Re-engineering construction: going against the grain

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Abstract
An overtly critical perspective on ‘re-engineering construction’ is presented. It is contended that re-engineering is impossible to define in terms of its substantive content and is best understood as a rhetorical label. In recent years, the language of re-engineering has heavily shaped the construction research agenda. The declared goals are to lower costs and improve value for the customer. The discourse is persuasive because it reflects the ideology of the ‘enterprise culture’ and the associated rhetoric of customer responsiveness. Re-engineering is especially attractive to the construction industry because it reflects and reinforces the existing dominant way of thinking. The overriding tendency is to reduce organizational complexities to a mechanistic quest for efficiency. Labour is treated as a commodity. Within this context, the objectives of re-engineering become ‘common sense’. Knowledge becomes subordinate to the dominant ideology of neo-liberalism. The accepted research agenda for re-engineering construction exacerbates the industry’s problems and directly contributes to the casualization of the workforce. The continued adherence to machine metaphors by the construction industry’s top management has directly contributed to the ‘bad attitudes’ and ‘adversarial culture’ that they repeatedly decry. Supposedly neutral topics such as pre-assembly, partnering, supply chain management and lean thinking serve only to justify the shift towards bogus labour-only subcontracting and the associated reduction of employment rights. The continued casualization of the workforce raises real questions about the industry’s future capacity to deliver high-quality construction. In order to appear ‘relevant’ to the needs of industry, it seems that the research community is doomed to perpetuate this regressive cycle.

Keywords: casualization, enterprise culture, lean construction, neo-liberalism, private finance initiative, re-engineering