

On the discourse of construction competitiveness

Stuart D. Green, Chris F. Harty, Abbas Ali Elmualim, Graeme D. Larsen & Chung-Chin Kao

School of Construction Management and Engineering, University of Reading

Abstract

It is contended that competitiveness is better understood as a discourse rather than a characteristic that is supposedly possessed. The discourse of competitiveness derives its legitimacy from the enterprise culture that came to dominance during the 1980s. Current popularised theories of competitiveness are constituent parts of this broader discourse which has had significant material implications for the UK construction sector. The dominant recipe of competitiveness amongst contracting firms is shaped by the need to achieve structural flexibility to cope with fluctuations in demand. Fashionable espoused improvement recipes such as total quality management (TQM), business process re-engineering (BPR) and lean construction legitimise and reinforce the material manifestations of the enterprise culture. In consequence, the UK industry is characterised by a plethora of hollowed-out firms who have failed to invest in their human capital. While the adopted model may be rational for individual firms, the systemic effect across the sector as a whole equates to a form of anorexia. However, the discourse of competitiveness is by no means monolithic and continues to be contested locally. There have also been numerous counter-discourses that have been mobilised in response to the undesirable externalities of unbridled enterprise. Currently important counter-discourses promote the ideas of sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: Competitiveness, discourse, enterprise culture, lean construction, sustainability.