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RABENECK (Andrew), « Editorial. Embracing and Accounting for the Political Economy of Construction »

RÉSUMÉ – L'histoire de la construction manque de pratiques formelles, mais elle est de plus en plus répandue en tant que domaine d'étude. À l'heure où les pratiques de construction connaissent des changements spectaculaires à l'échelle mondiale, les historiens de la construction feraient bien d'élargir leur perspective pour refléter l'économie politique au sein de laquelle se situent les objets de leur étude. Une analyse plus transversale refléterait mieux les dynamiques de pouvoir et les forces géopolitiques à l'œuvre dans la construction.

MOTS-CLÉS – construction, économie politique, institutions, mondialisation, analyse transversale

ABSTRACT – Construction history lacks formal practices but is increasingly popular as a field of study. At a time of dramatic global change in construction practice, construction historians might do well to broaden their perspective to reflect the political economy within which the objects of their study are located. More transverse analysis would better reflect the power dynamics and geopolitical forces at work within construction.

KEYWORDS – construction, political economy, institutions, globalization, transverse analysis

## EDITORIAL

### Embracing and Accounting for the Political Economy of Construction

*La construction est la condition sine qua non  
de toute vie culturelle, économique et sociale*<sup>1</sup>.

Construction history is a branch of knowledge that as yet has no specific research plan, no agreed theoretical framework, and no formal mechanism for its transmission through teaching. Its methods borrow from both the sciences and the humanities. However, despite shortcomings as a formal discipline, construction history is a branch of knowledge becoming increasingly popular, and this is because it deals with a fundamental human activity, the provision of shelter.

*Ædificare* has been established to recognise that construction history provides a meeting point, a specific space within which to address transversal, or cross-disciplinary, issues. The editors have helpfully identified some of the important topics for transversal study.

- The locus of construction work.
- The place of construction knowledge.
- The materials of construction.
- The decision to construct; who decides.
- The effect of time on construction.
- Those who construct, craftsmen, contractors, designers.

In reviewing the editorials of the first ten issues of the journal it is noticeable that each in some way calls for construction history to

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Lacoste, « Aspects géographiques généraux des industries de la construction ». *Annales de Géographie*, Année 1959, Volume 68, Numéro 366 p. 121-153.

broaden its scope or alter its perspective so it can address major topics that are staring us in the face. Dominique Barjot sees the recent profound transformation of the production structures of construction as a major challenge for construction historians<sup>2</sup>. Valérie Nègre argues for a ‘circular economy of knowledge’<sup>3</sup>, and later with Robert Carvais urges us to concentrate on the ‘life of materials’<sup>4</sup>. The regulatory/political failures that led to the Grenfell Tower fire and the material/design failures of the Morandi bridge, have tragically emphasised the need for more transverse historical research<sup>5</sup>. Just recently in the UK, political indifference to widespread failures in the once popular reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC), has resulted in emergency school closures, its history closely related to degradation in the public authority for construction research since the privatisation of the government’s world renowned Building Research Establishment in 1997, just a year after their report into systematic failures in RAAC concrete<sup>6</sup>. The general depletion of resources and the response of construction to climate change are also addressed in *Aedificare* editorials, and this is a welcome development.

I am not suggesting that traditional accounts of technological invention and application are no longer valid as construction history or are necessarily misleading, just that the hot topics in this time of remarkable transformation in construction should reflect the social and political context within which the change is taking place. In a way I am recalling Bijker, Hughes and Pinch’s 1980s plea for a proper sociology of technology, with ‘thick descriptions’ and ‘actors’ networks’<sup>7</sup>.

A pioneer in the use of such a transverse approach to construction is the geographer Yves Lacoste, whose articles from the 1950s include one on the global cement industry<sup>8</sup>, and one on the wider construction industry<sup>9</sup>.

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2 Editorial, *Aedificare*, No. 9, 2021.

3 Editorial, *Aedificare*, No. 4, 2018.

4 Editorial, *Aedificare*, No. 7, 2021.

5 Robert Carvais raised both of these in *Aedificare* editorials, No. 2, 2017-2, and No.3, 2018-1.

6 Building Research Establishment Information Paper 10/96, <https://www.thenbs.com/PublicationIndex/documents/details?Pub=BRE&DocID=98696>.

7 W.E. Bijker, T.P. Hughes, T. Pinch, *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*, 1984, Cambridge, MIT Press.

8 Yves Lacoste, « L’industrie du ciment », *Annales de Géographie*, t. 66, n°357, 1957, p. 411-435. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/geo.1957.18305>.

9 Yves Lacoste, « Aspects géographiques généraux des industries de la construction », *Annales de Géographie*, t. 68, n°366, 1959, p. 121-153. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/geo.1959.16542>.

Lacoste is known as a progenitor of the concept of geopolitics, and both articles engage with the post-war global political economy in a convincing way. What is happening technologically is properly explained in terms of what is happening politically and economically.

For Lacoste “geography is a form of strategic and political knowledge, central to the military strategy and the exercise of political power”<sup>10</sup>. Michel Foucault, after debating with Lacoste in 1976, altered his position, agreeing that geography is indeed the meeting point of space and power<sup>11</sup>. The geographical dimension is increasingly relevant to construction history also, because of the transformations that construction is undergoing at a global scale<sup>12</sup>. A contemporary exemplar of the transverse approach to construction history is Dominique Barjot, sometimes taking an explicit dive into political issues that shape construction, and always alert to global issues driving change<sup>13</sup>. His editorial for *Aedificare* No. 9, “The Sources of Value Creation: Companies, Entrepreneurs, Engineers and Workers” makes the point that construction history needs to cast its net much wider than the technical or architectural factors, however necessary they of course are, if it is to capture the true nature of contemporary transformations.

So, what tools might be available to help construction historians in the framing of a wider, more transverse reading of the transformation of construction under late capitalism? A relatively new discipline *International Political Economy*, or IPE has emerged to provide a framework to explain the dynamics we are witnessing. Seeing the global

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10 Hepple, « Géopolitiques de gauche: Yves Lacoste, Hérodote and French radical geopolitics ». In Leslie W. Dodds, Klaus; Atkinson, David (eds.). *Geopolitical traditions: a century of geopolitical thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 268.

11 Yann Calbérac, “Close Reading Michel Foucault’s and Yves Lacoste’s Concepts of Space Through Spatial Metaphors.” *Le foucauldien* 7, no. 1 (2021): 1–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.90>.

12 Andrew Rabeneck, “Recent Geopolitics of Construction – origins and consequences” in Ine Wouters, Stephanie Van de Voorde, Inge Bertels, Bernard Espion, Krista de Jonge and Denis Zastavni (eds.) *Building Knowledge, Constructing Histories*, Proceedings of the 6th International Congress on Construction History (6ICCCH 2018), July 9-13, 2018, Brussels, Belgium, CRP Press/ Balkema, London, Taylor and Francis, 2018, 3 vol., t. 2, p. 1089-1096.

13 Dominique Barjot. « Les entrepreneurs et la politique. L'exemple du bâtiment et des travaux publics », *Politix*, vol. 6, n°23, troisième trimestre 1993. « Patrons. Représentation des intérêts et usages d'une représentation », sous la direction de Guillaume Courty. p. 5-24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/polix.1993.1567>.

economy as a political competition that produces winners and losers, IPE examines how state and non-state actors pursue wealth and power. Emphasising economic concepts as well as the interplay between domestic and international politics, IPE encourages critical thought about how economic policy is made in the context of globalisation<sup>14</sup>. The reason this is important for construction history is that population growth, the mobility of capital and its instruments of distribution over the last twenty years are transforming every construction market and the culture of construction everywhere: the extraction of raw materials, the manufacture and distribution of building materials, products and systems of construction, the organization and execution of construction, the management of construction labour and not least the position of architects and engineers. We construction historians can learn much from the approaches being tried by IPE. There is a need for a synoptic view of the political economy of construction, the forces that change the way we build, from population growth to resource scarcity. Construction is a universal activity that, as Yves Lacoste realised in the 1950s, is an important aspect of the anthropocene, man's interaction with the geology and ecosystems of the planet.

The global hegemony of the Western institutional framework of construction, now reinforced by computer applications, and diffused through the worldwide web, is a huge and fascinating field for construction historians, as are the global oligopolies dominating virtually every category of construction product or material. There is plenty to talk about.

Andrew RABENECK

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<sup>14</sup> An exemplary text outlining the history of IPE is Eric Helleiner's *The Contested World Economy*, Cambridge, CUP, 2023.