

Jelena Dobbels, *Building a Profession: A History of General Contractors in Belgium (1870-1970)* (Brussel: VUB Press, 2021, 246 pp. ISBN 9789461171795).

Jelena Dobbels obtained her PhD in the field of architectural and construction history in 2018 with a dissertation on the emergence and development of the general contractor profession in Belgium (1870-1970). Her research was carried out under the guidance of historian Inge Bertels (U Antwerpen) and the engineer-architects Ine Wouters (VUB) and Bernard Espion (ULB). This nicely illustrated book offers the main results of Dobbels' in-depth historical study. Not only does it fill an important gap in historical literature, it also largely transcends the topic described in the title. Dobbels handles more (much more) than merely the history of general contractors: she sheds light on the history of the entire construction sector. Her study contributes to an overall understanding of building practices in evolution, thus opening up vast inroads for future research.

The relevance of this study can be argued in several ways. Dobbels convincingly demonstrates how general contracting was a key element in the transformation of the building profession in the second half of the nineteenth century. Historians of the built environment have focused their research prominently on architects, engineers, and, to a lesser extent, on the sibling rivalry between those two professions. Dobbels significantly broadens the perspective, fostering an overall evaluation of the many different actors involved, the contractors in particular. By placing their profession at the core of her analysis, her study clearly transcends prevailing literature on the matter, mainly encompassing biographical and company case studies and/or histories of interest associations.

In short, Dobbels' study interconnects the vast fields of architectural and engineering history with the historiography on entrepreneurship and professionalisation in the modern era, while applying a clear longitudinal approach (1870-1970). Moreover, this study is based on a broad, impressive set of source materials, involving both archives of the main interest associations and specific (small and large) building company archives, a topic on which the author has developed a remarkable expertise. All this allows her to apply a three-level analytical framework, involving the company-level, the associational field connected to the building profession, and its interactions with the state and with other interest groups and professions, architects and engineers in particular.

As a concept, general contracting is, of course, hard to delineate. Dobbels offers the following, in my view convincing, definition: 'those that

take on, are responsible for the execution and coordination of, complete construction projects, entirely by themselves or by subcontracting' (15). This new professional category, which combines a strong corporatist tradition with a remarkable impact on the outlook of the modern (urban) environment and its many infrastructures, was a key actor of modernity. Dobbels offers several remarkable examples of how contractors, e.g. the firms De Waele or Ruttiens, contributed not only to the execution but also to the design of important building projects, thus nuancing the seemingly dominant role of architects.

The emergence of the profession is linked to the remarkable and sustained increase of building activity and the augmented use of lump-sum contracts, awarded by using tendering procedures with financial guarantees, all this requiring a more efficient organization of building work. The linear trade-by-trade sequencing of construction was gradually replaced by a more managerial approach: the general contractor became responsible for the organisation and executions of complete building projects. The gradual professionalisation of the building trade is a central focal point of the analysis. This transformation process of an occupation into a profession is rightly linked to public regulation of contracting (see the overview on page 201). From 1941 onwards, a licensing system was implemented, which was further refined in 1947 and linked to diploma requirements in 1964, then in the framework of the law on the access to professions (*Vestigingswet*) but only for masonry contractors. Dobbels justifiably underlines the importance of these measures, strengthening an already manifest tendency towards specialisation and upscaling.

Given the outspoken focus of this study on the process of professionalisation, I was surprised not to find a more thorough statistical analysis of the number of (general) contractors in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Belgium. Although some figures are quoted, the author doesn't offer a general overview of the (admittedly, often conflicting) official statistics produced by censuses, social security, and tax administrations. The near absence in the analysis of professional education and training is also striking. Although some attention is paid to the importance of industrial schools, the practices of vocational and other forms of training are barely mentioned. Sociologists as Ulrich Beck or Hansjürgen Daheim have extensively argued that in modern professions, occupation and position do not always coincide and even conflict. Within their (largely Weberian or Durkheimian) view on the process of professionalisation, the labour capacity of the members of a professional group (*Fähigkeit*), rather than the actual activities (*Tätigkeit*), delineates a profession. Dobbels and the source materials that she valorises, mainly focus on this last aspect. The importance of training and professional know-how is, however, repeatedly mentioned, for instance when reference is made to the remarkable number of general contractors rooted in the carpentry businesses (see for instance p. 34-35). There, they were clearly trained in reading drawings and in obeying a strict timing, crucial skills to, for instance,

build woodworks for fortified concrete works. Admittedly, there were also different entrepreneurs with no previous experience or certificates, but with substantial financial means or a broad network, that elbowed themselves in the position of general contractor.

This well-structured and elegantly written study opens many different paths for further research. It would, for instance, be worthwhile to learn more about the public imagery and the self-imagination of the general contractor; again, crucial elements to fully understand the process of professionalisation. As the author acknowledges, interest organisations and other associations seem to have played a crucial role by ‘promoting a common identity, language and “producing” a next generation through selection, training and socialization’ (93). Their party-political and ideological affiliations could be a topic for further study too. This would allow us to better understand the political impact of this professional sector. Another aspect of the building profession that remains remarkably absent in this book, and thus deserves to be taken up in future projects, is that of its workforce and its conditions of employment. Dobbels handles a wide perspective on the actors in the building sector (see the pyramid scheme on page 205), but the particularly large number of workers and employees (165.000 in the 1930s!) remain in the dark. The same can be said about the unions in the building profession and their social agency. Strikes in the sector had a huge societal impact, the one of April-June 1957 was even labelled by Els Deslé (‘Bouwen en wonen te Brussel, 1945-1958’, 431) as ‘one of the toughest social showdowns in the history of the Belgian building trade.’ By complementing this excellent book with additional studies handling a more pronounced socio-political perspective, our understanding of the building profession would be further expanded.

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