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Book Review

Construction Cost Management: Learning from Case Studies

Construction cost management is a very broad topic, so it comes as a surprise to find a single text attempting to cover it in less than 300 pages. Nevertheless, Keith Potts has attempted just that, with the added dimension of introducing case studies to illustrate the text. The result is surprisingly effective, providing a good overview in a chatty style while taking a very practical approach. Nevertheless, as is necessary with such an ambitious scope, there is a tendency to leave the reader wanting more at the pointy end of the detail.

This book is from the Spon Text series, and draws upon industry experience as a senior quantity surveyor. As such, it relies heavily on experience in preference to literature and the result emphasizes the practical application of cost management techniques on real projects much more than the theoretical underpinnings of those topics. The overall effect is easy, interesting and informative. This is a useful primer to the world of cost management.

The book generally well organised and presented, with 18 chapters divided into six parts: Introduction and overview - including an analysis of the various UK reports into the construction industry; Management of the pre-contract stage; Key tools and techniques; Procurement strategies; Management of the post-contract stage; and Contracts and case study (a brief look at Heathrow Terminal 5).

The range of topics covered is large and the strategy is to describe the tools and techniques employed in construction cost management. The descriptions are adequate as an introduction but rarely explore the methods to any depth. However, here is where the key character of the book stands out. Rather than delving further into the literature (the book is sparsely referenced at best), the work instead turns to case studies to provide depth. This is quite an effective strategy and, despite the fact that the case studies are also necessarily brief, sometimes merely serving to whet the appetite, they do serve to draw the reader into a genuine partnership with the author in exploring points of interest.

There are several artifices used to construct the work which ease the burden of communication of ideas to the reader. Apart from the usual tables and diagrams, the author uses panels to break up the text. These are frequently side discussions on a particular point of interest, such as a comment extracted from Latham, or a discussion of a noteworthy someone's point of view. Panels are more frequently used for mini case studies (there are over 65 project case studies) and these help the reader to rapidly connect the topic with real projects. There are also occasional worked examples, constructed as a shaded panel separate from the main text. While these artifices sometimes make the text hard to follow, they do serve to break it up into manageable parts and provide interesting points of distraction.

The book would be most effective as a companion document to a taught subject. As a stand-alone it is probably inadequate - too often fine detail is missing and must be filled in by other methods, such as the knowledge of the teacher - but this is probably a deliberate strategy and suggests why it would make a great primer. As it is, the book is full of content and is very informative. If further detail had been included, the book would either have been much bigger or would have covered fewer topics. It is therefore up to the reader to use the book to gain an overview (complete with the latest thinking and issues) and to seek out more detailed explanation, theory and indeed cases within dedicated topic areas of their choosing.

What's wrong with this book? Occasionally it seems the author knows the material so well that some detail is left out, which can be a little frustrating. The structure and sequencing can be surprising - for example why are civil engineering projects discussed before highway projects and these before building projects? In fact, such different components of the industry, so different from each other in their management, are not separated well. The sense is that the text jumps about, making the argument sometimes hard to follow. The panels and case studies are not always explained in the text, which can add to the confusion. Another thing which irritates this international reviewer, is the
attempt to internationalise the book through case studies, while concentrating almost exclusively on a UK context. For example, only reports into the construction industry in the UK are examined, the contracts are UK contracts and the roles of parties are UK roles. Yet, the case studies draw upon international examples with no recognition of the change of context. This effectively limits its value to the UK, or to regions heavily influenced by UK practices.

Overall this book is a valuable addition. It will serve well as an undergraduate text, being up-to-date and yet able to serve the test of time. For those engaged in teaching cost management, this work will make an excellent foundation upon which to build further detail and upon which to found their lectures.

It will also be of interest to those construction practitioners wanting to broaden their understanding and knowledge of a wider range of cost management methods than they might currently be exposed to. To them, the cases will be a welcome aid, bringing familiarity and application to the learning process.

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