



## Making Sense of Construction Improvement

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## Book Reviews

### **Making Sense of Construction Improvement**

Stuart Green, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 2011

392 pp, ISBN 978 1 4051 3046 2, £45.00 (hb)

This book deals with 70-odd years of UK policies, initiatives and debates to improve the UK construction industry ranging from World War II to the present. It does so in over 350 pages and 10 chapters. The ambition of the book is ‘to understand the forces which have shaped the construction improvement agenda over time’ (p. xii), and with that ‘deliberately challenge the current construction improvement debate and the way in which it is conducted’ (back cover). Although the book has a predominantly UK focus, the value of the book reaches beyond the UK borders. Since the 1990s, the UK construction reform programmes have been a role model and inspiration for other countries to follow. So, a better understanding of the how and why of successive construction industry initiatives in the UK is useful for reflecting on construction improvement initiatives and rhetoric outside the UK, too. And if you are an academic in the field of construction management (CM)—as most of the readers of this journal probably are—it will inescapably invoke questions about the role and workings of the CM research community also. This, again, goes beyond the geographical boundaries of the initiatives discussed.

The author is an esteemed professor at one of the leading CM research and academic institutions (University of Reading). In his long academic career he has been working in the field of construction improvement and has conducted numerous construction industry research projects and written many publications. He is known as a pragmatist, social constructivist and not shy to act as the rebel voice. For him—as stated in the preface—‘the book is an account of a personal journey’ (p. xii); which it indeed turns out to be.

The book starts off with a 10-page preface that explains the core narrative and central ideas of the book. This is done very well. The main theoretical concepts and arguments are introduced and framed. Also the structure of the book is laid out. The preface already gives good insights into arguments that unfold in the 10 chapters that follow. The structure of the

book is mostly chronological, dividing the time between World War II and now into successive time periods. The brackets of these periods are mainly related to developments in UK politics, and changes in administrations. Chapter 1 starts off the story in July 1945. The pivotal Chapter 5 deals with *Rethinking Construction* (Egan, 1998). Chapter 10 puts an end to the narrative in May 2010. Only Chapters 6, 7 and 8 break out of the chronological structure. These three chapters function to enlighten the reader as to how the author *makes sense* of construction improvement. Chapter 6 is about the different perspectives one can choose to look at the phenomenon of organization. The author uses Gareth Morgan’s (1997) metaphors—from *Images of Organization*—as lenses to examine the debate on construction improvement. It is particularly the lens of the machine metaphor that is used in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 to scrutinize successively business process re-engineering and lean construction. These two themes get that much attention in the book because the author sees these two themes as the ultimate manifestation of the mechanistic machine metaphor-like approach to the construction industry. Green asserts that it was predominantly this machine metaphor logic that has driven the trajectory of construction industry programmes over the last 20 years—including Egan’s high profile agenda. The book pivots around this assertion and Green’s astonishment at why this machine metaphor was so appealing to the people driving the construction industry agenda.

Chapter 1 describes the post-war period up to the 1970s as an age of planning and collective bargaining. The construction industry played an important role in rebuilding the country and the economy. Early 1960s problems emerged leading to reports by Emmerson (1962), Banwell (1964), Wood (1975). These reports pointed to menaces of the boom–bust cycle and fragmentation and low cost open tendering. They advised more integration, teamwork, collaboration, up-skilling and training. In the 1970s, the political climate changed more towards more free markets and privatization. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister. What that meant for the construction industry is described in Chapter 2, entitled: ‘The dawn of enterprise’. The third chapter documents the changes

in the construction industry due to the policies implemented: privatization, hollowed-out firms, sub-contracting, fragmentation, labour casualization and antagonistic relations. The problems of these developments were acknowledged over time and, in the 1980s, several initiatives to do something about this were developing. This is explained in Chapter 4: 'The improvement agenda takes shape'. The reports by the National Economic Development Office (1983, 1988), Centre for Strategic Studies in Construction (1988) and Latham (1994) are portrayed as the antidote to fragmentation in putting more emphasis on integration, teamwork and partnerships—much like the reports of the 1960s.

Although all relevant successive UK construction industry initiatives and reports are nicely woven into the story line, Chapter 5 seems the pivotal chapter in understanding the drive behind the book. It builds up to and deals with the Egan Report—probably the best-known publication in the field of construction management, worldwide. Green acknowledges that the Egan Report has dominated the construction improvement debate since its publication in 1998 (p. 131). Chapter 5 dissects the report, examines the actions for implementation and scrutinizes the underlying assumptions and rationales. The picture painted from this analysis is critical and stark. Green clearly is no aficionado of the Egan Report and the *Rethinking Construction* movement. He characterizes them as: (a) too much faith in instrumental improvement recipes; (b) an exclusive focus on efficiency; (c) strong in rhetoric but ultimately vague in goals and aims; (d) evangelical about new management approaches; (e) focusing on the client while ignoring other stakeholders; and (f) not receptive to other views; 'the machine metaphor ruled supreme' (p. 160). The next three chapters deepen these observations by explaining the machine metaphor and using this frame of observation to make sense of client orientation, of business process re-engineering, of partnering and of lean construction—the themes that dominated the construction improvement debate for many years.

Chapters 9 and 10 deal with the construction industry reports, initiatives and programmes since Egan, such as *Accelerating Change* (Strategic Forum, 2002), *Modernising Construction* (National Audit Office, 2001) and *Constructing Excellence*. The merits of these reports and programmes are measured against the frame and narrative developed in the chapters before. Chapter 10 also assesses the damage of successive construction industry initiatives regarding the construction industry record on sustainability, health and safety. The book ends as it started with a reflection on relevance, impact and dynamics of the construction improvement programmes.

Green develops no explicit outline or analysis of the construction improvement debate, but the debate—all nuances and gradations aside—seems to be a battle between two more basic paradigms for change. On the one hand we have the paradigm that acknowledges the systemic boom–bust cycles of the industry and its destructive effect as fragmentation, erosion of labour conditions, health and safety, and education. This 'considerate' paradigm calls for interventions from the government to restrain and regulate the market forces for the benefit of the people involved, society and the long term. The other paradigm puts market first, sees enterprise as the main creator of prosperity and welfare, and renounces regulation. This 'enterprise' paradigm trusts free market forces, firms, management and management techniques as the main moderators and agents of the route to improved construction (boom–bust cycles are perceived as non-problematic). These two paradigms could be imagined as two continuous undercurrents in the construction improvement debate, each periodically getting the upper hand—in the shape of initiatives, programmes and reports—corresponding to the political climate.

Is the book relevant? Construction improvement is the bread and butter of the construction management academic community. Where would we be without it? The reform initiatives in the construction industry have provided many of us with research funding and other good opportunities. The construction industry gets more than its fair share of attention from policymakers. Why? The construction industry is, was and will be close to political debate and public policies in many developed economies. The construction industry is relevant in terms of employment and domestic product. It creates the physical infrastructure for economic activity and bricks and mortar are fixed financial assets for many households. The current international financial crisis in many countries has its roots in real estate booms, lending and mortgages. Furthermore, overruns on major projects and accidents on construction sites catch media attention. Since the construction industry also absorbs quite a portion of public spending, it is of no surprise that the industry's performance is under continuous scrutiny—in the past, now and certainly also in the future. Therefore it is hardly a surprise that initiatives continuously emerge to 'improve', 'reform', 'rethink', 'revalue' or 'restructure' the construction industry—in various countries around the world. As academics in construction management, we are participants and agents in the construction improvement debate and construction improvement practice. The book provides insights and inspiration to engage in this debate more mindfully.

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### Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture

Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, Routledge, London, 2011  
224 pp, ISBN 978 0 415 57193 7, £24.99 (pb)

'A timely study that raises vital issues for the future'. Such were the words recently used by the Royal Institute of British Architects in announcing its decision to award the 2011 RIBA President's Award for Outstanding University-located Research to *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, the book edited by Nishat Awan and Tatjana Schneider of the University of Sheffield, and Jeremy Till of the University of Westminster.

Amid the rhetoric that often surrounds these events, the succinct description does indeed do justice to the work compiled by the three academics and the intellectual platform supporting it. A reflective analysis of the various ways of contributing to change in

the built environment outside the canonical plots of professional practice, *Spatial Agency* tackles some of the central tenets of architecture as a discipline, asking whether these in fact maintain currency for both the profession and the built environment.

Does architecture's traditional alignment with building run the risk of diminishing the discipline's ability to be truly visionary? Should the professional debate start shifting emphasis from the production of building artefacts to the production of inclusive notions of space that are capable of shedding light on the context in and through which the same artefacts are produced and allowed to operate? Should thus more attention be placed on the social coalitions, networks and dynamics that make the concrete implementation of successful ideas possible? Would such shifts lead to a broadening out of the notion of built value? Last but not least—and irrespective of all the previous questions—can one still hold on to the set of skills and ways of thinking that go into the production of architecture yet apply them to a broader set of operative contexts and social concerns?

For Awan, Schneider and Till the answers are all affirmative. The present times call for a requalification of the terms of reference by which the built environment is produced: architecture has become too rigid (or narrow) a concern to accommodate needs that exist in space but outside its operative boundaries; hence its focus and procedures must be expanded. Professionalisms of old are entrenched into established ways of doing things that stifle radical innovation in the sense of building activism, and must at least be complemented by alternative forms of technical expertise, thriving not on institutional autonomy but on direct participation, exchange and social cooperation. And yet, architecture as a *modus operandi* that combines vision and pragmatism, courage and tactics, must be retained and in fact extended to as many world-building realms as possible.

As the title suggests and the introduction to the book explains, the intellectual linchpin of the authors' theory rests with the idea that real, significant change in the built environment is brought about socially, by a panoply of actors that act collaboratively with and on behalf of others, and who engage in the transformation of space by negotiating existing conditions with the intent of reforming them. The definition of these actors as 'agents', literally interpreted in the text as the measure of an individual's capacity to effect change, is a function of actual success rather than alleged roles. So much so, in fact, as to bring the authors to stress the importance of practical, context-specific analysis and action over normative knowledge. Actors acting as agents may not have to perform complex professional routines, but they have to seek