

CLR-GB

Newsletter 2/2010

The **CLR-GB** Office is a platform linking CLR activities at EU and GB levels as well as trade union and academic work in GB in the field of Construction Labour Research. It will support related initiatives specific to GB.

Introductory Note:

In this issue of the CLR-GB newsletter, your attention is first brought to the formation of a new research centre for the study of the production of the built environment (ProBE) at the University of Westminster. This research centre seeks to act as a research hub to encourage debate and discussion on research into the social processes and people producing the structures and spaces that frame the built environment. A series of ongoing research projects is also outlined in this newsletter. Thereafter, and expanding on the theme of the economic crisis, the Trade Union Congress's (TUC) response to the crisis, embodied in *The road to recovery*, is reviewed, highlighting greater alignment between the positions of employers and the national trade union. Finally, you are all invited to participate in a forthcoming research seminar on "Skills and low carbon construction" to be held in the University of Westminster on Friday 5 November 2010.

Paul W Chan/ CLR-GB October 2010

Centre for the Study of the Production of the Built Environment (ProBE)

ProBE is a newly-formed research centre at the University of Westminster. This joint research centre between the Westminster Business School (WBS) and the School of Architecture and the Built Environment (SABE) is committed to researching

the development of a rich programme of research and related activities, including projects, oral history, film, exhibitions, and seminars. ProBE is inclusive, embracing those actively engaged in funded projects and publications. It will provide a research hub, a forum for debate and discussion, and a focus for interdisciplinary and international activity related to the production of the built environment.

Specifically, ProBE has an emphasis on research into the social processes and people producing the structures and spaces that frame the urban and rural environment, nationally and globally. In building a coherent portfolio of projects and outputs with a committed team of researchers, ProBE seeks to be recognised as a distinct, original and controversial unit, researching problematic issues and developing unique theoretical approaches. For more information about ProBE, please contact Professor Linda Clarke (l.m.clarke@wesminster.ac.uk; telephone +44 (0) 207 911 5000 ext 3158). A brief overview of ongoing projects will be outlined here:

Constructing post-war Britain: building workers' stories 1950-70

Dr. Christine Wall (School of Architecture and the Built Environment) and Professor Linda Clarke (Westminster Business School) have been awarded a two-year Leverhulme Trust project entitled *Constructing post-war Britain: building workers' stories 1950-70*, beginning in August 2010 and part of a larger programme, *Britain at Work 1945-1995*, an umbrella group promoting projects related to the oral histories of workers, for which a cooperation agreement has been signed by a range of institutions, including the University of Westminster. Dr Charles McGuire is to be the main research fellow on this Leverhulme project.

The project is focused on important examples of post-war architecture which have attracted great international acclaim and challenged traditional

divisions of labour in construction and in society. The case studies chosen include iconic projects of the early Welfare State (Stevenage New Town, South Bank Arts Complex), large industrial sites associated with newly nationalised industries (Isle of Grain Refinery, Sizewell A Power Station) and schemes offering new perspectives for future living and working (Barbican development). As such they are products of the historical legacy of modernism, when architecture was regarded as integral to social welfare and betterment and publicly funded projects were dominant. All reflect the importance of large projects in shifting entrenched attitudes and traditional social, technical and industrial relations in the construction industry.

The project addresses key factors of change, including: social relations on site; trade union organisation and involvement; training and apprenticeship; the working environment; industrial techniques; design conceptions; wage relations; work and family life; housing and living conditions. The approach, combining oral histories with documentary analysis in case studies of significant post-war buildings, is distinct. Its impact promises to be considerable: through the involvement of building workers, through addressing a subject which has been largely ignored, and through a depth of interpretation not before attempted in accounts of post-war reconstruction. It will provide important evidence for future research and - before it is too late - capture the memories of those who have experienced and subsequently reflected upon their work in the post-war building industry. It will inform policy, feed into the current theoretical debate on theories of the built environment, and provide a vital source for students and those concerned with the built environment, oral labour and social history.

If you, or anyone you know, worked on the sites mentioned above and are interested in participating in the project please contact Chris Wall (c.wall@westminster.ac.uk), Linda Clarke (l.m.clarke@wesminster.ac.uk) or Charlie McGuire (c.mcguire@westminster.ac.uk).

Bricklaying qualifications, work and vocational education and training in Europe

This 8-country study (Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Poland) is funded by the European Commission and is run jointly by the European Construction Industry Federation (FIEC) and the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW). The research team in England includes Professor Linda Clarke and Michaela Brockmann (Westminster Business School) and Professor Christopher Winch (King's College London).

The project investigates possibilities, means and problems associated with the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the development of a sectoral qualifications framework in relation to bricklaying. Its aim is to further the recognition of bricklaying qualifications and competences by enhancing their transparency and comparability, thereby increasing the effectiveness of mobility and the quality of labour across Europe. It seeks to overcome some of the challenges posed to EQF implementation by the diversity of qualifications and VET.

Olympic builders film project

This project, about construction workers – especially apprentices, students and new entrants to the industry – and the Olympic Development, links the production of a documentary film with the education and training of a community. The film will feature people employed and hoping to be employed building the Olympic site at Stratford. It will focus on apprentices, students and new entrants to the construction industry in the five host boroughs but will include older workers, both British and foreign. It will explore the contradictions between training and working on a site of such historical significance and the reality of the construction labour process, with its often risky and insecure conditions. The production will be organised to provide a range of educational opportunities for construction students and media students, trainees or recent graduates who will be involved in the research and filming through workshops. Work experience and the making of their own short films. The film will follow some young Londoners drawn towards construction by the opportunities potentially offered by Olympic-related construction.

Scarcity and creativity in the built environment (SCRIBE)

This project is funded under the auspices of the European Union's HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) joint research programme. Professor Jeremy Till will work with Oslo School of Architecture and Design and the Vienna University of Technology, two leading European Universities to investigate how scarcity might affect creativity – and how design-led innovation can improve the built environment in the future. Professor Till summarises the research, "Human existence has in the past appeared to be a struggle between scarcity and abundance, but although scarcity regulates action and behaviour, this may not necessarily be in a negative manner. Our research will start with two premises: the first will be that resources are necessarily limited, the second that human well-being can still flourish

within these limits. Where human well-being in western society is usually tied to notions of abundance and growth, our project, following recent work by economists such as Tim Jackson, posits that well-being might be achieved within conditions of limited resource, but that to do so one needs the intervention of new forms of creativity.”

Review: Role of Trade Unions in Post-Recession Recovery

The annual conference of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) concluded in September, where there were calls for coordinated industrial action and civil disobedience against austerity measures planned by the government. At the core of such rhetorical discourse lies the fundamental need to seek a healthy balance between the power of capital and labour. Yet, the TUC’s response to the financial crisis, embodied in *The road to recovery: how effective unions can help rebuild the economy* (TUC, March 2010) seemed rather moderate in comparison to the discussions at the conference. Here, the importance of worker representation in times of economic austerity is reinforced by claiming the benefits of representation on increased productivity and high performance, issues generally associated with managerial/employer perspectives. At the same time, the TUC recognised the criticality of trade union responsiveness to the problems of members and their ability to get management to take trade unions seriously as measures of effective worker representation. Thus, it would seem that the position of the TUC is one of encouraging partnership with the employers in crunch times.

Yet, it is suggested that the emphasis of the worker voice appears to be downplayed in this strategic document that symbolises a national trade union perspective on post-recession recovery options. Instead, the report articulated a more defensive role for the trade unions, concentrating on current trends, such as the tactical importance of the green economy, and how trade union density was good for employers as a result of lower propensity of employment disputes to be brought to the tribunals. Disappointingly, the report does not confront the critical debate of readjusting the asymmetries of power between the roles of capital and labour in contemporary society. Rather, the role of trade unions, according to this report, seems to be one that subverts the labour process in favour of simply forging a closer alliance with the employers, without

questioning the status quo. There is no mention of how trade unions could formulate effective strategies to elevate their status as an equal partner in social partnership arrangements so as to redress the balance between labour and capital, or how trade unions can serve to curtail the power of financial capital, all of which arguably formed the basis of the most recent financial crisis.

Workshop Invitation: Skills and Low Carbon Construction

To be held in the University of Westminster, Regent Street Board Room, 309 Regent Street, London W1B 2UW on Friday 5 November 2010

The requirements to create low carbon buildings relate to all aspects of construction, including design communication, contractual relations, site management and operative skills. The underlying objective of the symposium is to understand how ownership of the whole process can be claimed across occupational and professional barriers in order to make a paradigm shift in the conception of “green buildings” – from niche market to industry standard. Skill requirements for this cannot simply be pinpointed and training provided in the form of a short term technical ‘fix’, without consideration of the context in which young people enter the construction industry, vocational education and training (VET) provision available, the possibilities of work experience and developing a career, and the prevailing employment and working conditions.

Social, technical, contractual and communication issues will be explored by invited speakers and symposium participants, who include members of professional and trade groups, employers and trade unionists. Different sessions will identify skill barriers to low energy construction and outline the current situation before addressing what can be done. Themed workshops will also be organised for participants to identify the challenges and to propose solutions.

This symposium has been organised by ProBE (Centre for the Study of the Production of the Built Environment), in association with CLR, to identify - with the help and active participation of various industry stakeholders – the kind of VET system needed to establishing mass build, low energy construction and the barriers to this. To reserve a place please contact: Amanda Willmott willmoa@westminster.ac.uk or 0207 911 5000 x 3285.

9.30 – 10.00	Registration and coffee	
10.00 – 10.15	Welcome: Introduction:	Colin Gleeson: School of Architecture & the Built Environment Linda Clarke: Westminster Business School
ASPIRATIONS & BARRIERS		
10.15– 10.35	<i>Adaptation for Built Environment professionals towards zero Carbon Construction</i>	Robin Nicholson: Edward Cullinan architects
10.35 – 10.55	<i>The construction process: skill barriers</i>	Tim Fenn: Director Green Carbon Construction Ltd and Vice Chair Oxfordshire Construction Training Group
10.55 – 11.15	Discussion	ALL
CURRENT RESPONSE		
11.15 – 11.35	<i>Meeting Skill Requirements</i>	Alistair Collin: ConstructionSkills
11.35– 11.55	<i>Vocational Education and Training provision</i>	David Jazani: Bedford College
11.55 – 12.10	<i>Employment Barriers</i>	Richard Clarke: Unite
12.10 – 12.30	Discussion	ALL
12.30 – 1.30	LUNCH	
WHAT IS TO BE DONE?		
1.30 – 2.00	<i>Practices elsewhere in Europe: Danish Benchmark</i>	Camilla Vakgaard: BAT, Denmark
2.00 – 2.15	<i>Short film: 'Barriers to low energy construction in the UK'</i>	Henrietta Lynch: University College London
2.15 -3.15	<i>Workshops</i> <i>Building low energy buildings</i> <i>Do skills feature in environmental decision-making?</i> <i>Construction quality, performance and skills</i>	Led by: Cal Bailey: NG Bailey Paul Chan: University of Manchester Malcolm Bell: Leeds Metropolitan University
3.15 -3.30	AFTERNOON TEA	
3.30- 4.30	<i>Panel discussion</i>	Workshop feedback and discussion of the day's proceedings

To Our Readers:

The CLR-GB Newsletter is the organ of exchange for CLR in Great Britain. This function depends on the co-operation of its readers. The editors ask everybody who is interested in construction labour to contribute with information and commentaries.

Please send your suggestions, articles, information, letters, etc. to

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