Revaluing Construction

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Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, 2008: ISBN 978-1-4051-5919-7; 296pp; £69.50; hardback

Journal of Building Appraisal (2008) **4**, 45–46. doi:10.1057/jba.2008.15

This new collection of papers has emerged from an extensive programme of research, led by the University of Salford, which considered tangible and strategic ways in which the construction industry should re-evaluate its worth to economies and to society.

The subject matter covered is by necessity quite wide-ranging. Opening with a review of the many and often critical reviews of construction (in the UK, especially), which have emerged over the past few decades, the authors quickly establish a framework for their writing. Using the outcomes from internationally hosted workshops to identify drivers, actions and restraining factors in construction, the book then presents a series of linked themes, collectively referred to as an ‘infinity model’ of the areas which need to be addressed by the industry in the coming years. To the reader, this means a collection of seven such themes, which range across values of stakeholders, through decision-making and market structures, to the value derived by society from construction.

On the one hand, this approach is useful for the reader, in that the authors have attempted to retain a wider view of the industry throughout, while allowing for deeper discussion within individual themes. On the other, the scope of the research project as presented here was apparently quite wide, perhaps as a result of stakeholder consultations. In effect, this results in a book that makes necessarily grand demands of the industry, and leaves the reader in some instances searching for greater depth of discussion, or more direction towards related research and debate. Having said that, section two sets out a clear agenda for the industry to address current issues, and which require attention if potential benefits from construction can be realised. The authors did well, I felt, to ensure that each chapter contains clear signposts for future development, even where these by necessity will require a complex range of participants to collaborate and contribute to ongoing debate.

The third section presents a series of discussion papers by many authors, each of which takes a distinct and in all cases interesting views of an aspect or aspects of the model. Of particular note, I felt, were those papers by Ruddock, Lees and Vischer, which deal, respectively, with economic context, education and the building user.

Ruddock’s chapter (complemented by that of Lee and Barrett) provides a useful review of evidence to place construction within the context of the wider economy. As mentioned, the work of Lee (‘Construction is Good!’) provides a heartening and positive view of the industry, and particularly SMEs. These sections also provide specific advice regarding learning and inward investment, to complement a strong reaction to client needs.

Lees’ chapter concerning educational challenges is also very timely, given current debate within higher education regarding linkages between teaching and research, and the needs of industry. The highly vocational nature of education in built-environment disciplines has tended, since the early 1990s at least, to prompt a debate on the balance between work-readiness and wider goals of higher education. This has led to apparent

dissatisfaction of employers with the immediate abilities and skills of graduates. Interestingly, Lees differentiates the architecture discipline, where professional prescription of syllabus content and student outcomes is perhaps stricter than in other areas of the industry. Lees' mention of professional doctorates as a potentially more appropriate research route than the traditional PhD is interesting, and would in itself require and bring benefits from a stronger integration between educators and industry.

I also found Jacqueline Vischer's chapter on the needs and values of end users very interesting, and an important addition to the book as a whole. The discussion centres largely on post-occupancy and building performance evaluation, all through a discussion of how we might try to understand the experience of users in terms of physical, functional and psychological comfort. In addition to the discussion included here, I felt it would have been interesting to also include some discussion of participatory design and wider reference to work from environmental psychology and environmental economics. If anything, though, the chapter makes a clear point that a 'revaluation' of construction requires an assessment of such wider social and perceptual concerns.

Barrett's concluding remarks appear to recognise this, and note that the research and this book are necessarily wide-ranging. This tends to be reflected in the scope for improvement across all themes. I, however, found the final table of impacts on society, and priorities for the industry and research, to be useful, specific and positive in its outlook. The author's final comment that change needs to be driven by the industry, with reference to research, is obviously vital, and one hopes that this will be acted on by industry and professional bodies. This would be refreshing, given the overview of historical inaction presented at the outset.

This is a timely publication, and one that could act as a useful starting point for a reader trying to understand current challenges facing the industry. The papers contained within the book cover the 'model' from numerous standpoints and as such do not always read as a cohesive argument. One, however, suspects that this was not the intention, and as a well-supported and well-argued agenda for the industry, the book is a valuable contribution. I feel that it adds a number of useful perspectives to an ongoing debate, and as such would prove useful reading for practitioners and students alike.

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