A metaphorical analysis of client organizations and the briefing process

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This paper reviews and critiques the current practice of classifying building clients according to their 'type'. An alternative approach to understanding organizations is developed in accordance with the principles of naturalistic inquiry. It is contended that the complex pluralistic clients of the 1990s can only really be understood 'from the inside'. The concept of organizational metaphors is introduced as the basis for a more sophisticated way of thinking about organizations. The various strands of organizational theory are also analysed in terms of their underlying metaphors. Different theories are seen to bring different insights. The implicit metaphors adopted by practitioners are held to be important in that they tend to dictate the adopted approach to client briefing. This contention is illustrated by analysing three different characterizations of the briefing process in terms of their underlying metaphors. Finally, the discussion is placed in a contemporary UK context by comparing the dominant paradigm of practice during the 1980s to that of the 1990s.

Keywords: Clients, naturalistic inquiry, organizational metaphors, briefing.

Introduction

Construction professionals are all too often guilty of taking an over-simplistic view of their clients. It is invariably assumed that client organizations are unitary entities whose objectives are pre-determined and consistent over time. The current literature tends to perpetuate this naivety by the way in which it attempts to classify clients according to their 'type'. The primary purpose of this paper is to develop an alternative theoretical framework for understanding clients 'from the inside'. It is contended that construction professionals must develop more sophisticated ways of thinking if they are to understand the complex pluralistic clients of the 1990s.

The process by which construction professionals understand the requirements of their clients is seen to be synonymous with that of briefing. The process of briefing is essentially a research activity in that the objectives are those of *enquiry* (Zeisel, 1981). Whilst briefing has traditionally fallen within the remit of the architectural profession, the need to understand client organizations is by no means limited to architects. The effectiveness of any professional ultimately depends upon their ability to understand and develop effective relationships with clients. This is equally true for project managers, construction managers, building economists and facilities managers. Indeed, the briefing process for any large complex project is likely to involve all of these professionals. The argument in this paper is therefore developed from the perspective of the generic 'construction professional'. The advantage of adopting this approach is that it enables the discussion to focus on the complexity of client organizations, rather than perpetuating the construction industry's obsession with its own sub-divisions.

Client types

The existence of different types of building client has long been recognized. Higgin and Jessop (1965) distinguish between *sophisticated* and *naive* clients on the basis of their previous experience of the building process. Nahapiet and Nahapiet (1985) also consider the client's level of previous experience to be important, but further distinguish clients on the basis of whether they are primary or secondary constructors. Primary clients are

seen to be those whose main income is derived from constructing buildings, i.e. property developers. Secondary clients are those who build in order to perform some other business activity, such as retailing or manufacturing.

Several other authors have also suggested ways in which clients may be classified. Hillebrandt (1984) refers to 'continuing clients' and 'one-off clients' and also distinguishes between public and private sector clients. Rougvie (1987) differentiates between public clients, individual clients and corporations. Kelly *et al.* (1992) suggest that clients can be broadly categorized in accordance with three parameters: size (small or large); sector (public or private); and project interest (developer or owner-occupier).

Masterman and Gameson (1994) have summarized a wide range of published sources and conclude that construction clients are best classified in accordance with four categories: secondary inexperienced; secondary experienced; primary inexperienced; and primary experienced. The category of primary-inexperienced client was, however, subsequently eliminated on the basis that an organization whose primary business is the construction of buildings is unlikely not to have an established means of accessing the necessary experience. Masterman and Gameson also argued that clients cannot be categorized as 'experienced' solely on the grounds that they possess previous experience of building; they must have previous experience of the particular building type in question. The same client organization could therefore be classified as 'experienced' or 'inexperienced' depending upon the type of project.

Social complexity of client organizations

Whilst the preceding classifications of client organizations are widely accepted, they tend to underplay the social complexity of many client organizations. A more realistic approach is perhaps that of Cherns and Bryant (1984) who recognize that clients are often multi-faceted in nature, comprising several different interest groups whose objectives differ, and may well be in conflict. The potential for conflict within client organizations is further recognized by Walker (1989) and Baden Hellard (1992), although neither offer any further comment other than the need to 'interpret the balance' between conflicting priorities.

Perhaps the most influential demonstration of the complexity of multi-faceted clients is provided by Morris and Hough's (1987) study of major projects. Whilst this study was not specific to the construction industry, many of the conclusions are directly relevant. Of particular importance are Morris and Hough's observations regarding the way in which political issues often detract from the clarity of a project's objectives. It was concluded that the chances of eventual success are severely diminished if conflict and ambiguity regarding a project's objectives are not resolved during its early stages.

Despite the more sophisticated train of thought encouraged by Cherns and Bryant (1984), the majority of the literature continues to classify clients in accordance with pre-determined characteristics. It is contended that the insights gained by such attempts to understand clients 'from the outside' will always be limited. It must be recognized that client organizations are *social systems*. They therefore possess the inherent complexity of any situation characterized by people.

Naturalistic inquiry

Within the management science community, Checkland (1989) has been particularly influential in arguing that 'facts and logic will never supply a complete description of a human situation. Equally important will be the myths and meanings by means of which human beings make sense of their world'. Whilst this argument is well aired within the social science literature (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979) it has yet to be widely recognized amongst construction management researchers. The vast majority of the literature relating to client organizations ignores the importance of myths and meanings, thereby reflecting an ontological position of positivism. The underlying assumption is that social reality is 'hard' and 'tangible'. Researchers operating within this tradition endeavour to identify causal links which are assumed to exist 'out there'. Whilst this position may well be tenable within the physical sciences, the extent to which it is applicable in social situations is highly questionable. The repeated failure of the scientific method to deal with social situations has led to the development of an alternative research paradigm, variously described as phenomenological, interpretative or naturalistic (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Reason and Rowan, 1981; Robson, 1993).

The ontological position which underlies naturalistic inquiry is that reality is constructed within the minds of individuals. Whilst the existence of some tangible entities may well be commonly accepted, there is not necessarily any agreement concerning the meaning of those entities. Different individuals are seen to ascribe different meanings and therefore construct different realities. The naturalistic equivalent of 'objectivity' therefore becomes intersubjective agreement. Reality is no longer seen to exist 'out there', it becomes a social construct which is continually re-negotiated. The perceptions of individuals become an important part of reality, because it is their perceptions which will govern

their behaviour. In contrast to the positivist tradition of 'observing from the outside', naturalistic research requires the researcher to become involved in situations as an active participant. The contention of this paper is that construction professionals must understand the individual clients for which they work 'from the inside'. They must also accept that there will never be any single interpretation of a complex multi-faceted client. It therefore becomes necessary not only to understand the 'characteristics' of the client organization, but also to understand the ways in which the client makes sense of his own organization. This requires a much more sophisticated way of thinking than is currently evident in the construction literature. It is contended that such a way of thinking is provided by the concept of organizational metaphors.

Organizational metaphors

The concept of organizational metaphors was originally introduced by Morgan (1986) who suggested eight metaphors, each of which are seen to provide a different way of thinking about organizations. It is argued that practising managers make sense of organizational life by invoking different metaphors, i.e. by thinking about organizations as if they were something else. This is seen to remain true irrespective of whether managers are familiar with organization theory or not. The difference is that those who are educated in organization theory are more likely to be able to invoke different metaphors, thereby gaining a number of different insights.

Morgan's first metaphor perceives an organization as a goal-seeking machine which consists of interchangeable parts. Organisations are assumed to be unitary in nature with all parts working in harmony towards a pre-determined set of objectives. The environment within which organizations operate is also assumed to be static over time. Morgan suggests that the machine metaphor is implicit within classical management theory as epitomized by 'Taylorism' (Taylor, 1911). Keys (1991) has argued that the assumptions of the machine metaphor also underlie traditional operational research and the associated field of systems engineering. The perception of an organization as a goal-seeking machine is also widespread within the field of micro-economics. The advocates of this metaphor tend to describe organizational goals in terms of profit maximization. Their natural response to declining profitability would be to make the 'machine more efficient'.

The second metaphor views organizations as biological organisms which continually adapt to changes in their environment. The 'open systems' and 'contingency' approaches to organizational theory are based on an organic metaphor. Organizations are seen to be in continuous interchange with the environment. Different species of organization evolve in order to cope with different environments. The individuals who comprise organizations are also recognized to be living entities with their own complex set of needs which do not necessarily accord with those of the organization. The initial inspiration for the organic metaphor was provided by the General Systems Theory developed by von Bertalanffy (1968). Other important contributors include Burns and Stalker (1961), Woodward (1965) and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967). The advocates of the organic metaphor would typically respond to difficult trading conditions by arguing that the first must 'adapt in order to survive'.

Morgan's third metaphor extends the organic allegory in that organizations are seen to possess a central intelligence, or a brain, which can predict change in the environment, rather than passively react to it. This metaphor emphasizes the need to collect information which can then be processed by the central brain. Decisions are made on the basis of this information and instructions are communicated to the outlying 'limbs'. Simon (1947) has been particularly influential in propagating this information-processing view of organizations. It is this avenue of thinking which has spawned the huge literature on information systems and decision-support systems. The subsequent development of the discipline of cybernetics increasingly saw organizations characterized as brains which can learn from experience, and perhaps more importantly, learn how to learn. The important proponents of the cybernetic metaphor within organizational theory include Argyris and Schön (1978) and Beer (1981). The proponents of this approach would respond to a recession by emphasizing the need for better 'intelligence', together with more effective control and feedback. In many respects the cybernetic metaphor can be considered to be a 'high-tech' extension of the machine metaphor.

The next three metaphors differ in that they focus upon the sociological and psychological aspects of organizations. The culture metaphor focuses upon the importance of an organization possessing shared values and beliefs. Definitions of organizational culture invariably emphasize the importance of shared values and beliefs and the way in which they effect individual behaviour (Kast and Rosenzweig, 1985). The following definition is typical of many:

> 'organisational culture is the unique configuration of norms, values, beliefs, ways of behaving and so on that characterise the manner in which groups and individuals combine to get things done.' (Edridge and Crombie, 1974)

Peters and Waterman (1982), in their search for excellence amongst leading American companies, placed considerable emphasis on the need constantly to

reinforce corporate culture to ensure shared values. It is also evident that many organizations seek to establish a strong corporate culture by use of mission statements. Wilkins and Ouchi (1983) have further suggested that highly developed unique cultures tend to exist within organic organizations. They argued that in many cases it is the shared values, beliefs and accepted norms of behaviour which provide guidelines for action. In contrast, mechanistic organizations rarely develop unique cultures, the necessary guidelines for action are provided by written rules and regulations.

Whereas the culture metaphor tends to emphasize cooperation amongst individuals, the political metaphor emphasizes the role of power and conflict. Individuals are seen to use organizations as vehicles to achieve their own aspirations. Organizations are characterized by intrigue and internal 'politicking'. Groups of individuals form temporary coalitions for the purposes of mutual self-interest. These alliances are always changing as new power groups emerge and individuals transfer their allegiance from one group to another. From this point of view the very notion that an 'organisation' can ever possess objectives of its own appears very naive. Within the organizational literature, the leading advocates of this approach include Pettigrew (1973) and Pfeffer (1981). The political metaphor is particularly important in that it legitimizes the use of power, conflict and coalitions in order 'to get things done'. Industrial relations issues are often best understood by means of the political metaphor. Indeed, much of the negotiation literature is directed towards ways of resolving conflict. It should also be recognized that conflict is not necessarily a destructive force, but can often act as a useful catalyst for creativity. The long-term success of any organization will however depend upon an underlying willingness amongst its members to form coalitions, otherwise the organization will inevitably disintegrate.

The final metaphor of this set is that of the psychic prison. This stems from the perceived tendency of people, and organizations, to become trapped into the favoured way of thinking. Organizations can develop strong norms of behaviour which can stifle individual creativity. The phenomenon of 'groupthink' provides an extreme example of decision-making which is constrained by the prevailing group norm (Janis, 1972). The tendency to persevere with tried-and-tested solutions is perhaps even stronger within bureaucratic organizations, where the normal methods of procedure are enshrined within rules and regulations. It is the psychic prison metaphor which implicitly underpins the extensive literature on creative thinking (e.g. Adams, 1980; de Bono, 1971; Gordon, 1961). The metaphor of a psychic prison is clearly connected with that of corporate culture. They both address the same issues, albeit from a different perspective.

The seventh metaphor, organization as flux and transformation, is somewhat more abstract in that it perceives organization as a verb, rather than a noun. This point of view suggests that an organization cannot be understood by means of a 'snapshot' at a given point of time. This is true irrespective of how careful our analysis is, or how many different metaphorical standpoints are taken. It is arguably impossible to understand what any organization is, without also understanding where it has come from. This argument would be well understood by any historian. It would surely be naive to argue that the current situation in Bosnia could be understood without a knowledge of events which have occurred over several generations. Whilst this perspective is strangely neglected in the organizational literature, it does add a further obstacle to the possibility of ever obtaining a single objective interpretation of any organizational situation. Not only are we faced with different meanings attached to current events, we are also faced with different myths relating to past events. Such myths are clearly likely to develop and change over time. This may happen to such an extent that they lose any connection with the 'truth' of the initiating event. It is often myths of this nature which constitute an important part of an organization's culture. The development of these myths over the lifespan of an organization militate against any short-term efforts to 're-engineer' an organization's culture.

Morgan's final metaphor is that of organization as an instrument of domination. From this point of view, organizations are the means by which powerful individuals impose their will on others. The notion of corporate culture is seen to be less about shared values and more about 'brainwashing' individuals into accepting the required model of behaviour. In some respects, the domination metaphor is an extreme extension of the political metaphor. However, the emphasis no longer lies on coalition-forming, but on the exploitation of the organization's employees by the dominant power group. Morgan also argues that it is possible to perceive multi-national corporations as instruments of domination with respect to their host communities. The possibility that organizations exploit their environment gives an alternative perspective to that of the organic metaphor. It is perhaps worth mentioning that Karl Marx maintained that every capitalist firm, and indeed, the capitalist system as a whole, is an instrument of domination.

Metaphorical lenses

For the purposes of this paper, the importance of Morgan's contribution is that it moves the debate away

from asking which organizational theory is more 'correct' towards which theory provides the more useful insight in a given situation. This enables practitioners to adopt the metaphor which provides the best insight into the particular problem in hand, rather than being limited to one specific way of thinking. In some situations the machine metaphor may well provide a useful guide to action, in others the political metaphor might be more appropriate. In complex situations, managers would be able to gain different insights from the use of different metaphors. This argument leads to a revised interpretation of the role of organizational theory. It is no longer meaningful to perceive theories as simplified models of reality, they can now only be understood as models which may be relevant to the debate about reality (Checkland, 1994).

From a practical point of view, it is useful to perceive a metaphor (or a theory) as being a lens through which we can view organizations (Flood and Jackson, 1991). The use of different lenses will accentuate different aspects of organizational reality. It should also be recognized that this argument is by no means dependent upon a knowledge of organizational theory. The lenses used by practising managers are often simply implicit to their 'view of the world'. The only difference is that their 'theory' is derived from their own narrow experience, rather than the more widely-based literature. Every manager views organizations from a particular viewpoint; and makes simplifications in order to make their own sense of organizational life. The important advantage of education is that it makes managers aware of which metaphor they are using. The ability to select different metaphors also enables managers to see situations from different points of view, thereby gaining a richer overall understanding.

The concept of organizational metaphors also supports the philosophical argument that the 'reality' of an organization does not exist independently of the theory which we use to understand social situations. It has already been argued that organizations are not only characterized by 'objective facts', but also by myths and meanings. If we accept that the meanings ascribed to events are dependent on which metaphorical lens we use in order to understand events, then it follows that the nature of organizational reality is influenced by our adopted theory. If a client's management consistently acted in accordance with the narrow interpretation of the machine metaphor, then the organization would become increasingly machine-like in nature. Those employees who objected to being treated as mindless components would seek employment elsewhere. Management would then seek to replace them with people who were comfortable with being treated in this way. The machine metaphor would therefore tend to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In retrospect, McGregor (1960) was undoubtedly before his time in recognizing that the adopted management theory will influence 'reality'. The assumptions of the machine metaphor regarding human behaviour are neatly encapsulated in McGregor's well-known 'Theory X'. McGregor argued that if management acted as if these assumptions were true, there was a likelihood that they would indeed become true. In other words, McGregor recognized that the metaphor which we use to make sense of reality it likely to influence the behaviour of others, and therefore the nature of 'reality' itself.

It is easy to see how the argument of the self-fulfilling prophecy could also apply to the use of other metaphors. If a manager consistently acted in accordance with the political interpretation of organizational life, then others would be likely to respond in a similar way. The organization would therefore become increasingly characterized by intrigue and conflict.

On a higher level of abstraction, the notion of a shared culture can be equated with a 'shared view of the world', or, in other words, a shared metaphorical lens. Purposeful action within an organization would clearly be hampered if key personnel viewed events through different lenses. From this point of view an important role of management is to construct a shared social reality. It is perhaps useful to interpret the development (or more realistically, the evolution) of a distinctive corporate culture as a means of ensuring that organizational actors perceive reality in a broadly similar way.

In a consultancy situation, such as client briefing, an appreciation of organizational metaphors can provide an enhanced understanding in two ways. Firstly, the use of different metaphors can help provide different insights into client organizations. Secondly, important insights can be gained by detecting the dominant metaphors which govern the behaviour of individual interest groups. It is also useful to recognize that the initial acceptability of a consultant is likely to be significantly enhanced if he (or she) is able to reflect the favourite metaphors of their sponsor. There is a persuasive argument that clients ultimately rate consultants in accordance with the perceived success of their relationship. The ability to talk the same language as the sponsor is likely to be crucial in determining the success of the sponsor–consultant relationship. Once the credibility of the consultant has been established, he will then be able to encourage the development of different ways of thinking by invoking different metaphors. Indeed, over a period of time the consultant may well be able to change the dominant metaphors which are used within the client organization. As a caveat to this argument, it is also important for consultants to recognize which metaphors are likely to be culturally unacceptable. For example, clients may not always appreciate references to the political nature of their organization.

Organizational metaphors and client briefing

In the light of the preceding discussion, it is revealing to consider the organizational metaphors which lie behind the three contrasting approaches to client briefing characterized by Bennett (1985). Bennett's first characterization draws from Townsend's (1970) 'tongue-in-cheek' advice on how an organization should move head office. Townsend advocates that one person should be appointed to take responsibility for the entire process. The appointed person should then seek to provide standard accommodation for everybody and on no account should the building users be consulted. If consultation were allowed, Townsend suggests that the process would take 'twice as long and cost three times as much and all key people in the firm will be completely preoccupied with status symbols and would have no time for their work'. A successful outcome is seen to have been achieved provided that the building works 'reasonably well' and is completed on time. It is further contended that the cries of outrage will die out after thirty days. Townsend's approach to briefing would seem to relate to the machine-bureaucracy of classical management theory. The dominant metaphors implicit are those of the organization as a machine and as an instrument of domination. It is taken for granted that the client's objectives are clear and pre-determined and that they remain static over time. It is also assumed that the organization's objectives are entirely independent of the aspirations of the workforce. Construction professionals who have worked for extremely buraucratic clients such as the civil service or the Ministry of Defence may find Townsend's advice uncomfortably close to their own experience.

The second characterization of briefing described by Bennett (1985) draws from Goodacre *et al.* (1982) and is diametrically opposed to that of Townsend. This alternative view suggests that briefs are best produced by means of extensive collaboration between clients and designers over a period of time. It is further suggested that clients are often incapable of producing their own briefs and that their needs and objectives need to be probed in depth. Goodacre *et al.* perceive the processes of briefing and designing to be iterative and interdependent, thereby questioning the assumption that the client's objectives can be pre-determined and that they remain static over time. Furthermore, design is no longer perceived to commence only when the brief has been completed. The recommendations of Goodacre and his colleagues have since been supported by several other leading commentators (e.g. Becker, 1990; O'Reilly, 1987; Worthington, 1994). Murray *et al.* (1993) provide further clarification by observing that inexperienced clients are often unable to articulate their requirements

until they have been exposed to a range of initial design concepts. There is, therefore, a considerable body of opinion which contradicts the prevailing assumption that the client's objectives can be pre-determined. The organizational metaphors which underlie this second approach to client briefing are clearly more complex than that of the machine. The previously dominant metaphors of machine and domination have given way to the organic and political metaphors. The contention that clients can learn as a result of their interaction with designers is also suggestive of an underlying cybernetic metaphor.

The third approach to client briefing characterized by Bennett (1985) is that which was adopted by Greycoat Estates during the property boom of the 1980s. It was a continuation of this approach which was subsequently employed by Stanhope Securities on the prestigious Broadgate development in central London. As repetitive developers, these clients were able to develop standard briefs which could be presented to designers at the time of their appointment. These standard briefs reflected the lessons which had been learnt on previous projects. However, designers were encouraged to suggest improvements to the brief on the basis of their own experience. The underlying philosophy was one of continuous improvement by means of 'responsible innovation'. Not only were these clients notable for their sharp commercial acumen, they were also notable for their commitment to research which kept them up to date with the best of international construction practice. Their philosophy required designers to challenge constantly the accepted UK methods of construction. The practice of developing standard briefs, together with a commitment to continuous development, has also been widely adopted by supermarket and chainstore developers (NEDO, 1988).

Whilst the Greycoat/Stanhope approach has some similarities with that advocated by Townsend, there are also a number of important differences. The commitment to progressive improvement by learning from experience is strongly reflective of an underlying cybernetic metaphor. The emphasis given to challenging the accepted methods of construction also suggests an underlying psychic prison metaphor.

Choice of approach

Before addressing how briefing practice could be improved by the preceding analysis, it is worthwhile pointing out that several sources suggest that designers sometimes adopt an inappropriate approach to client briefing. Cherns and Bryant (1984) observe that most client organizations are more complex than project team members commonly acknowledge. They additionally

observe that construction professionals sometimes seem impatient with this complexity, or even embarrassed by it. Allen (1984) also contends that professionals tend to assume erroneously that the client already knows what his or her requirements are. Peña *et al.* (1987) further suggest that designers give far too little time and attention to 'exploring the problem'. The implication which lies behind these various observations is that designers sometimes adopt a machine metaphor when the circumstances are inappropriate.

On the basis of the above discussion it becomes possible to suggest a generic framework for the briefing process which is based on adopting the organizational metaphor which is appropriate to the situation. In making this choice, the distinction between unitary and pluralistic clients is of particular importance. If the client organization is unitary, and operates within a static environment, then the machine metaphor may well provide the most efficient means of operation. In some cases the existence of a pre-determined set of objectives can indeed be taken for granted. However, if the client organization is multi-faceted, with no broad agreement on objectives, then it becomes necessary to construct a consensus understanding in order to resolve the pluralism. The briefing process advocated by Goodacre *et al.* (1982) achieves this social construct by means of a dialectic debate amongst client members and designers over a period of time. Once a clear and accepted statement of the client's strategic objectives has been produced, it then becomes possible to draft the outline briefing document. If the client's business environment is stable, then the requirements stated in the briefing document are likely to remain constant over time. In contrast, if the business environment is dynamic, then the requirements may well change as the design evolves. The Goodacre model of briefing clearly recognizes the second of these possibilities in recommending that the outline brief should not be 'frozen' until the end of Stage C of the RIBA Plan of Work (RIBA, 1965). This view is supported by both the organic and cybernetic metaphors.

Paradigms of practice

It can be concluded from the above that the choice of briefing approach depends largely upon the adopted organizational metaphor. However, the extent to which professionals really do make a 'choice' regarding their adopted approach is questionable. The tendency for professionals to employ inappropriate metaphors for the briefing process has already been discussed. In some cases it would appear that designers possess an implicit 'default metaphor', or paradigm of practice, which they apply in the absence of any real thought. The contention is that professionals act in accordance with a pre-determined set of assumptions and procedures which they acquire from previous experience. This view is supported by Gameson's (1992) research into the early interactions between building clients and construction professionals, which concluded that professionals exhibit a 'pigeonholing' approach to diagnosing clients' problems. Whilst Gameson focused on the influence that education and training has on the adopted paradigms of practice, it was also recognized that a professional's previous experience could have a significant influence. This is perhaps particularly so during the early formative years of practice. The notion of professionals operating within an implicit paradigm of practice once again invokes the metaphor of a psychic prison:

> '... once one is locked into a paradigm it is difficult to see the world in any other way or to recognise the need to do so.' (Keys, 1991)

The concept of a 'default' paradigm of practice goes some way to explaining why practitioners who are used to working with unitary clients often find it difficult to adjust to pluralistic clients. If construction professionals are to succeed in pluralistic situations they must learn to adopt the organizational metaphor which is appropriate for a given situation. Blackler and Brown (1983) offer a further insight by suggesting that, within the applied social sciences, the applicability of competing paradigms must be explained not only by issues of internal validity, but also by wider socio-economic and political changes. It is therefore illuminating to consider how the dominant paradigm of practice for the procurement of commercial property has changed over the last decade in the UK.

UK construction industry: 1980s versus 1990s

The construction boom of the 1980s was fuelled by a dramatic increase in demand for office space. Development tended to be speculative in nature and was primarily investment driven. The overriding commercial need was to reduce the development duration in order to secure an income stream as quickly as possible. Continued rental growth and firm investment yields were largely taken for granted (Matthews, 1993). The result of this mentality was an office market which was largely homogeneous; attempts to supply different types of space for different users were the exception rather than the rule. This situation was exacerbated by the design criteria for office buildings specified by the funders' 'institutional standards' (Duffy, 1986).

Within the above frame of reference, the process of briefing is relatively straightforward. The successful developers of the 1980s possessed a very clear under-

standing of what they wanted and were invariably able to provide a standard briefing document which included detailed issues of specification. Within this frame of reference, the activity of design is essentially the technical process of satisfying the client's brief. Whilst designers and construction managers were often encouraged to suggest alternative specifications and methods of construction, the number of new ideas adopted for each project was deliberately limited. The same underlying philosophy is reflected in the 1980s approach to value engineering (see for example, Green and Popper, 1990). Alternative design options were generated and appraised in accordance with their impact on (1) contruction cost; (2) construction time; and (3) investment value. In the final analysis, all of these could be accounted for in financial terms. The developer clients of the 1980s were undoubtedly motivated by clear, unambiguous financial objectives. They were invariably unitary in nature and are well described in terms of the machine metaphor, although the cybernetic metaphor is also applicable to the market leaders. Given that these firms were motivated solely by financial objectives, effective decision support could be provided by the single-criterion decision models of investment appraisal. Whilst some decision models would include an assessment of risk, others would be purely deterministic. In either case, the models would be inevitably biased by the intuitive 'gut-feel' of the decision-maker (see Green, 1994). The general buoyancy and optimism of the market undoubtedly acted to reduce their risk aversion. In many cases, false optimism about the future market for property resulted in subsequent financial disaster. This was particularly true in London, where the Canary Wharf and London Ark developments stand as prime examples. It is notable that the funding institutions were no less guilty of false optimism than the developers. The governing mentality of the 1980s developer has been well summarized by Duffy (1989):

> 'a mixture of simple-minded Taylorist management attitudes and a "can do" constructionalist enthusiasm'.

The above quotation clearly invokes strong connotations of the machine metaphor which characterized the then dominant paradigm of building procurement.

The extraordinarily severe recession of the late 1980s had a pronounced impact on the UK property and construction industries. The sudden oversupply of office space caused a spectacular demise in the need for speculative development. This was particularly true in London where the fall in demand led to plummeting rents and yield rates. As a result, the industry of the 1990s is no longer dominated by developer clients, but by owner-occupier clients. These clients differ in that they are not primarily motivated by a building's exchange value, they place much more emphasis on use value. For owner-occupier clients, value for money is now determined by the extent to which the building facilitates the client's primary business activity. Project success can no longer be measured simply in terms of time and cost, it is necessary to address issues of building performance. Companies have also become increasingly concerned with the effect of the built environment on the operational performance and behaviour of their staff. This increasing interest is evidenced by the emergence of facilities management as a bona fide discipline (e.g. Becker, 1990).

Whilst a number of property developers have continued to build during the early 1990s, they have been building to order rather than speculatively. The sudden change in the demand/supply equation had placed consumers in the ascendency. Clients now expect to influence the design of the buildings which they occupy. The property market has ceased to be supply-driven, it is now consumer-led. Whilst it could be argued that this emergence of consumer power is solely due to the change in balance of supply and demand, this would be to ignore similar trends in other sectors of society. The new decade heralded increasing consumer influence over a wide range of services such as transport, health and education. This change in emphasis towards a consumer society is partially politically-driven and is epitomized by the UK Government's 'Citizens Charter'.

Within the dominant paradigm of practice of the 1990s, the previously dominant organizational metaphors of machine and domination have given way to those of organism and brain. The change in emphasis is reflected directly in the way in which clients and designers approach the briefing process. The Townsend and Greycoat approaches have become increasingly marginalized and the Goodacre approach has emerged as the accepted paradigm of practice. The increasing occurrence of multi-faceted clients, comprising many different interest groups each of which possesses different objectives, has also made the political metaphor much more prevalent. Within the 1990s paradigm, the existence of a pre-determined set of objectives cannot be taken for granted. Design is no longer simply a technical process of achieving pre-determined objectives, it is initially necessary to develop a shared understanding of what the problem actually is. Whilst such an understanding certainly depends upon the initial collection of substantive data, it also depends upon an accommodation regarding the relative importance of different objectives.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that the above analysis is intended to be a characterization. The discussion contains many generalizations and certainly over-simplifies the economics of supply and demand. The argument that there has been a dramatic switch from developer clients to owner-occupier clients over the

last decade has also been exaggerated. To a greater or lesser extent, the construction industry has always served both types of client and will continue to do so. It is also necessary to recognize that some repetitive clients, such as supermarket chains, continue to find the machine metaphor appropriate. Nevertheless, the conclusion that there has been a significant shift in the dominant paradigm of practice is considered inescapable.

Summary and concluding remarks

This paper has contended that construction professionals are often naive in their understanding of client organizations. Clients are invariably assumed to be unitary in nature with all interest groups working towards common objectives. The traditional literature relating to client 'types' tends to perpetuate this type of thinking. The concept of organizational metaphors has been introduced as the basis for a more sophisticated way of understanding organizations. Clients cannot be understood simply by classifying them in accordance with a predetermined set of characteristics. It must also be recognized that there can never be any single 'objective' interpretation of any organizational situation.

It has been argued that the concept of organizational metaphors can provide construction professionals with the ability to gain a richer understanding of the complex clients which dominate the 1990s. Different insights can be gained by viewing organizations through different metaphorical lenses. It has also been argued that if construction professionals are to really understand their clients, they must also understand the metaphors which client members use to understand their own organization. The 'reality' of any organizational situation does not exist independently of the theory which the actors use to understand it.

To illustrate the above argument, three characterizations of client briefing have been analysed in accordance with their underlying metaphors. As a result of this analysis it has been suggested that the adopted approach to client briefing depends upon the dominant metaphors which are used to understand the client organization. Of key importance is the distinction between unitary clients and pluralistic clients. For unitary clients whose objectives are unambiguous, the machine metaphor may indeed be appropriate. In this situation design can be perceived as a technical process of achieving predetermined requirements. For pluralistic clients, the briefing process must be underpinned by more sophisticated metaphors. Purposeful action depends upon initially constructing a common understanding of the 'problem'. Within this frame of reference, building design is no longer seen to be a straightforward technical process of problem-solving, it is now seen to be a social process

based on iteration and learning. This revised interpretation of the building process is arguably best understood within the broader context of facilities management. From this point of view, the activities of briefing, designing, constructing, refurbishment and post-occupancy evaluation become constituent parts of an ongoing process which continues over time. This wider perception of the building process requires a different sort of relationship between clients and construction professionals. It is no longer sufficient for construction professionals simply to work for clients, they must work with clients. This interpretation is fully consistent with the current trend towards partnership arrangements. The success of any professional ultimately depends upon their ability to understand the requirements of their client.

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