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MODUS

As the coronavirus began to tighten its grip on countries around the world, RICS professionals stepped up to offer their skills and expertise in the global response to the pandemic, from building temporary hospitals to developing virus-tracking technology. We spoke to eight of them from their lockdown, photographing them via their webcam, about how they have contributed

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FACING DOWN COVID-19



TRACKING THE VIRUS

WINNIE SHIU FRICS, PRESIDENT,
HONG KONG INSTITUTE OF SURVEYORS

When the first Covid-19 case was confirmed in Hong Kong in January, like many of her compatriots Winnie Shiu was abroad on holiday for the Chinese New Year. An expert in geographic information systems (GIS), it immediately struck her that the technology could be used to track the spread of the virus and she sent an urgent message to a government contact in her capacity as president of the Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors. “GIS was used very successfully to trace the source of Ebola. That convinced them to use GIS to capture information on coronavirus,” she says.

Shiu qualified as a surveyor in the UK in 1989 before returning to her native Hong Kong to join the civil service’s Lands Department. Before the pandemic, she was leading the development of a common spatial data infrastructure portal for the territory due for launch by the end of 2022, a crucial step in creating a 3D digital twin for Hong Kong and enabling the use of smart city technology.

When Shiu returned to the city on 30 January, she was plunged into three days of frantic work, and on 3 February the Hong Kong coronavirus dashboard was launched. The resource, available on desktops and mobile phones, tracks medical data on the progress of each case of the virus, recording whether the sufferer has been hospitalised,

has been discharged, or has died. It then matches that information with geographical data from the GIS digital mapping system so you can see the progress of cases within individual buildings.

Pulling together the digital infrastructure and the data for the dashboard in such a short time was an immense feat of inter-agency cooperation and coordination. It also meant harvesting vital information from already hard-pressed medical staff. “Most of us hadn’t met or worked together before. The government had announced work-from-home arrangements. Even so, we were in the

office apart from night time when we did it through home IT systems. We worked day and night for those three days,” says Shiu.

The dashboard has had more than 22 million views. “People would look at it to find out if their building had any cases and they would then become more aware of hygiene when going in or out,” says Shiu.

She hopes that with the application of more resources and medical data, the resource can eventually be used for contact tracing. But, at the very least, doctors will be able to use it to plan for the day when another pandemic might occur.

