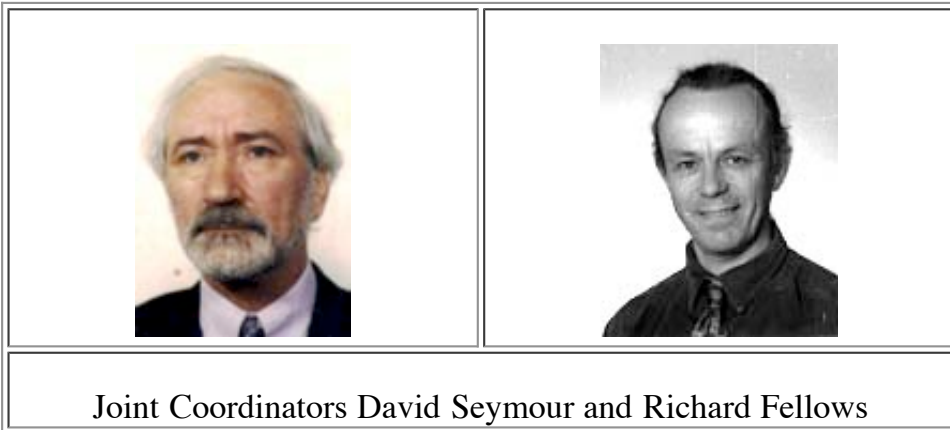


TG23 - Culture in Construction

Joint Coordinators David Seymour and Richard Fellows have kindly provided an up-date on TG23 affairs. Below they trace the history of the Group since its inception a couple of years ago and identify the two themes which continue to be the focal points of TG23's attention.

In their report they pose a number of fascinating questions and come up with some equally fascinating if hypothetical answers.

Provisional plans already in place for up-coming meetings including a Workshop in the Netherlands next year. If successful this will chart a clear course for TG23 in the future.



Introduction and Background

TG23 was formed in 1997 on the premise that the word 'culture' was being used with increasing frequency within the construction management and research community. The first meeting was held in September at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom and attended by over 20 delegates. It aimed to find out what people meant by the word 'culture' and establish what the nature of the interest was. Through workshop discussions the initial objectives of TG23 were defined as:

- To identify and define concepts of culture in the international construction industry and to carry out research into their manifestations and effects.
- To discuss and develop appropriate methodologies for the study of culture in construction.
- To determine and, where appropriate, adopt methodologies used in other disciplines, with special reference to the social sciences, for researching culture in the international construction industry.

Towards the realisation of the objectives, three research working groups were established:

- Overview of Culture - Definitions, Perspectives, Dimensions, etc.
- Topics as Focii for Culture in Construction
- Current Research on Culture in Construction

Two further meetings of the Task Group have been held - at Gävle, Sweden (in conjunction with the CIB Congress June 1998) and at Chiang Mai, Thailand (in conjunction with W092, for a joint symposium, in January 1999). The next meeting is being arranged for the Netherlands in May 2000 and a further meeting at the CIB World Congress in 2001 in Wellington, New Zealand.

State of the Art

Two substantive themes continue to attract the majority of interest. The first concerns the international transfer of technology/skills/techniques. The second concerns the perceived need to transform attitudes and conventional ways of working in order to facilitate innovation, to implement methods of continuous improvement and to encourage cross-organisational collaboration, (respectively through such initiatives as benchmarking and partnering).

It is expected that these themes will remain central to the work of the Group.

However, we emphasise that for the work of TG23 to proceed effectively, it continues to be necessary explicitly to address questions that are often taken for granted: Why do we want to study culture? What kinds of findings do we expect to produce? For what purposes and for whom? Making these questions explicit may be expected to bring greater clarity to matters of method and treatment.

We take it that answers to these questions will be of the following kind:

- To be able to get on with, work with, do business with people who differ from us in various respects
- To be able to record, provide an account or analysis of what facilitates and impedes this
- To communicate findings for the benefit of others
- To assess the utility of management techniques in different cultural contexts, bearing in mind the kinds of value differences identified by, for example, Hofstede
- To help manage the transfer of skills and techniques across different cultures
- To provide means of assessing the cultures of particular organisations, or occupations (SWOT analyses of cultures)
- To study attitudes and reactions to change in organisations
- To investigate and propagate the skills of change management

The 'deliverables' may take many forms:

- To provide a 'guidebook' - the do's and don'ts when you relate to e.g. Muslims, Arabs, Italians, Swedes (e.g. Trompenaars)
- To provide abstract descriptions in order to make comparisons of cultures (e.g. Hofstede)
- To provide ethnographic accounts of cultures
- To establish connections (e.g. impact of culture on safety/accidents; impact of the 'macho' culture of construction on female careers; impact of national culture on 'take-up' of new forms of procurement; transfer of technology)

What Next?

The legitimate concerns of the study of culture are wide. However, the *raison d'être* for TG23 is the conviction that the study of culture provides a distinctive mode of entry into a range of issues and can cast a distinctive light upon them. This seems to be the conclusion within the social sciences where conventional themes are being revisited from a cultural perspective.

An emergent view within TG23, therefore, is that, in construction, research into cultural issues has been constrained by a certain academic parochialism in seldom searching beyond the borders of the literature particular to that industry. Further, that there is much to be learnt from the social sciences, notably sociology, anthropology and psychology.

However, there are significant signs that the situation in construction research is changing as methods and findings from the fundamental and applied disciplines are being used in construction work to an increasing extent. Thus, it is becoming apparent that: first, within these disciplines, there is a considerable and rich body of research, continually developing, and available for use by construction

researchers, and, second, that the methodological and conceptual issues which construction management research is now addressing have already been addressed.

To provide a focus for the future, it is intended to take the lead from the fundamental body of work which exists in the social sciences. Thus, first, culture is an intensely complex phenomenon and is manifest in a range of different ways throughout the subject matters of these disciplines. Second, as researchers in construction management are themselves discovering, it is difficult, as it were, to 'contain' culture as a distinct and clearly identifiable 'variable'. Third, a promising direction for the study of culture to follow, if it is to make a distinct contribution to our understanding, is in the concept 'signifying systems' which is being used in the social sciences to focus cultural studies. The concept refers to the way people convey meaning and intention to each other and is to be seen in various communicative methods and techniques.

An approach to culture using the concept 'signifying system' is expected to provide a strong link between the concerns of theory and practice.

Workshop on Culture in Construction

A Workshop, planned for May 2000 and titled "Culture in Construction: Part of the Deal?" aims to explore the significance of these developments for construction. The Workshop will be a two-day event bringing together the theoretical and practical experiences of culture in an international context within the construction industry and construction research. It will be hosted by the University of Twente in Enschede in the Netherlands. Organisers are Dr.Ir. Wilco Tjihuis and Dr.Ir. Andre Doree as members of the Faculty of Technology and Management, Department of Civil Engineering and Management, Section of Construction Technology and Construction Process.

Amongst the topics that have already been identified for presentation and discussion at the workshop are:

- The use of the EFQM. This is a methodological framework, devised for practitioners, which makes explicit a number of cultural issues which firms need to manage in order to improve performance.
- The take up and use of a design management system. Here, the interest is in the way a highly formalised set of techniques is being introduced and used and what kinds of organisational re-alignments and cultural changes become necessary in order to assimilate it.
- Doing organisation research whilst addressing culture-related issues. This reflects a way of acting as e.g. a "third culture person" within an organisation, caring for the inside-outside approach.
- International experiences in construction; how projects with a multi-cultural background and projects-teams succeed or fail. These aspects are related to company strategies and working methods.

Thus, the Workshop will bring together the theoretical and practical experiences of ways in which culture is seen to be important in both an organisational and international context within the construction industry and construction research.

Other topics which centre on this theme are warmly invited.

Prospective participants should, therefore, prepare a short note (one or two pages DIN A4) with their vision and experiences at both theoretical and practical levels.

Goal and Outcome

The goal of the Workshop is to define a research agenda with which TG23 can adapt its research programme both from the viewpoints of academics and industry.

Time Schedule

The Workshop is planned to be a two days event in May 2000. However, to get an indication of the possible number of participants we would like to receive a message from interested researchers and practitioners; from academics and from industry.

The closing-date for this pre-registration is 31st January 2000.

In the meantime the preparation and organisation of the Workshop will be completed, so that a definitive time schedule and other details will be available in February 2000.

Organisation

The Host of the Workshop will be the University of Twente in Enschede in the Netherlands. The state-of-the-art research and collaboration with international research-institutes and industry gives the University of Twente a unique position in the international community. To improve insight into the construction process by means of an integrated approach which contributes to the improvement of both construction processes and the constructed object itself is the present strategy and programme of the Faculty, attracting several international contacts and projects.

For More Information

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