

TG23 - Culture in Construction

Culture in Construction: Part of the Deal? was the intriguing title of the TG23 Workshop which took place in Enschede, The Netherlands in May.

The contents certainly lived up to the expectations as the report from Wilco Tjihuis and Richard Fellows shows.

Culture in Construction: Part of the Deal? A TG23 Workshop

Introduction

The Workshop was held on 22nd and 23rd May this year, and was organised by the University of Twente in Enschede, the Netherlands, Faculty of Construction Technology & Construction Management. The Organising Committee, led by Dr.Ir. Wilco Tjihuis and his team, put together a two-day-programme, in which several aspects of culture and its role in the construction industry were discussed.

The main goal of the Workshop was to examine the research, undertaken by members of TG23 (with its Joint Coordinators Dr. Richard Fellows and Dr. David Seymour) in the broad context of construction industry practices and issues, to promote more extensive examination of the operation, perspectives and 'dimensions' of 'culture' in construction. The results of the Workshop suggest that progress towards this goal is well under way.

The participants

A small but highly enthusiastic group of some 10 persons of several nationalities, (UK, Hong Kong, Australia and The Netherlands) participated in the Workshop. By bringing together academics and practitioners in the field to exchange and critically review their knowledge, viewpoints and experiences, many interesting discussions were generated.

Discussions

Starting with a number of presentations designed to provide the initial direction for discussions, the main themes were defined quite clearly. Especially the role of culture-research and its practice in research and industry led to interesting issues. Experiences from an academic viewpoint crossed and inter-linked with experiences from a business-consultancy viewpoint. This gave food for fruitful thoughts.

Some Outcomes

In a general way, some particular outcomes were:

- Participants in the construction industry should become aware of the importance of culture and its impact and influence on the process and product of construction business.
- To stimulate such awareness, it is essential to assemble multi-cultural teams for undertaking research in this field.
- The role of 'trust' (and 'distrust') was discussed, especially in the field of possible reasons for understanding (or misunderstanding) differences in culture.
- Doing desk-research means, in a lot of cases, that the existing frameworks of research in this field (e.g. Hofstede) provide valuable starting points. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the framework

does not exist - continuous improvements and adaptations are needed.

- The need for clear definitions was quite obvious, and certain progress is being made.
- Doing field-research in culture-issues requires good and realistic access to organizations; reporting from 'inside' gives the best guarantee for realistic viewpoints and outcomes.
- However, reporting from inside organisations introduces the risk of 'becoming too close' (a so called 'third-culture-man').
- One very specific aspect of 'the field' was discussed, as it is possible to apply for (international) funding schemes and research-programmes; such frameworks should stimulate progress in research.

A more detailed overview of the Workshop, research programme, discussions and outcomes will be published as Proceedings of the Workshop to be published officially by CIB in the coming months and edited by Dr.Ir. Wilco Tjihuis and his team from the University of Twente in the Netherlands.

Conclusions

The discussions were interesting, especially when it came to understanding how executing research into culture in the construction industry can be quite different from doing research in other subject areas and in other industries. Notably, it became very clear that we can learn from experiences in other branches of industry as cultures are multi-dimensional and operate at a variety of 'levels' in societies. No longer should it be acceptable for culture to be used as a 'black box excuse' for effects that have not been explained in an investigation.

Exchange of information worldwide becomes easier, more rapid and ubiquitous due to modern media but the cultural differences seem to remain. This was also one of the major observations which the CIB Secretary General Wim Bakens made in his closing speech. As construction is a peoples' business, and will stay so, 'culture' must become an essential part of the deal !

Dr.Ir. Wilco Tjihuis & Dr Richard Fellows

