

Book Review

Construction Innovation

Orstavik, F., Dainty, A.R.J. and Abbott, C., Eds. (2015). Construction Innovation. West Sussex: WILEY Blackwell. 224 pages. ISBN: 978-1-118-65553-5

It can be argued in construction circles that innovation is the *concept de jour*: it is certainly the case for politicians and funders of research. It encompasses matters of technology, business process, and the softer sociological aspects of managing the networked flows of information necessary to bring projects to a successful and profitable conclusion; by implication it allows the various industry stakeholders to thrive in their diverse endeavours.

At times the search for innovation can spawn conceptual insights that lead to the development of new ways of describing the business of business, sometimes provoking the zeal of the evangelist in their proponents, and equally emphatic refutation by proponents of rival ideologies – or perhaps more correctly, sociologies. Amongst all of this it can get lost that the underpinning motivation of all participants in construction-related enterprises is the relentless drive to create a sustainable competitive advantage delivering above sector average return-on-investment in a low margin industry over the longer term.

For a researcher first approaching the topic of innovation in the construction industry the point of departure for their particular project may be dictated in large part by the tastes and experiences of their supervisor or colleagues followed by the idea that exploring multiple and diverse perspectives on innovation will be both bewildering and daunting.

Whilst this reviewer hesitates to describe Construction Innovation edited by Orstavik, Dainty and Abbott as a primer – conjuring as it does visions of Ladybird readers for primary schools – it nevertheless provides an eminently approachable and readable reference to the major schools of thought in this field, all firmly contextualised within the architectural, engineering and construction paradigms. It would certainly have become well-thumbed and dog-eared if it had been available at the time of my doctoral research. Why?

There often appears to be little agreement upon the nature of innovation, with the most innovative outcome being the generation of new innovation-related concepts and investigative lenses. The propagation of alternative conceptualisations is sometimes legitimate, but there is an argument to be made that some of the subtle distinctions arise not as a consequence of genuine need, but rather because the researcher has been unaware of the prior existence of an adjacent concept (often generated in another unrelated discipline).

This book takes a refreshing approach, openly attempting to tame the complexity of rival perspectives on innovation by providing unambiguous definitions and explanations, connecting

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theory to real-world practice. One of its strengths is that leading academics from different paradigms have been commissioned to illuminate their ideas at a level that is both approachable and yet rigorously informative, these then being brought together in one place. It might be argued that this is unusual, if not unique to the domain; it is undoubtedly refreshing and useful.

Nor is this book's usefulness confined to academics alone. The thoughtful business leader would certainly benefit from reflection triggered by dipping into this book's pages, seeking alignment between their own position and those of a particular school of thought. If relaxed further this business leader might also come to question their preconceptions and beliefs about the nature of innovation and sustainable competitive advantage, or perhaps simply reconfirm an existing worldview.

Either way a business leader reading this book will come to have a clear understanding of the commonalities and differences between different innovation paradigms, their strengths and weaknesses, and their applicability at the level of the project team and the individual firm. Various chapters provide insights into the barriers and enablers of innovation, the strategic planning necessary to facilitate it, the formulation of metrics used to gauge progress and benefit, and the mechanisms necessary to propagate and defuse an innovation culture in various contexts.

I thoroughly commend this book to those with a serious interest in the topic.

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