



17th Annual
Engineering
Project
Organization
Conference

Working Paper Proceedings

The Existential Crisis of Construction Project Managers: Who, What and Why Are We Anymore?

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EPOC 2019 | VAIL CO

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The Existential Crisis of Construction Project Managers: who, what and why are we anymore?

Robert Leicht and Fred Sherratt

Abstract

This paper will provide a brief background in existentialism, as applied to the built environment and specifically the role of the construction manager. The existential crisis of construction experts will be framed in the context of the current industry environment, and subsequently draw on interviews with industry leaders who are working to engage collaborative processes to understand the value proposition of these efforts in the light of the existential crisis in construction expertise. Whether they are implementing collaborative processes to create meaning, what about these processes is improving the enjoyment and fulfillment of construction experts, and in what way should these efforts expand or evolve? The discussion will seek to frame the existential crisis of the current construction expert through this existential lens and offer a philosophical basis for improving the construction industry.

Introduction

The exploration of existentialism, the development of meaning focused on the act of living and being by the human subject, has proven an influential theory in shaping our understanding of the human condition. Existentialism focuses on the creation of meaning of our own existence through sincerity and passion in our human pursuits. Existential pleasures in the act of hands-on construction can be easily understood – the skill, craftsmanship, and enjoyment, which is derived from the “making” of a thing, is an experience to which all people can relate. By extension, the role of the master builder or architect, who envisions a significant structure, designs it, and oversees its construction can similarly be understood, for the fulfillment and pride it creates (Florman, 1994). However, viewing the contemporary processes of engineering project organization and management through an existential lens creates something of an existential crisis.

Construction managers, as individuals, to some extent define themselves through their expertise in the construction process. However, the form of this expertise has significantly changed and developed from the Master Builders of history. It was suggested by Ness (2009) that project management in the construction context no longer involves a tangible contribution to the process, and instead it is the workers who get the job done whilst management simply ‘sets forth what is supposed to happen, and afterwards records progress’ (ibid 2009:652). Does the application of construction expertise, as made manifest in such an approach to the planning and execution of the construction process, create a meaningful, fulfilling human experience? Can we still define who we are in this

bureaucratic and administrative space? Furthermore, as the facilities we build have become increasingly complex, yet desired faster and more cost-effectively, problems with project delivery and the volume of litigation that surrounds such problems have also increased, fundamentally challenging the credibility of this expertise, arguably further adding to the crisis. If we are what we do, what type of experts are we being in these roles? Can we even lay claim to expertise at all? And this crisis is currently set against the imaginings of Construction 4.0, where technologies such as BIM, AI and machine learning will more efficiently plan and schedule the work for us, much better able to do that with a computer rather than a human brain. What then for construction project managers?

However, in the evolving context of the construction industry, changing technologies, new delivery methods, and the adoption of new collaborative processes also arguably provide opportunities for the improvement of the meaning created by the expert construction manager. Through the very act of collaboration, construction experts are potentially able to create fulfillment. But how can such processes allow construction experts to shift their roles to retain the application of their expertise through which they define themselves? What change does our industry need to bring about to allow the meaning and fulfillment of construction expertise to once again develop, expand, and evolve, and therefore resolve, the existential crisis in construction management?

Here, we first provide a brief background to existentialism, as applied to the built environment and specifically the role of the construction manager. The ‘existentialist crisis’ of construction experts is framed in the context of the current industry environment, and we subsequently draw on interviews with industry leaders who are working to engage collaborative processes to understand the value of these efforts in the light of the current existential crisis in construction management. We explore whether they are implementing collaborative processes that create meaning, what about these processes is improving the enjoyment and fulfillment of construction experts, and in what way should such efforts expand or evolve. The discussion will seek to frame the contemporary crisis of the current construction expert through this existential lens and offer a philosophical basis for improving the construction industry.

Context

Existentialism as a Philosophical Position

Questioning the meaning of life is an activity that has been undertaken for most of human existence. The Greek philosophers, including Socrates, explored the relationships between philosophy and practice, and how actions realized more meaning than any underlying philosophical or ethical “truths”. Indeed, Socrates taught that life should be about a quest for virtue, morality and goodness, rather than the accrual of money or personal pleasure, and committed to this so strongly that it eventually resulted in his death. “I believe it to be true... [that]... anyone who wants to be happy must seek out and practice self-discipline and beat as hasty a retreat as possible from self-indulgence.” (Plato [1994:105]). When Socrates was tried and condemned for corrupting the Athenian youth through his teachings, he voluntarily drank the poison proffered by his executioners, and so took a step beyond

the rational. He accepted the decision of his community and acted upon his own instruction of the need to comply with the laws of the government under which he had chosen to live, mindful of the negative consequences of any defection or escape, and thus prioritized his moral compliance over his own life. His postulations that there *may* be immortality of the soul also enabled him to construct a truth which in turn supported a personal conviction, and thereby resulted in his ultimate action (Flynn 2006).

Kierkegaard, writing centuries later, praised Socrates for his actions, and further supported his call for morality and goodness, setting out the hypothesis that each person is responsible for defining meaning in their own life. Meaning, from an existentialist view, is the search for value and purpose: “What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*...to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*” (Kierkegaard [1996:32]). This differed significantly from what had philosophically gone before. Grounded in Plato’s ideas of Essentialism, earlier considerations of existence postulated the presence of “pre-determined essences,” “The craftsman of this universe, then, took as his model that which is grasped by reason and intelligence and is consistent, and it necessarily follows from these premises that this world of ours is an image of something... [namely]... an eternal model,” (Plato [2008:17]) which formed the basis of individuals’ character, and through which their existence could then be defined. The key differentiation for existentialism was the postulation that existence *preceded* these essences (Sartre [1947:2007]) and indeed essences did not exist in any “Platonic Form” in heaven (see *Timaeus*, *Republic*), but rather were socially constructed through human interaction. Building upon ideas laid out by Kierkegaard, Kant noted that “no knowledge within us is antecedent to experience, and all knowledge begins with experience” (Kant [1781:2007:38]). Therefore, the search for meaning from an existentialist perspective places emphasis on existence, and so meaning is drawn from the everyday living, feeling and acting of the human experience: a person first exists then through action defines meaning in that existence. Grounded in a relativist ontology, meaning for existentialism is therefore not given, but something that is achieved through the process of social construction; the journey, more so than the destination.

Key to this philosophy is choice, indeed Existentialists would argue that to choose is to live. As life is given meaning by our actions, how we choose to act (much like Socrates), then creates our own meaning, as Sartre (1947:2007: 308) noted: “we are our choices.” We must therefore make our own choices and fully accept the “weight of freedom” (Camus 1942) that these choices inherently bring. Yet defining ourselves through our choices and actions requires feeling and the will to act in ways that then constructs or creates an identity of “self” that we can accept and live with, and so give life meaning.

The Existentialist Crisis of Construction Project Management

Why then, is there an existential dilemma in the “action” of construction expertise, and thus an existential crisis in construction project management?

As noted above, the tangibility of construction work readily finds fit with Frankl’s (1985) first method for the definition of meaning: that of “creating a work or doing a deed.” By

extension, the role of the master builder also has value in the creation of a tangible structure and the experiential process of managing the construction towards a successful end. However, the expertise that the master builders of history once held has been diminished by significant change in the processes that now define the daily work of the construction project manager. They no longer spend long periods of time on site (roles now taken on by site superintendents or construction site managers) and instead find themselves more office-based, dealing with the administrative management of those who actually do the work (Ness 2009). The meaning that individuals could once ascribe to their lives as they realized the tangible production of a built environment asset has now been supplanted by involvement in non-tangible activities and thus results in obfuscation of their expertise in the construction process. Construction project managers, as individuals, will naturally to some extent define themselves through their work and deeds, including their expertise in the construction process. Therefore, this shift has the potential to create an existential crisis in which the expert no longer has close connection to the thing about which they claim expertise.

The economic value placed on expertise, in any field, begins to force emphasis on measurable outcomes which also influences the development and establishment of identity and self within this space. In the context of expertise, as Bauman (1990: 84) notes, there is already an inherent dilemma: “On one hand, the individual needs to establish a stable and defensible difference between own person and the wider impersonal and impenetrable social world outside. On the other hand, however, such a difference, precisely to be stable and reliable, needs social affirmation and must be obtained in a form which also enjoys social approval.”

Yet for construction management, determining such approval has become an increasingly bureaucratic process, driven toward emphasis on reporting and “measurable outcomes.” As Applebaum (1982) explains from an anthropological approach, construction work was traditionally managed through a superintendent in the field working with foreman and trades, “absorbed in the messy process of getting the work done, of making mistakes, of fighting bottle-necks and bad weather, of having to bare their emotions and tempers, as well as using politics and exchanging favors to accomplish their tasks.” The interactions and “comradeship” of the workforce is indicated by the mutual support, coordination, and cooperation of the foremen. In contrast, he describes the management trailer as having, “a tone of silences as people worked within walls of filing cabinets trying quietly to avoid criticism and striving for neat files, orderly demeanors and orderly work places.” Bauman goes on to discuss the predominance of human relations in construction, in which “managers cannot speed up a machine or an assembly line to increase productivity.” The primary and increasingly prevalent issue highlighted by Bauman is the increasingly bureaucratic nature of the management of construction work does not conform to the social organization of construction operations. As argued by Weltfish (1979), as the use of computers and machines grows, we move further from the view of people as the primary resources of organizations. However, in construction, with the dynamic nature of field

operations, it is exactly the expertise of the individual tradespeople and foremen that is needed and so should be most highly valued.

When the value we provide is measured in the documentation we can capture, the meaning of the acts are often lost. When the value of what we do is lost, a loss of meaning follows. The pluralism seen in the specialization and fragmentation of the construction industry leads to “socially segregated sub-universes of meaning” in which “role-specific knowledge becomes altogether esoteric,” (Berger and Lucmann, p. 85).

Methodology

To begin to explore whether an existential crisis exists, and, if so, what forces are at play in influencing its manifestation and development, we sought out construction managers directly. In order to complement the existentialist philosophical lens and enable its application to the empirical findings, this research is grounded in a relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology (Gergen and Gergen 2004; Burr 2003). This approach accepts that the world as experienced is socially constructed by the people within it through their interactions, systems and practices (Gergen and Gergen 2004), and so does not seek positivistic truths, or platonic forms of essence to return to the terminology of our earlier philosophical discussions. Therefore, there are challenges to the traditional positivistic conceptions such as validity, which are replaced here by credibility (Lincoln and Guba 1985) as demonstrated through persuasive coherence and robust argument (Taylor 2001), and reliability, which here is demonstrated by standardization in the data collection, transcription, and constant comparison during the analytical process (Gibbs 2007). Exploration of these shared versions of knowledge is achieved by illuminating the *dominant discourses* (Taylor 2001; Burr 2003) found within the empirical data, which reveal shared versions of “knowledge” within particular communities, making “truth” simply the currently accepted way of understanding meaning in that particular world (Burr 2003). And so here we must acknowledge the active role of the researchers in this process, and note that we both come from a practical construction management background, and so are part of this community. Our own meaning therefore has been, and perhaps still is, associated with construction management practice, and so we have inevitably taken an emic stance when drawing others into our exploration of any existential crisis in this context.

Method

To explore the existential crisis of construction project management, both in extent and incarnation, interviews with senior construction industry personnel were conducted. Semi-structured conversations were used to engage these experience construction experts in conversation regarding their personal experience, perspectives, and as appropriate existential crises, regarding their longitudinal engagement in the construction industry. The sample was purposive, and personnel that have served for more than 25 years were sampled to allow consideration for changes observed in the industry, particularly around technology adoption and changes in the role of construction experts in newer, collaborative delivery methods. Each of the three experts, had worked in the construction industry for more than

25 years, all starting from entry level project roles and moving up into senior project management positions. In addition, all three are currently active in construction projects, two still in construction firms and one having recently moved to a project manager role at an institutional owner.

In order to reflect the methodological approach adopted, interview questions were constructed to be deliberately open-ended and to enable the interviewee to direct and shape their answers according to their own constructions and understandings of meaning.

The questions used to prompt the conversations were:

Demographic questions:

- Name
- Current role
- Years / past roles working in construction

Questions:

- In your experience, what is the role of a construction manager?
- How do you describe the job and tasks a construction manager performs?
- In your personal experience, how has the construction manager role developed, or changed over time?
- How has the engagement with work in the field/site or engagement with the workforce changed?
- What do you find meaningful about being a construction manager?
- Do you think construction managers are valued, as a career?
- Where do you think the future of construction management lies?
- How do these changes influence CMs?
- How do they change the role of CMs are on projects?
- How do they change the 'experience' of being a construction manager? (enjoyment, engagement?)
- How do you think we should consider these changes in the education of the next generation of CMs?

The data was recorded, subsequently transcribed and coded to reveal the dominant discourses that emerged. The coding was data-driven and aimed to be as inclusive as possible. A constant comparison method was employed (Silverman 2001), and codes therefore emerged, developed and collapsed as the process continued. Repeated and multiple passes were made of the coded data (Taylor 2001) resulting in a high level of familiarity and confidence in the processing of the data, ensuring the validity and accuracy of the findings as they emerged. Although discourse analysis is an interpretive process (Wetherell et al. 2001) skill in the identification of patterns and variations is critical (Potter and Wetherell 1992), therefore this subjective dependence was compensated through the use of two emic researchers, able to provide inter-reader reliability.

The findings are presented here through the dominant discourses as revealed by the aggregated data, set out in narrative form, as is common for the presentation of this method

of research, to enable the nuances, interrelationships and conflicts between them to be clearly explicated. In instances where extracts and quotes are used they are representational rather than anecdotal, and all names are pseudonyms.

Findings and Discussion

Construction management is in something of an existential crisis. Although there remain firm ‘pegs in the ground’ that can be associated with the traditional iron triangle of time, cost and quality, there is also doubt and reflection on what the role really means. The positioning of expertise in this space, the actions of project owners, and current construction management practices all have influence in the development of discourses that shape and re-shape the identity of the construction manager, at times providing constructions able to support meaning and validation of identity, yet at other times emerging as constructs more associated with derogation and self-doubt.

Construction management practice was linked to fundamental management practices, such as planning and control (after Fayol), as well as a level of specialist expertise within that process, articulated through the specific activities with regards to construction work itself. This ‘discourse of expertise’ contributed to the construction of identity for construction managers, and was closely associated with the project client, the lack of expertise held by the latter able to reinforce meaning and validity for the former in their professional role:

I've always seen the construction manager as being the person that helps the owner build their building,

helping [the owner] manage themselves, as well as also the work that needs to get done,

Specific aspects of construction work were drawn into the discourse of expertise, grounding this expertise in practical and tangible activities that have long been associated with construction management:

It's really setting the job up, making sure we're buying on the right scope, and performing the work in the fields with a plan so that we can schedule milestone dates, and deliver the job to the owner,

The initial grounding of construction management identity in traditional management functions was developed to incorporate construction-specific aspects, which can be drawn on to develop expertise with in the construction site space. For example, quality (the ‘right scope’) and the scheduling of milestones require specific knowledge of construction technology, materials and site management requirements (such as access, logistics and interfaces) for project success. Critical here is the challenge of construction management to ensure progress and development in what is often a highly-fragmented and silo-structured industry. And perhaps unsurprisingly, the need for collaboration and co-operation rapidly emerged as a critical aspect of the role as experienced in contemporary practice:

making sure everybody else is aligned and playing together properly so that the work gets done,

Yet this management of people and collaboration actually repositions construction management more firmly within the arena of the social. Although construction work has always necessitated people management – ‘using politics and exchanging favors to accomplish their tasks’ (Bauman 1982) – this is less grounded in technical or engineering expertise, and the differentiation from management in any other field becomes less clear, as one respondent noted:

if you boiled it down, I’m a very high-priced babysitter,

However, this discourse of expertise was at times challenged by the relationships and increasing, or changing, requirements of the owner within the project. The owner, a position with considerable influence and power in the process, places demands on the construction manager that can erode or even dismiss any version of construction management expertise. They can at times even eschew expertise, and instead reshape an identity of the construction manager developed from a position of intense scrutiny, supported by a denial of the potential value they can bring:

It’s this whittling down of both on the design side, it seems, and what you’re referring to in the construction that’s under scrutiny.

It’s a delusional state of mind. One of the people I’m working with has said to me, “I don’t need experts. I hate experts. Experts tell me what I can’t do, and nobody tells me what I can’t do.

Although construction managers can on the one hand mobilize the owner’s ignorance of construction to validate their own expertise, and thus their own identity as expert, on the other conflict arises when the owners do not also align to that discourse, and instead seek to devalue the role of the construction manager on their projects. In order to validate this alternative construct, owners place greater and greater demands upon the construction manager by requiring them to measure and demonstrate their alleged expertise and performance throughout the project. This, as Bauman notes, inherently leads to a more bureaucratic process of construction management practice:

We’re definitely doing more measuring. We’re definitely doing more reporting out. We’re definitely having to do a lot more for owners as they require certain metrics to be provided to them.

Now everything is so ultra-documented. That’s another big change that’s happened over the last 20 years is that, the amount of paper, so to speak, whether that’s electronic paper or actual paper, and correspondence, is documenting the RFIs and other things. Those things always existed, but it just feels like today the volume has just increased tremendously.

This ‘discourse of bureaucracy’ further distances the construction manager from both the technical and people management aspects of their role, and therefore their identity as grounded in expertise. Not only are they now no longer valued for people skills and technical knowledge, they are also called to account on every action. This discourse was associated with frustration and resentment and has led to changes in practice in order to ensure self-preservation, and thus a defense of identity, through the validation of action by tightly controlled reporting systems. This discourse directly challenges that of expertise from a people management perspective and dictates practices that encourages individuals to look out for their own best interests.

the only way that you can be a successful competitive low-bid contractor is ultimately you’re gonna screw the owner, the project, your employees, or your subs. Meaning there’s thousands of dark ways to cheat.

This discourse creates a space in which collaboration is not only challenged, it is actively discouraged. This lack of collaboration that feeds upon itself, as others pursue self-interest and protectionist approaches in their practice, and so the gaps increase, and the adversarial relationships interactions build upon each other:

“Well, why are you behaving this way, Mr. Architect?” or “Why are you behaving this way, Mr. Contractor?” It’s one of self-preservation versus one of collaboration.

This nexus of increasing demands, increasing reporting to demonstrate expertise, and adversarial relationships that take a toll not just on the team, but on each individual arising from contracts and low bid procurement create the crisis.

That all leads to burnout in your project team, whether it’s on your side, the owner’s side, the architect’s side, because invariably, if somebody’s being difficult, it’s gonna create more work for somebody, whether it’s you, the construction management team, or somebody with the owner or somebody with the architect or somebody in an ancillary position,

With one respondent summing things up:

I think we’re at a crisis point.

However, there is also opportunity here. The people aspects of construction management expertise also have the potential to be its saving grace. If we are losing the meaning in the act of “creating a work or doing a deed,” as Frankl (1946) frames the finding of meaning, then perhaps opportunities lies in, “experiencing something or encountering someone.” It was not only in the projects, but in the connections with other people that helped create meaning.

One of the things that has frustrated me in construction and makes me shy away from it are the things that drove me towards high-level team engagements where the personal satisfaction and the human side of this gets enhanced and not diminished, because construction can be an extremely crushing experience. Especially when coming out of the old school groups, which were heavy low-bid federal procurement contractors who knew ways to force performance out of people and crush their families at the same time.

The shift toward integrated project delivery, relationship management, and the pursuit of collaboration stems from the need to find meaning and enjoyment in our work.

I really do think that for me, what's meaningful are the personal relationships, because that's what you're dealing with every day.

I get great satisfaction and meaning from the teamwork aspect of it

It is exactly this co-creation of meaning that offers the opportunity to re-frame the role and expertise of construction managers in much more collaborative processes. The expertise of diverse teams creates new and creative solutions, but also enhances the value and meaning of the human experience through the participation and co-creation.

there's an altruistic side to this, which is if I can build a building that uses less energy, that provides a healthier workspace, emotionally, psychologically, physically, whatever. I can walk away from a project where the architect wins a Pritzker. The contractor has photographs up in his lobby. The owner says, "My experience with that group of people is one of the best experience." You know what? It was hard, but I'm so proud of my facility or whatever it is. This school, when we teach students, students learn in this place. That's not just our doing.

Conclusions

Construction is at a crisis point, and construction management is in something of an existential crisis. Although construction managers can look to the owners, and their lack of knowledge of construction and engineering projects to validate their own identity, drawing on a discourse of expertise, owners have also contributed to alternative discourses that erode and challenge the very identity of construction management practice – thus diminishing its meaning. The increasing emphasis on people management as part of construction expertise distances it from the technological aspects and knowledge of the construction site, reducing the construction manager to the level of any other manager in any other industry. Yet this would perhaps be tolerable, and reshape rather than reduce identity, if it was not coupled by the actions of the owners, drawing on discourse that reduces the movement toward commoditization and the extremes in technology, which is a disturbing trend. The de-emphasis of the value of construction management, which has led to increasing demands and bureaucracy, which has further leached meaning from the

practice. The current identity of the construction manager is one of people management, paper pushing and reporting – a far cry from work directly involved with materials, plant and the creation of tangible change within the real world.

However, despite these challenges and the lack of meaning now found within construction management, and therefore a ‘loss’ of identity, there is the potential for positive change and opportunity. Positive aspects remain, both through the creation of meaning in the delivery of meaningful projects as well as the meaning created from working with collaborative teams of experts.

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