



Delft University of Technology

## Reflections from the Editor-in-Chief

### confronting emerging challenges with important and interesting research in Construction Management and Economics

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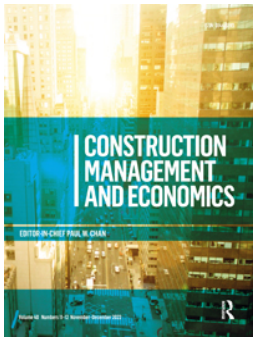
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EDITORIAL



## Reflections from the Editor-in-Chief: confronting emerging challenges with important and interesting research in *Construction Management and Economics*

When I took on the role of Editor-in-Chief for *Construction Management and Economics* in January 2020, I argued in the opening editorial that there is room for the journal to feature studies that tackle important and interesting questions surrounding the grand societal challenges of our time (Chan 2020). Thus, it gives me great pleasure to share my final editorial reflections at the back of the special issue of “Transforming Construction”, one of several special issues commissioned during my tenure as Editor-in-Chief that focus on some of the key ongoing challenges confronting researchers and practitioners in construction management and economics. The other issues included “Construction Defects, Danger, Disruption and Disputes” (Volume 39, Issue 12, 2021); “Sustainable Building Renovation” (Volume 40, Issue 3, 2022), and the Festschrift issue in honour of Dr. Glenn Ballard and his contribution to the field of lean construction (Volume 40, Issues 7–8, 2022). Still in the pipeline is the special issue on grand challenges facing our cities, as well as one based on the lessons learnt from the Covid-19 global pandemic.

When thinking about grand societal challenges at the time of writing the opening editorial, I could not have imagined the onset of the Covid-19 global pandemic and its impacts on academic life. While analyses of the impacts of the global pandemic are still ongoing and will likely continue for some time, the Editorial Team has nevertheless experienced impacts of delays to the editorial process. Our average turnaround time for making editorial decisions over the past three years has crept up slightly to just over 33 days,<sup>1</sup> indicating perhaps the challenges arising from increased workload and time pressures in academic life. At the same time, the Editorial Team also made decisions on 1,760 manuscripts over the same period with an acceptance rate of 13.3%, representing an increase in submissions to the journal and a slightly lower acceptance rate than the previous three years. In any case, there is a silver lining in the horizon where the turnaround time for an editorial decision is concerned; this appears to have reduced to just under 27 days on average over the past 11 months in 2022, which is in line with pre-pandemic levels. The Editorial Team is therefore grateful for the support given by the peer-reviewers, a list of which is appended at the end of this issue.

### **Forty years of *Construction Management and Economics*: a moment to celebrate, commemorate and reflect for the continuity of the journal**

This year marks 40 years since the formation of the journal. To celebrate this significant milestone, a special online collection of articles has been made available on <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcme20/collections/emerging-challenges>. This collection highlights a selection of papers published over the last three years, an eclectic range that deals in one way or another with the emerging societal and sustainable transition challenges of our time, e.g. digital transformation, the transition towards circularity. In 2017, the journal was included in the Emerging Sources Citation Index. For the first time, *Construction Management and Economics* will receive an impact factor in mid-2023. This is therefore another cause for celebration and acknowledgement of the energy, commitment and contributions made by our authors, peer-reviewers and Editorial Board members over the years, as well as editors both past and present.

This year also saw the loss of Dr. Patricia Hillebrandt, a pioneering figure known for her use of economic concepts and analyses to develop insights about the business of construction.<sup>2</sup> Even to the end, Dr. Hillebrandt was still active in promoting the link between economics and the study of the affairs of the construction industry. In the foreword of the *Elgar Research Companion to Construction Economics* (Ofori, 2022), Hillebrandt reflected on the accomplishments of construction economics and noted how many governments have come to realise the importance of the construction industry and that investments in the industry can generate improvements for the wider economy and nation. Still, Hillebrandt shared her concern that construction economics has not yet achieved the status of being a branch of economics, and that more work is still to be done to gain this recognition. In a journal that so prominently features *economics* in the title, there has been a far greater concentration in the author submissions to date on the *construction management* element of *Construction Management and Economics*. Perhaps there is scope for more special issues in the future dedicated to studies of construction economics and the connections with construction management research in dealing with societal and sustainable transition challenges.

Apart from strengthening the *economics* aspects of the journal, what lies ahead for *Construction Management and Economics* ... for and beyond the next forty years? The future is of course anyone's guess,<sup>3</sup> though it may be useful to briefly return to the past to make sense of how the journal (and field) has developed over time in order to help construct possible future directions. Going back to the reflections by Betts and Lansley (1993) on the first ten years of the journal, they noted that those formative years of *Construction Management and Economics* had "sharpened its focus on project-level production-oriented issues" (p. 221). As I reflected already in Chan (2020), the early years of the journal saw a strong emphasis on publishing research with a strong engineering mindset. This goes some way to explain why there has been (and still is) a substantial number of manuscript submissions based on identifying, prioritising and structuring factors, variables or aspects to explain what conditions and constrains production. During the past three years, the Editorial Team also saw a substantial increase in the number of manuscript submissions based on reviews of previous studies – possibly due to pandemic-related disruptions to fieldwork – and a majority of these also tended to use the literature to develop lists of factors that mattered to the authors and their conceptual models and frameworks.

Since the mid-1990s, in part due to the debates on methodology and the role of theory initiated by the late David Seymour<sup>4</sup> that played out in the journal, *Construction Management and Economics* saw a gradual growth in the acceptance of papers based on qualitative research. Over the next two decades, my predecessors, Will Hughes, Andrew Dainty and Roine Leiringer, promoted the need to balance relevance with theoretical rigour. Citational impacts of research set in the context of ever more sophisticated forms of research assessments also meant that journals in our field began to emphasise the need to make clear the role of theory and the authors' contributions to theory. Over this time, the journal has also seen an expansion of interest in studying the affairs of the construction industry beyond production concerns on the project site, as researchers shifted from normative prescriptions of best practice popular in the 1980s and 1990s to practice-based understanding of the complexities of everyday life in (inter-) organisational interactions as we entered the 2000s. Without a doubt, papers published in *Construction Management and Economics* have become more theoretically informed and practice-based studies that engage with practitioners through e.g. case study research, (ethnographic) observations and interviews to produce richer insights into the world of practice have become more common.

Beyond rich representations of practice, there is also room in this journal to feature studies that actively design (and co-design with practitioners) change in industry practices. Oftentimes, researchers draw on the experiences of practitioners and the findings simply reflect what is already known to the practitioners. I am

reminded of a recent conversation with a colleague in my department who raised an interesting question: what is the added value and new knowledge to the practitioner then? In confronting emerging societal and sustainable transition challenges, it is perhaps not sufficient simply to analyse and reflect back what practitioners know, tell or show us about what goes on in everyday practices. In writing about engaged scholarship in construction management research, Voordijk and Adriaanse (2016) distinguished between research about action (practice-based research), research for action (design research), and research through action (action research). Thus, there is scope for promoting research for and through action to find new ways to deal with the societal and sustainable transition challenges.

A word of caution though. Designing change in industry practices goes beyond the production of models or templates of practice. While there may be practical value in developing guidance or frameworks to change practices, it is also important to situate the contribution in more fundamental terms. As Voordijk and Adriaanse (2016) argued in their conclusions: "to reach a deeper understanding of practice it is necessary to change it; understanding practice is needed to design useful propositions; and the propositions and interpretations of practice are ultimately tested through attempts to improve practice" (p. 548). Thus, there is a need to relate the co-production of practical artifacts for change with the contribution to theory, and it is here that one can draw inspiration for example from the field of design science research (see e.g. Baskerville *et al.* 2018, and; a recent review by Akoka *et al.* 2022).

## Closing remarks

In 2013, the then Editor-in-Chief Professor Will Hughes invited me to join the Editorial Team of the journal. I recalled being unsure about fulfilling the role of an Associate Editor as this entailed quite some responsibility to spot the potential in manuscripts and act as gatekeeper in deciding which manuscripts to accept or not. In fact, I had suggested to Will that he should put me on a six-month probation to begin with. After nearly 10 years in the Editorial Team and the last three as Editor-in-Chief, and having personally handled and made editorial decisions on 1,561 manuscripts, it has indeed been a privilege to learn from and work with so many authors, reviewers and Editorial Board members to develop promising manuscripts into the high-quality papers that we expect in the journal. I have also had the great honour to work with my fellow editors who have judiciously worked to ensure the editorial quality of the journal; thank you Richard Fellows, Andreas Hartmann, Christine Räisänen, Carrie Dossick, Islam El-adaway and Pablo Ballesteros Perez. I am also delighted that Pablo has also agreed to take over, together with Florence Phua from the University of Reading, as the new joint Editors-in-Chief.

## Notes

1. This is based on the records in our online database on 27 November 2022.
2. See the obituary placed by the Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction in University College London: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/construction/news/2022/aug/tribute-dr-patricia-hillebrandt> accessed on 27 November 2022.
3. Harty and Leiringer (2017) offered possible trajectories of how the field of construction management research might develop in the future.
4. David Seymour passed away in 2021. In the 1990s, he co-authored several papers including Seymour and Rooke (1995), a critique on the culture of the industry and the culture of research that argued for the alternative interpretive research approach to better understand social and cultural change and to counteract the rationalist paradigm that predominately featured in papers published during the journal's formative years.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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