THE DISCOURSE OF CONSTRUCTION COMPETITIVENESS: MATERIAL CONSEQUENCES AND LOCALISED RESISTANCE

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Abstract

It is contended that competitiveness is better understood as a discourse rather than a characteristic that is supposedly possessed. Construction companies, and national construction sectors, are continuously exhorted to improve their competitiveness. The search for competitive advantage is widely accepted as an essential component of enacted strategy, but there remains little agreement on how it can be achieved in practice. Different discourses are derived from the competitive positioning school, the resource-based view and the theory of dynamic capabilities. The associated terminologies are frequently ambiguous and arguments are too often divorced from context. Key terms are subject to different interpretations within different constituencies. Such co-existence of multiple representations of concepts is a common social phenomenon. Different meanings are articulated and mobilised to serve the interests of different social and institutional constituencies. The discourse of competitiveness derives its legitimacy from the enterprise culture that came to dominance in the Anglo-Saxon world during the 1980s. In the UK construction industry, the discourse of competitiveness has had significant material implications for the structure of the sector. The dominant recipe of competitiveness amongst contracting firms has been the need to achieve structural flexibility to cope with fluctuations in demand. 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. A currently important counter-discourse promotes the ideas of corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: Competitiveness, Competitive Advantage, Context, Discourse, Enterprise Culture.