innovations. The contributors to this volume investigate the way in which contractors contribute to the development of new construction or design processes for buildings.

The three papers dedicated to entrepreneurs working during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – Mexican public contractors at the Northern Mexico frontier (1919–1934), Belgian general contractors (1870–1930), and French contractors (1930–1970) – demonstrate a growing interest in “small entrepreneurs” and in the diverse range of activities connected with this category of actors.

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The Building Entrepreneur through the Municipal Accounts of Urban Construction Sites. An Individual Career Path in Albi in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

In order to examine the figure of the building entrepreneur in medieval times, this contribution analyses a number of individual career paths, through municipal accounts of the city of Albi in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This case study focuses on master mason Pos de Peiraficha. As a travelling master, he worked on several

Albigeois construction sites before settling in the city at the request of the consuls. Once settled there, the mason took on several commitments in the service of the municipal institution. He participated in technical visits and expert assessments. Benefitting from socio-professional relations and his reputation, he seems to have found his place in a group of master craftsmen that held a position of monopoly over the management of public construction sites. Thus, in the light of the elements mentioned in the first part of the analysis, Pos de Peiraficha, like some of his peers, appears to have been an important entrepreneur of public works. Professionally well-reputed and sought-after, did he act as a real entrepreneur? Did he mobilize its financial, material and human resources for the purpose of profit? Did he invest in areas of activity or in infrastructures? The documents consulted delivered few elements that would allow us to take stock of the economic units and business networks developed by these master craftsmen. While they were able to intervene in the public works market as intermediaries, the municipal accounts reveal, above all, that the market was also occupied by other actors. Indeed, consuls and merchants held an important position, mainly in the material supply sector. They acted as suppliers and carriers of building materials, with a view to making additional gains. For construction contracts, urban magistrates were frequently responsible for delivering all the materials. The contractor was only required to provide the labour. The reality of this market leads us to reconsider the place of master craftsmen as entrepreneurs. Their entrepreneurial opportunities may indeed have been limited within a competitive sector. As such, it is necessary to qualify and refine the criteria used to define the figure of the entrepreneur. As illustrated by the case of Pos de Peiraficha, competence, reputation, multiple contracts, and belonging to decision-making circles do not always reveal important entrepreneurs of public works. These observations need to be enriched and nuanced through the consultation of notarial archives.

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Entrepreneurs and Innovation in Art in Fourteenth-Century Girona

Around the year 1300, the city of Girona was one of the most dynamic cities in the Principality of Catalonia and, by extension, the entire crown of Aragon. This situation can be explained by several factors, including geographical, historical and sociological aspects. Firstly, we must take into account the geographical and strategic location of the city, halfway between the two capitals of medieval Catalonia, Perpignan and Barcelona, and the old Roman road, then transformed into a royal road, which crossed the lower (west) part of its original enclosure. This advantageous situation also naturally led to the city achieving commercial and administrative preponderance (as the headquarters of the diocese since the fourth century), which only the neighbouring capital of the county of Empúries, Castelló, sometimes overshadowed. Many foreign artists and craftsmen were attracted by the great dynamism of Girona's society and economy, as well as by the fact that many of the architectural firms, as well as commercial tastes, required knowledge and new techniques that the Gironans of the time did not possess. In a way, skilled immigrants brought concrete knowledge to the city, each in their own field, which made a decisive contribution to its beautification and prosperity. Of course, this knowledge could be assimilated very quickly by Girona, thanks to the establishment of apprenticeship contracts and commercial companies. In this context, we will identify people from the countryside and city who were trained in the craft of stonemasonry; masters who brought about innovation in sculptural forms and exports to other territories; painters and shoemakers, owners of quarries, which they rented out to sculptors; glassmakers from the northern Pyrenees who brought new techniques, set up companies with inhabitants of the territory, and made use of the furnaces; and other glassmakers who brought about innovation in the decoration of funerary monuments. In summary, we

will underscore a number of examples of diversification, entrepreneurship and innovation in art.

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A Contribution to the History of Building Contractors. Guillaume de La Vergne, an Example from Paris (?–1710)

The life of master mason and contractor Guillaume de La Vergne, the subject of this article, is a concrete example of the management of an enterprise at the end of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. De La Vergne, who was from the Limousin region, settled in Paris where he married the daughter of a contractor in 1696. After joining the *maîtrise* two years later in 1698, he began working as a master mason, erecting buildings as turnkey projects and coordinating the various tradesmen required (masons, carpenters, locksmiths, plumbers, etc.). He quickly succeeded in being awarded projects, such as the construction of major private buildings: the Hôtel de Richelieu (1700–1705), the Hôtel de Pompadour (1704), the masonry of the Hôtel de Rohan (1705) and the Hôtel de Soubise (1707) (now the National Archives). Supervised by Jean Beausire, he built, renovated and improved several quays of the Tuileries, the Louvre, Orsay, etc., the banks of the Seine, sewage pipes, fountains, drinking troughs, and so on. From 1706, he managed the construction of the east end of Saint Roch Church on Rue Saint-Honoré, based on plans by Jules Hardouin-Mansart.

Nevertheless, his affairs became more complicated after 1709 and he was forced to gradually withdraw from his various enterprises for

reasons not fully understood. He died shortly afterwards, on 8 June 1710, following a short illness, aged less than forty. The creditors who showed up, nearly seventy in total, attest to the significance of the financial risk borne by contractors; receipts and writs received by de La Vergne confirm how important it was to know how to manage money in the profession. Far from being a business with clearly regulated limits, being a contractor was above all an activity that could be practised freely by master masons with a talent for management. Although this aspect is already recognised, the study of Guillaume de La Vergne provides a detailed analysis of each of the sites where he was active through archival documents, some of which are new discoveries. The tasks specified in the contracts vary depending on the patrons (private, public, or religious) and clearly demonstrate that being a contractor remained very closely associated with the profession of the master mason at the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment.

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The Role of Contractors in Building Eighteenth-Century Languedoc
Bridgework. The Case of Jean Chauvet in Building the Lavaur Bridge
(Tarn, 1773–1782)

In eighteenth-century Languedoc in South-West France, the États (provincial assembly) led an ambitious policy to improve roads and bridges. The engineers appointed by the province designed the constructions, while the builders conducted the works.

Contracts were awarded following a bidding procedure on a global, fixed-price basis. Subsequently, the builders were responsible for providing

the materials and the machines as well as for hiring the employees and managing the site.

Available sources relevant to civil engineering projects shed light on the builder's activities and his relationships with the other stakeholders, namely the engineers and the États. The bridge in Lavaur (the Tarn) is an illustrative case study. Its size makes it an outstanding achievement and the multiple disputes that occurred between the parties involved generated extensive documentation.

Some disagreements arose over the obtainability of the materials. The main bone of contention was the centring required to support the arch, the biggest ever used at the time. The specification drawn up by the engineer was very succinct on this point. The recommended design proved too weak to support the massive vault. The builder, Jean Chauvet, created an adequate one, but experienced the greatest difficulties in getting his proposal accepted by the engineer and the États. This was the main cause of the dispute. To clarify, validate and substantiate his position, Chauvet drew up many papers, including a set of technical drawings. Some show the yearly progress status in minute detail while others set out the successive views on the centring.

These manuscripts show not only how he developed his technical thinking but also how he sought to gain recognition for his abilities, having come from a modest social background.

The documents and pictures analysed in this article offer an original perspective on the knowledge and technical skills of an eighteenth-century builder whose talents and instrumental activity were key to achieving the construction of great civil engineering works in the Languedoc.

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Urban House Development in Paris at the End of the Eighteenth Century. The Role of the Building Contractor – Owner or Builder?

Despite being less represented in French historiography, the urban house is highlighted through the construction fever that prevailed over the capital near the end of the eighteenth century.

Widely noticeable in the plots figuring on *Vasserot's Atlas* (1810–1836), this kind of dwelling seems to have been very common in the urban topography of the districts near the capital, especially those of the *Chaussée d'Antin*, as well as the *Poissonnière* and *Montmartre* suburbs.

Analysed in a broad sense in this paper, these modest houses were intended for non-commercial use, composed of one or two buildings, elevated by a maximum of two floors and systematically embellished with variably sized gardens.

The update and analysis of new documents found in the French national archives highlights the recurrence with which the building contractor is mentioned. Whether they were an architect or master mason, they seem to have been involved in the construction of many houses built during the 1780s and 1790s.

Besides the confusion surrounding the status of the building contractor, as already illustrated by Valérie Nègre and Robert Carvais, these documents shed light on the role played by these actors in the evolution of urban houses. We could cite the example of François Guireaud de Talairac, who is also qualified as a master-mason in the archival documents.

The three houses he built on *Rue Joubert*, hybrid buildings standing somewhere between many different architectural styles, show some of the solutions devised to address the plot constraints and the densification of the peripheral districts.

In cases in which the status of the creator of the house is well-known or at least well-conjectured, it is possible – with the help of some documents, such as construction-related conventions, taken from notarial acts or market quotes – to compare the production of architects and

master masons. The first observation to emerge from the analysis of some examples is that there is no real distinction – in terms of typology, size, aestheticism, sponsor, or owner – in the production of a building attributed to a master mason, or an architect, whether or not he is a contractor.

This study could be developed through the analysis and comparison of these houses with the engraving of models found in *compendia* dedicated to domestic architecture published during the same period.

Whether they are idealised and do not fully reflect the actual building reality or rather more faithful, they are designed for builders and individuals and attest to the interest demonstrated in this type of habitation, as well as its democratisation.

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The General Contractor in Belgium. A Building Actor with a Mixed Profile (1870–1930)

In Belgium, general contractors became increasingly responsible for the execution and coordination of complete construction projects from the 1870s onwards, when the system of separate trade contracting broke down. These construction actors did not emerge out of nothing. Rather, they need to be placed in the context of the Ancient Regime with a background in construction trades such as carpentry and masonry. The article focuses on the context of the establishment and profile of these Belgian general contractors in the period 1870–1930.

It has become clear that people from other building trades or from the wider construction sector could also make the switch to general contracting. Above all, it was important to have sufficient technical construction insight and to be able to carry out a large part of the construction project. Regarding their profile: it was clearly of a ‘mixed’ nature. Unlike in many other countries, such as France—where there was a clear separation between contractors of public works and those carrying out private works—Belgian general contractors undertook both public and private works. Furthermore, they also developed their own building projects ‘for the market’, combined specific projects in their own trade with general contracting projects in which they also took on the coordination, completed both new construction projects and smaller repair works, and so on. To gain insight into this mixed profile, a broad variety of archival sources have been consulted. The main sources are the archives of two general contracting companies: *Entreprises Générales Henri Ruttiens et Fils* (1878–2000, held in the Belgian State Archives) and *Entreprises Louis De Waele* (1866–present, held within the company). These archives contain very interesting archival documents on the different projects carried out by both general contracting companies, from the 1870s onwards.

Concluding a four-year research project on the longitudinal professionalisation of Belgian general contractors (1870–1970), this analysis is contextualised within the broader research framework of the general contractors’ professional organisation. As such, it provides insights not only into the profiles of the general contracting companies studied but also into broader tendencies in the history of Belgian general contractors. Moreover, since recent research has uncovered the existence of many other general contractors’ archives in Flanders and the Brussels-Capital Region, this analysis could provide an outline for research possibilities relating to these archives.

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Public Works Contractors at the Northern Mexico Border (1919–1934). A Look at the Communications and Public Works Ministry’s “Building Department”

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the Mexican Government initiated an ambitious plan to achieve building material improvements in the North Frontier. For some years, the engineers and architects of the Communications and Public Works Ministry (the SCOP, in Spanish) produced project and building record files. And even though the original idea was to build directly, for several reasons they mostly selected contractors. In a detailed study of the new buildings, extensions and repair works – including through inspection reports, construction budgets, and on-site inspection works – it is now possible to obtain an idea about the diverse profile of this figure. Through a study of the political and economic context and an analysis of the dossiers of the SCOP, this article reveals three groups of contractors active on the border: the small craftsmen involved in direct administration works, the variations between small contractors and others tied to companies, and those established within commercial stores. The former were local artisans, established on both sides of the border, while the latter were controlled by commercial houses mainly set up in nearby American cities. For medium contractors and company contractors, however, the sample was larger and more diverse. Through an examination of their technical decisions, we can describe their building capacities and motivations, because the SCOP’s technicians tried to support the Mexican markets but were ultimately driven to choose the American influence because of the proximity of the border. The sample used in the analysis includes eleven worksites in Mexican cities, which in most cases faced a neighbouring, populated American area. Another interesting aspect was the duplicity between public employment and professional activity within the local context: this was probably due to the need for professionals in the border cities, which were undergoing a process of modernisation. Finally, this study corroborates – within the building

industry domain – that the border was very weakly tied to Mexico, and the profiles of building contractors attest to this condition.

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From Self-Employed Worker to Entrepreneur. Construction Artisans in France from the 1930s to the 1970s

The purpose of this paper is to follow the progressive evolution of French construction artisans from self-employed workers to entrepreneurs. The craft trade structured itself and evolved throughout the twentieth century. It went through a difficult period in the 1950s and 1960s, which other trades in the construction sector did not experience. At the time, the construction sector formed a major part of all artisan trades and was growing in importance. Until the middle of the century, artisans in the construction sector were craftsmen, former workers who carried out their activities for themselves, in the capacity of self-employed workers. Subsequently, from the middle of the century, they began recruiting workers, extended their workshops, which became more clearly separated from the family area, and then upgraded them by increasing their financial investments. Transforming their work practices, they opened bank accounts in order to obtain bank loans with which to finance their evolving activities. They also developed advertising on a local scale in order to attract attraction to their specific market. By expanding these entrepreneurial initiatives, they became real entrepreneurs. Yet as they chose a wide variety of approaches, they left the door open for a diverse range of forms of entrepreneurship for construction artisans.

Many companies did not last beyond five years, notably because their owners had underestimated the burden of these entrepreneurial management tasks. Around 1970, slightly more than 40 percent of construction craftsmen remained self-employed, with no employees. These craftsmen were still strongly influenced by their original cultural working background. Craftsmen employing workers usually hired one or two, and continued to participate in the work on construction sites with their employees on a daily basis. Only a small minority employed more workers and labelled themselves as 'building contractors'. Devoting most of their time to business management tasks, they were less active in the production side of affairs. Consequently, they found themselves situated midway between traditional small contractors (*petits entrepreneurs*) and larger companies, in an intermediary position when it came to economic and union issues. This situation may have given rise to conflicts with other craftsmen, for instance during the Poujadiste protest movement.

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