



Constructing Futures

Industry leaders and
futures thinking in construction

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About the authors

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Rachel Cooper is Professor of Design Management at the University of Lancaster, where she is Director of the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts and also ImaginationLancaster (a centre for research into products, places and systems for the future). Her research interests cover design management; design policy; new product development; design in the built environment; design against crime and socially responsible design. She has led on numerous UK government-funded research projects, spanning a range of design-related issues, including requirements capture, future scenarios for distributed design teams, design against crime, use of design in government departments, and process thinking and management. She also led on the £3m Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) funded 'Vivacity 2020' research programme investigating sustainable urban design for the 24 hour city. She is currently co-investigator of Urban Futures, a five-year EPSRC-funded research project (see www.urban-futures.org). Rachel has authored several books in the field including *The Design Agenda* (1995), *The Design Experience* (2003) and edited *Designing Sustainable Cities* (2009). She is currently commissioning editor for an Ashgate series on *Socially Responsible Design*. She was commissioned in May 2007 by the Foresight programme on Mental Wellbeing and Mental Capital to write the *Scientific Review on Mental Wellbeing and the Built Environment*. Professor Cooper is President of the European Academy of Design, and Editor of *The Design Journal*. She has also undertaken several advisory roles to national and international universities, government and non-governmental organisations.

Preface

This book is as much about constructing relationships as it is about constructing an understanding of 'futures thinking' in the construction industry. The genesis happened in 2004 when a new working relationship was constructed between the two of us – one the Professor and the other a new researcher. During a regular research meeting early that year, the Professor suggested that it would be a good idea for us to talk to the good and the great of construction to find out what cutting-edge issues were confronting the industry. This was to be the defining moment that marked the start of the journey that led to the production of this book. Our initial desire was to get closer to the leaders of industry to find out about the research agendas that mattered in practice. After all, being a non-cognate, the Professor had benefited herself in the mid-1990s from constructing relationships with senior people in a number of UK construction companies to gain a better insight into the world of construction. So, we thought that it was timely then to get a renewed perspective of the critical issues that industry leaders faced so as to help inform our research directions. Thus, we proceeded to write to a wide range of senior figures to see if they were interested in participating in our project.

By the middle of 2005, we constructed relationships with 15 influential figures in the UK construction industry. What started out as a few interesting conversations led us to take a number of fruitful detours. Increasingly, we became fascinated by the life stories that these influential people had to share with us, especially in terms of how their personal life experiences intimately merged into the career paths that they eventually undertook. We were also privileged to obtain their firsthand accounts of how the UK construction industry had developed from the past, the issues that were confronting the industry at the present and the challenges to be addressed for the future. The personal stories recounted by our influential participants provided rich, practical insights into what motivated them to continue working in the construction industry. Often, it is this underlying passion for construction that sustained their sense of optimism for the future. The issues discussed were wide-ranging and eclectic, and, at times, the messiness of the data created difficulties for our sense-making process. Nevertheless, it was the identification of these issues that drove us to search deeper into a variety of literature sources, from policy perspectives to foresight studies, to theoretical perspectives of leadership, sustainable development and governance, resulting in the final compilation presented here.

Two things really registered with us as we progressed through this 'project'. First, we were struck by how the legacies of the past, the lessons from the present and the thoughts about the future of the construction industry were so interwoven in the tales told by our

willing participants. Second, we got great comfort from the conversations with our influential figures as there was much confluence between what they had to say and the theoretical literature that we have subsequently reviewed. This was, therefore, instrumental in the way we have designed the structure of this book. To help the reader navigate through our sense-making process, we have organised this book into three main parts. In Part 1, we look to the past by reviewing a series of foresight studies of the construction industry (Chapter 1), and re-present stories of our interviewees' lives to explain the development of leadership in the context of the construction industry (Chapter 2). In Part 2, we look to the present by discussing two fundamental issues that emerged in our analysis of the interview data. These two issues relate to the various perspectives of sustainable development (Chapter 3) and the governance of the construction industry (Chapter 4). In Part 3, we conclude with an afterthought for the future, highlighting key lessons learnt by embarking on this journey and putting forward a series of research questions derived from what we consider to be a scholarly reflection of 'futures thinking' in construction presented in this book.

Within each of Chapters 2, 3 and 4, we have juxtaposed the views of our influential figures with a review of the salient points found in the relevant and authoritative sources of theoretical literature, both in the mainstream literature and the field of construction management. Whereas we do not profess to treat the diverse range of literature bases exhaustively, it is hoped that the book will allow the reader to benefit from learning practical insights from our participants while gaining a rapid understanding of the key debates of the theoretical subject under scrutiny. By placing our analysis of the interviews adjacent to the theoretical review, it is also our intention to enable the reader to make comparisons so that overlaps and gaps between theory and practice can be ascertained.

It is hoped that this book will contribute to a number of areas within the broad field of construction management. First, the 'project' has permitted us to construct a deep reflection of the life histories of our 15 participants. Life history methodology is rarely deployed in the field of construction management, and, therefore, we hope that our analysis provides knowledge of not only what motivates our senior leaders in construction, but also how these value systems drive the way they think about the future. Specifically, we have identified how 'futures thinking' in construction is really emergent, shaped in part by the personal passions of leaders in construction. Thus, this challenges the orthodox view that 'futures thinking' in construction, in the form of scenario planning, must be strategic and objectivised. Second, and following on from the critical finding of emergence, our analysis has revealed the internal struggles that our influential figures go through when making sense of the contemporary agenda of sustainable development. This provides a rich picture of the dynamic ways in which our senior figures grapple with the grand challenges confronting the industry of the day. Such personal journeys are rarely reported in conventional research in the field. Indeed, the analysis has sought to explain the critical issues that help shape decision-making when talking about the creation of a sustainable future. The trade-offs are articulated in the form of tensions, ambiguities and paradoxes that our interviewees constantly seek to resolve. Leading on from this is the third point of our contribution. Much of the discussion on emergence implies the impotence of prescriptive methods, often espoused in the construction management literature. Indeed, boundaries as perceived by our influential figures tend to be fuzzy, as our practitioners get

on with experimenting with new methods of working and new ways of organising relationships and governance structures in moving forward to the future. Such fuzziness does not mean the perspectives of our influential figures are any less valid than the neat categories formulated by theoretical endeavours. Rather, there is much scope in seeking cooperation between the academy and industry as we make sense of the future for the construction industry. As the title suggests, the book is about *constructing* the future of the industry as opposed to maintaining a *constructed* view of the future.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge a number of key people in helping us with the journey of *Constructing futures*. First, our gratitude goes to Madeleine Metcalfe and her editorial team at Wiley-Blackwell for their patience and encouragement over the years it took to produce the final manuscript. We would also like to acknowledge Professor Cary Cooper, whose work in the 1980s on *The change makers* inspired our endeavours in the first instance. We also recognise the financial support provided by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) in the UK (Grant references GR/R64575/01 and EP/D505631/1), which facilitated some of the early fieldwork necessary for this book project. We also like to extend our appreciation to Paula Richardson who provided immense assistance in the transcribing of the interviews, Roger Whitham for his efforts in producing the illustrations, and to Dr. Louise Bissett and Dr. Michael Pritchard for the conversations that helped in our thinking about the conclusions for this book. The ideas presented in this book have also been shaped through discussions with a wide range of colleagues, whom we have interacted with during various conferences. These included the CIB W55/W65 symposium in Rome 2006 and research seminars at Northumbria University, Chalmers University and the National University of Singapore, which helped in the development of Chapter 2; the 21st ARCOM conference in London that helped validate ideas put forward in Chapter 1, and ARCOM research workshop on 'sustainability' in Plymouth, which provided feedback for theoretical aspects reviewed in Chapter 3. Last, but not the very least, without our 15 influential figures and their willingness to offer up their time to share their stories with us, this book would never have come to fruition. We are, therefore, indebted to all of them. However, all errors and omissions remain our sole responsibility.

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