

SUMMARY OF WORKSHOP ON “DECONSTRUCTING ORGANISATIONAL PARADOXES IN CONSTRUCTION”

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As part of the Management and Innovation for a Sustainable Built Environment (MISBE) Conference, CIB Task Group 78 led a workshop entitled “Deconstructing Organisational Paradoxes in Construction”. This workshop took place at 2pm on Monday 20 June 2011 in the Assay Hall of the Beurs van Berlage, centre of Amsterdam. The workshop was also jointly organised with CIB Task Group 76 on “Recognising Innovation”. Around 20 participants took part in the discussion of eight papers accepted for presentation at this special thematic track. The articles covered a range of research topics including organisational ambidexterity in construction, knowledge generation and use, collaboration, innovation and empowerment, and methods for studying informality in construction.

Purpose of Workshop and Initial Questions

The central focus of this workshop was on paradoxes in construction organisations. Paradoxes are part and parcel of organisational life, and these manifest in a variety of ways (see Chan and Cooper, 2010). Tensions arise between the desire to take a longer-term view and the demands of satisfying short-term goals when shaping a strategic response to organisational change. Furthermore, in the globalised world we operate in today, there is the conflict between thinking in global terms whilst maintaining a sense of localism. There are also ambiguities of control emerging from the need to balance top-down authority with bottom-up participation, and a need to reconcile individual perspectives with collective consensus. Managers and workers in contemporary organisations are often confronted by these contradictions as they make sense of everyday dealings at the workplace. Unsurprisingly, much attention has been centred on how tensions, ambiguities and paradoxes are being resolved in an organisational context. For example, Clegg et al. (2002) noted the importance of improvisation tactics to address organisational paradoxes when putting plans into action. Smith and Tushman (2005) called for the need to explore and exploit binaries at the extreme ends when tackling paradoxes.

The systematic study of organisational paradoxes has however been given scant attention in the field of construction management research (see Price and Newson, 2003). Therefore, the workshop sought to bring together researchers to discuss and facilitate the deconstruction of organisational paradoxes in construction. A number of critical questions were raised in the call for contributions, including:

- How do researchers and practitioners explore, and deploy efforts to deal with, organisational paradoxes in the field?

- In deconstructing organisational paradoxes, there is the tendency for researchers to set boundaries on, and simplify messy realities into, discrete categories. What happens when multiple paradoxes clash with one another?
- How do researchers trace the changing nature of organisational paradoxes, and how practitioners deal with these, over time and across the space between organisations?
- What is the purpose of studying organisational paradoxes in construction? How do research methods facilitate this process?

Emerging Discussion

From a research perspective, it was noted that organisational paradoxes in construction remain an under-explored area. Often associated with negative implications of organisational conflicts to be managed or designed out, paradoxes can potentially be positive in terms of generating innovative behaviours, actions and outcomes. Paradoxes also play an inevitable role in organisational sense-making, which is especially relevant to the early phases of organising construction projects.

However, studying organisational paradoxes can be problematic. One of the key challenges lies with the recognition of organisational paradoxes. How do researchers go about seeing and identifying paradoxes in organisations? Through the discussions, it became apparent that researchers tend to conceive the notion of paradox by observing tensions, conflicts and contradictory positions in organisations. In many respects, the paradoxes revealed in the articles presented at the workshop were subjected to the researcher's interpretation of their observable phenomena in practice, often explained at a somewhat abstract level. Indeed, virtually all articles reported on research that did not contain as a starting point the intent to study organisational paradoxes *per se*. Instead, paradoxes emerged as the researchers exercised their interpretive authority on the data collected. In fact, it was noted that few authors started with working definition of organisational paradox. Peter Raisbeck, in his article entitled "Paradoxes of innovation and architectural design", drew on the working definition provided by Cameron and Quinn (1988): "[paradox is] the simultaneous presence of contradictory even mutually exclusive elements (p. 2; cf. Clegg *et al.*, 2002)."

The working definition by Cameron and Quinn (1988) provokes two critical points. Firstly, inherent within the definition is the notion of time. As the practitioners' lives in organisations progress, researchers observe the emergence of paradoxes captured in moments in time. The research projects presented at the workshop mobilised a mixture of methods, ranging from cross-sectional questionnaire surveys to ethnographic observations that require researchers to embed themselves within the paradoxical contexts as they unfold over time. What implications would the choice of research method(s) have on the way organisational paradoxes are exposed and explained? Is such interpretive flexibility desirable or problematic? How does time feature in such interpretation? In much of the analysis presented in the articles, there is a sense that organisational change over time (see Cameron and Quinn, 1988) is

what creates paradoxical contexts. So, how does the chosen research method account for the dimension of time, and how does this in turn affect the way we conceive of paradoxes in organisations? Leading on from the reflection of research methods and the factor of time, the second critical point emanating from the working definition (and discussed during the workshop) is the unit of analysis. Researchers often observe how individuals deal with conflicting positions and paradoxical situations. Yet, it is unclear how one can extend individual perspectives to a collective, organisational view of paradoxes. Is an organisational level of abstraction even possible, given the pluralistic contexts that typify organisational life?

This brings us to another point raised during the discussions at the workshop. Just what is the point of studying and explaining organisational paradoxes? Is this just another indulgent and decadent academic exercise, or is there purchase of such conceptualisations in practice? Nonetheless, interpretations of paradoxes presented at the workshop helped shed some light on the dynamics of how organisational change becomes institutionalised. There is perhaps scope to consider the role paradoxes can play in de-institutionalising organisational norms. Finally, the title of the workshop focuses on the deconstruction of organisational paradoxes. Yet, in nearly all the accounts provided by the eight articles, researchers have either constructed the notion of organisational paradox based on their interpretation of their observations of practice, or re-constructed their informants' accounts of paradoxical situations and events. Many did not offer much clarity on how one can really de-construct organisational paradoxes. Therefore, there is an opportunity here to trace the steps in de-constructing organisational paradoxes, which could in turn help practitioners themselves reflect on paradoxical encounters as they emerge. It is here that the article by Christine Räisänen and Ann-Charlotte Stenberg using positioning theory to explain how individuals address strategic management contradictions could provide some useful clues.

Next Steps

A recurrent theme emerging from the articles presented and discussed at this workshop is the issue of identity of the researcher and the research subject. As such, CIB TG78 is planning a follow-up workshop on "Identity Crises in Construction" to form part of the CIB W55/W65 Conference in Montreal, Canada in June 2012. Preliminary questions posed for this workshop include:

- What aspects and directions of identity research are (becoming) pertinent in the field of construction management research and practice? Why does identity research matter anyway?
- How do we study identity in construction? What methodological problems arise when studying identity in construction? What methods can we use to inform our understanding of identity in construction? What do we then do with this understanding?
- How do we construct, re-construct, and de-construct identity in construction, both of researchers and practitioners?

- How do we account for the identity of researchers undertaking research into identity in construction, especially when the researcher's identity is disrupted by the research subjects whose identities are being investigated?

Further details about this workshop will be made available soon, including instructions for submission of articles. Please contact the coordinators of CIB TG78 (Dr. Paul W Chan, paul.chan@manchester.ac.uk; or Professor Christine Räisänen, christine.raisanen@chalmers.se) for more information.

References

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