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# Construction UK: Introduction to the Industry (2nd edition)

Ralph Morton and Andrew Ross

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Ralph Morton's (2002) classic has been expertly updated by Andrew Ross in its second edition and now includes the latest DTI statistics as well as an examination of the effectiveness of post-Egan initiatives and other useful additions such as the influence of European initiatives, the increasing impact of IT, sustainability and the increasing skills gap.

The book aims to help students gain a broad appreciation of the construction industry in the UK and is therefore relevant to all the construction industry disciplines. In a recent straw poll among senior architectural students and staff, I discovered that none had heard of the book. This is most regrettable as it is particularly architecture students who would benefit from a better understanding of their industry. The publishers will, no doubt, wish to remedy this gap in their market.

Ralph Morton was an excellent economist and teacher. He lectured on economics and the social aspects of architecture at the former Liverpool Polytechnic and was later appointed professor and director of the School of the Built Environment at Liverpool John Moores University.

Although the content of the book is excellent, its layout and graphic design leave a lot to be desired. Its editing seems to have been rushed as it contains a large number of printing errors.

One of the most useful aspects of the book is its structure. Each chapter has a succinct introduction, a conclusion/summary as well as advice on further study, augmented by excellent references and a laudably succinct selected bibliography, enabling the student easily to carry out further study.

The author has highlighted with great perception the key historical elements of the development of our industry and illuminated these with an economic and social commentary pointing out some persistent problems and some solutions. His analysis in Chapters 2 and 3 of construction demand, its effect on the structure of the industry and its economic base is particularly good.

Chapter 4 about the workforce on site, the structure of employment and the endemic problems of training and skills makes very uncomfortable reading. It leaves a big question mark over the future of the industry. The author emphasises correctly that the causes for the continuing poor performance of the industry, measured by international standards, are rooted in our fragmented approach to education and training and our inability to adopt holistic and integrated solutions.

Chapter 5 on professionals and managers powerfully underlines the need to create a better understanding of 'design' as the essential activity in the preparation of plans for change and the responsibility of everyone in the team to contribute to this. These perceptual and educational problems are deep-seated. Achieving the 'integrated team' that Latham and Egan have called for still represents the biggest challenge.

I found Chapter 6 on the growth of contracting and Chapter 7 on procurement, contracts and the way ahead particularly illuminating, although the lack of clarity of the page layout was challenging. The author poses some important questions about the efficacy of PFI and PPP and the effect of these procurement methods on competition. The way he leaves some questions unanswered and open to interpretation enables the students to come up with their own answers. The two case studies are very useful in that respect.

The focus on technological innovation in construction in Chapter 8 is essential in highlighting the profound change in construction over the last few years. This is well complemented by Chapter 10 on the government and the building industry, which highlights the extent to which legislation is affecting this change. The separation of design from construction raised in this chapter is a particularly British problem, which is not the case on the continent, where a large proportion of project managers are trained as architects and/or engineers. Trade and/or specialist contractors are, as a norm, coordinated by architects or engineers on the continent rather than being under the control of a General Contractor. This achieves considerable savings, better integration between design and production and a far less adversarial process. A brief reference to this alternative way of working, which was until fairly recently also the norm in Scotland, would have placed our wayward attitude to 'design' in the correct context.

The expanded coverage in Chapter 9 on sustainability reflects the increasing importance of seeing construction in its wider environmental context. However, I doubt whether the construction industry will be able to meet intended targets without society significantly changing its *modus operandi*. The right balance to be struck between profitability and social responsibility can only be the result of another industrial revolution, which measures innovation against a global view of sustainability and sees profitability and economic success within that framework instead of as an add-on.

At the end of the book the author points to some exclusions. One of these is the relationship of construction firms to the materials industry. What is not generally understood is that the materials and components producers perceive themselves, and are statistically recognised by the government, as members of the manufacturing industry and not of the construction industry. This is a fatal structural problem, the extent of which has wide-ranging repercussions on the efficiency of our industry and its ability to innovate.

The book achieves its mission with eloquence, while enriching the student with a broad understanding of the history of the construction industry, its present strengths and weaknesses and its needs for the future.

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## Reference

Morton, R. (2002) 'Construction UK', Blackwell Service Ltd., ISBN 0-632-058 528.