Editorial

Last week I carried out a survey. In the sauna of the roof void I noticed that there was a junction in the wiring where a wire had a connection wrapped in insulation tape. There were ceiling recessed light fittings with no fire protective cap. In a garage I had seen a power socket fixed upside down. Three observations with the wiring being the loose connecting link. An electrician was sent in to check the system because of the doubts raised. Defects and faults were identified which resulted in the power being disconnected to the property for reasons of safety.

The inspection identified random irregularities which, when looked at together, suggested the electrical work may not have been carried out to the requisite standard. Doubts about the quality of the concealed installation were created by a disparate group of observations that suggested a trail to be followed. But what if the taped connection had been hidden by a box, the garage socket not noticed and the lighting risk merely noted? Could one have diagnosed a risk that will require over £12,500 to remedy?

I have been struck by two authors' selection of words — first, Mick Jackson (*The Underground Man* 1997) refers to 'imagination always being willing to leap into ignorance's breach'; and secondly, Conan Doyle's (1890) fictional detective advises that one must 'eliminate the impossible so that, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth'. One points out the risk of working beyond your knowledge, and the other the need for an ordered methodology in diagnosing the cause of failures.

We do not have a code for the diagnosis of defects. In the main we rely upon comparable evidence. 'What we are looking at looks like this which we know to be defective'. We recognise the stains of damp, we test for its presence, we report upon the presence and the risk of the damage it may cause. But surely we should be better equipped if we are to avoid occasionally failing to identify all of the major risks within a building. If a comparative analysis is expected to be the duty of the surveyor we need more examples with which we may compare the irregularities that we see.

We do at least have a process that we use to appraise buildings. We observe, describe, interpret, verify, decide and advise. But we commonly refer to elements of a building being 'faulty', 'defective', 'unsatisfactory', 'damaged' or 'unacceptable', or being in 'need of remedy', 'repair' or 'reinstatement'. We do not have a lexicon of appropriate words and meanings that can be used with precision.

If we are to make a credible diagnosis of the cause or consequence of those observed circumstances we need to develop a scientific process, together with a dictionary that will allow us to define the process and a repository of information which can be randomly accessed. In future editions of the *Journal of Building Appraisal* we will be exploring the developments that will allow us to be precise where that is appropriate and authoritative where there is an unqualified risk.

Among the items in this edition, Jorge de Brito and his colleagues report on the examination of prefabricated car parks; Alan Holmes discusses the additional problems of ventilating timber roof voids and the downside risks of not doing it properly; Larry Russen looks at benchmark reporting on traditional walling; David Mann looks at the methodology of an asbestos survey; Andrew Francis discusses third party rights; Nick Deakin gives an insurer's perspective on subsidence; and Vivien King tries to wean surveyors off their addiction to court decisions. These papers should contribute towards there being fewer opportunities for imagination to leap to a conclusion.

Malcolm Hollis
Managing Editor
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References

- Doyle, A.C. (1890) *The Sign of Four*, see Chapter 6 at
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DoySign.html>.
Jackson, M. (1997) *The Underground Man*, Penguin Books (ISBN 0-688-15449-2).