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Hollely, N. M. and Larsen, G. D. (2019) Challenging the rhetoric of construction briefing: insights from an Formula 1 sports venue. In: 10th Nordic Conference on Construction Economics and Organization, 7-8 May 2019, Estonia, pp. 409-417. Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/79719/

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Published version at: https://doi.org/10.1108/S2516-285320190000002056

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Article information:

To cite this document: Nick M. Hollely, Graeme D. Larsen, "Challenging the Rhetoric of Construction Briefing: Insights from a Formula 1 Sports Venue" *In* 10th Nordic Conference on Construction Economics and Organization. Published online: 26 Apr 2019; 409-417.
Permanent link to this document:
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Challenging the Rhetoric of Construction Briefing: Insights from a Formula 1 Sports Venue

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Abstract

Purpose – This research subscribes to the on-going process school of construction project briefing. Stakeholders underrepresented in the literature are engaged with by focussing on Formula 1 motor racing circuits. Attention is given to the rationales through which stakeholders define construction projects at such venues. The aim of this paper is to understand the realities experienced by stakeholders and how these resonate with the rhetoric of briefing literatures.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A single case-based research approach, encouraged for studying informality and emergence, was used to study a heritage oriented construction project at Silverstone Formula 1 Circuit, UK. Data included field-notes, interviews and strategy documents. Stakeholder interests cannot be directly accessed; however, language used when defining projects can be. Analysis focussed on how project rationales drawn directly from data could be grouped into interpretative repertoires. These repertoires are linguistic resources, drawn upon by stakeholders, formed partly from sets of rationales oriented around a common interest.

Findings – The priorities given to competing rationales are found to fluctuate through time and depending on audience. Project advocates mobilise these conflicting rationales, from different repertoires, to different audiences simultaneously when strategically defining the heritage project. Discursive definitions emerged during analysis through studying both formal and informal briefing practices.

Research Limitations/Implications – Conflict among stakeholders with competing agendas during briefing is widely recognised however references to discursivity are currently scant.

Practical Implications – Coping with discursivity during briefing poses significant challenges for construction professionals.

Originality/Value – By interpreting strategic briefing as an on-going and discursive process of project definition, researchers and practitioners can better empathise with realities experienced by stakeholders.

Keywords Briefing, Case study, Formula 1, Repertoire, Stakeholders, Rationale

All papers within this proceedings volume have been peer reviewed by the scientific committee of the 10th Nordic Conference on Construction Economics and Organization (CEO 2019).

The authors thank Prof Stuart Green for his aid in developing the research and to Stuart Pringle of Silverstone Circuits Ltd for participating in the research and giving permission to publish. They further thank the EPSRC for part funding the research through grant number: EP/G037787/1.

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Emerald Reach Proceedings Series
Vol. 2
pp. 409–417
Emerald Publishing Limited
2516-2853
DOI 10.1108/S2516-285320190000002066

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1. Introduction

In the aftermath of *Constructing the Team* (Latham, 1994), increased emphasis was placed on briefing to enhance client satisfaction, yet challenges remain. The goal of construction project briefing is perceived by some to be an exercise through which a completed brief is produced (Kelly *et al.*, 2005). Conversely, others argue briefing should aim to track stakeholder interests which are often dynamic (Lindahl & Ryd, 2007).

Any understanding of briefing is embedded in the contextual setting of the client and stakeholders. The notion of stakeholders is broader than just the client. Stakeholders are those with an interest in a project's success including users, those in the client supply chain, employees, shareholders, local communities and government among others. Briefing research has often given attention to clients repeatedly procuring similar services. Yet, there is a dearth of research focussing on, for example, major sports venues which perhaps experience less opportunity to develop long term collaboration networks but contribute to broader social wellbeing through sport. This research seeks to understand how stakeholders of a sports venue experience strategic briefing as a process of on-going project definition. Focus is placed on the ways that stakeholders mobilise contested rationales for projects over time. A case study research design is used, drawing upon a Formula 1 (F1) motor racing venue, which faces business challenges associated with its plans for future built facilities. The focus of the empirical research is the Heritage Experience Centre construction project at Silverstone Circuit, UK. This provides a fertile case for offering fresh insights into strategic briefing as an on-going process of construction project definition.

2. Tensions in strategic briefing literature

While the briefing literature is fragmented, it is possible to crudely categorise competing interpretations of strategic briefing into two schools: the rationalistic school and the on-going process school. Similarly, it is possible to conceptualise two perspectives regarding who is "doing" the briefing, either a static client with a unitary voice or a range of changing stakeholders with competing agendas which are not fixed.

The dominant literature perceives practitioners as needing to accurately understand requirements of projects that clients "apparently" possess (Kamara & Anumba, 2000). Such assumptions are held by some architects and practitioners which influences their approaches to briefing (Kelly *et al.*, 2005). This rationalistic perspective seeks to understand and accurately portray client project rationales, objectives, goals and success criteria in a finalised and static brief. Recent construction professional practitioner guidance documents closely mimic this logic (e.g. RIBA in Fletcher & Satchwell, 2015; CIOB, 2014; RICS in Schofield, 2016). This rationalistic perspective uses assumptions which are contested throughout the construction management literature. Rationalists align more closely with assuming there is an objective reality (Seymour & Rooke, 1995).

Tensioned against the dominant rationalist rhetoric above is the on-going process school of briefing which seeks to understand the discursive and temporal realities of stakeholders during briefing processes. The complexities, messiness and unpredictability of stakeholder realities during briefing can leave those using rationalist assumptions found wanting (Barrett *et al.*, 1999). Building upon Barrett's thinking, rather than perceiving clients as static problems for the construction sector to overcome, Haugbølle & Boyd (2013) call for more research that theorises stakeholders as having their own dynamic problems. Tryggestad *et al.* (2010) challenge rationalistic conceptualisations of briefing by emphasising the *emergent nature* of projects goals. Lindahl & Ryd (2007) argue stakeholders should be able to track the *evolution* of project goals, thus emphasising their *fluid* nature. Thomson (2011) went

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further, arguing that project success criteria often change over time, bringing into question the notion of a fixed brief to measure success against.

Building on past work in the on-going process school, this research sets out to conceptualise strategic briefing as an on-going process of project definition which is enacted by complex sets of stakeholders. Such a position celebrates discursively constructed realities and their temporal nature.

3. A Dynamic interpretation of project definition

Beliefs and values which shape construction project stakeholder interests cannot be directly accessed. Interests inform the rationales mobilised by stakeholders during project definition. It is recognised that through time, stakeholders strategically manipulate sometimes contradictory arguments during project definition. From this perspective, no argument is deemed true or false, rather, competing arguments are recognised as being used for differing purposes. When addressing challenges of trying to "access" something in flux, the notion of "interpretative repertoires" can be used as a unit of analysis (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1980; Mulkay & Gilbert, 1983; Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). Repertoires can be used discursively by stakeholders to shape and realise their interests. They consist partly of baskets of rationales with an underlying common purpose and are being continually co-constructed by stakeholders. As such, the rationales drawn upon by stakeholders can be short lived or enduring. Construction project rationales can be sought directly from data by searching for both literal and non-literal language used to form arguments that strategically define projects. These rationales can then be grouped together around common interests through time such that particular repertoires can be indirectly accessed.

4. Research design

Having described the theoretical constructs of repertoires and rationales it is important to describe the empirical setting before considering the case study research method. Despite the global appeal of motor racing, the increasing level of international competition to host F1 events and associated sports tourism, there is a dearth of research associated with motor sport venues with just a handful of exceptions (*cf.* Alnaser *et al.*, 2007; Larsen & Hughes, 2012; Larsen, 2016). While continually evolving, the UK's F1 venue of Silverstone (owned by the British Racing Drivers' Club [BRDC]) currently has over 100 buildings of different sizes, ages and uses, ranging from a University Technical College, to two separate pit facilities, VIP and media centres, clubhouse, showrooms, training centres, conference facilities and supporting infrastructure. Yet, international competition from newer, purpose built F1 venues places increasing pressure on Silverstone to get the briefing process "right".

The described research focuses on a £20 million construction project at Silverstone F1 Circuit aimed at celebrating "heritage". This Heritage Experience Centre project (HEC) fitted the time period for data collection while going through the process of definition and design. At the time of writing, it is under construction. Unprecedented access to Silverstone was granted as part of a collaborative doctoral research project, meaning data could be gathered throughout the period 2015-2017.

A case-based approach is used (Barrett & Sutrisna, 2009). The initial research stages (1) involved observing stakeholders to gain an understanding of the competing agendas surrounding briefing of potential new projects. Drawing upon Green *et al.* (2009), much of this data was co-created with project stakeholders informing the focus of research and includes the following:

- Co-constructed narratives with construction consultants and BRDC group executives between 2015-2017 (*cf.* Andrews *et al.*, 2013)

- Field-notes (between August 2015-November 2015) developed based on Wolfinger's (2002) salience principle (e.g. from observing construction project briefing meetings including Grandstands, Hotel, Rally Track, Automotive Brand Centre & Child Experience Centre)
- Observing HEC monthly briefing meetings (between September 2015 and May 2016) with stakeholders (management and design team) including pre- & post-meeting discussions with attendees.

The findings from these field observations were used in the development of a facilitation tool (a single-sided A1 conference poster summarising initial findings detailing changes to construction projects observed during fieldwork). The next stage (2) in 2017 included using the conference poster as an entry point to audio recorded conversations (between 1 and 2 hours) with three senior venue executives and a consultant architect. Each conversation participant was asked to study the poster prior to the conversation. Two venue executives and the architect were asked to give their account of the background to the HEC in the context of findings on the poster and how the HEC fitted into the overall venue development. One executive, who leads the HEC as project director was asked to give an account of the development of the project. Transcripts were then developed, which each participant had the chance to review. Only one participant did who proceeded to comprehensively rewrite their account citing confidentiality.

Analysis then (3) focussed specifically upon the rationales for changes to the venue with a focus on the HEC. This stage used the transcripts and multiple other data sources in the form of historic and contemporary documents. Publically accessible documents analysed included:

- Historic maps, plans and aerial photos (1608-2017)
- Masterplans for the entire venue (1971, 1988, 2001, 2008, 2011 and 2017)
- Annual reports published by the owners (1981-2016)
- Planning applications for developments (1977-2017)
- Law case report (1996)
- Local government policy documents (1998-2017)

Privately held documents analysed included the following:

- Operational venue asset booking calendar (2004-2014)
- Consultant report on BRDC group corporate governance (2006)
- BRDC Ordinary Resolution giving mandate for venue sale (2012)
- HEC feasibility studies (2011, 2012 and 2014)
- Slides from presentations to attract potential HEC funders (2012-2017)
- HEC grant applications (2012, 2012 and 2016) and consultant advice on applications (2012)
- HEC procurement and tender documents (2012-2016)
- HEC formal letters between stakeholders (2014-2016)

The output (4) from the analysis is a case study report (Yin, 2003). This has been reviewed (5) by research participants for accuracy.

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5. Case Study – Silverstone Circuit 1970-2017

The initial section focuses upon the competing agendas faced since 1970 and hence the antecedents to the HEC. The "Guardians of Silverstone" repertoire dominated the findings resulting from the analysis. Arguments (rationales) used to strategically define construction projects or other courses of action drawn directly from analysis of data are in italics throughout this section. Documents from which the rationales are sourced are in brackets.

5.1. Fluctuating priorities of competing rationales

The BRDC gained freehold ownership of Silverstone Circuit in 1970. The BRDC aim to promote and make motor sport racing accessible to the wider British population, celebrate racing successes and support the next generation of racing drivers. Stakeholders face the challenge of *improving* (planning applications, masterplans and annual reports) the ability to host large racing events at the venue to retain promotion rights to *keep the Formula 1 British Grand Prix* at Silverstone (annual reports and transcripts). This includes modernising venue buildings, race tracks and infrastructure. The main opposition to the *improvement* rationale since the 1970s has been to *diversify* (planning applications, feasibility studies, formal letters, masterplans, transcripts and annual reports) the business to future proof the venue in case hosting racing events became less lucrative. *Diversification* is a key rationale mobilised by stakeholders dating back to the early 1970s when considering constructing new built facilities to achieve the above aims which are somewhat contradictory. Hosting the F1 racing was highly profitable, and funded much *modernisation* for the owners leading up to the millennium. During the 1990s and 2000s, changes in motorsport commercial rights meant the stakeholders with a vested interest in keeping Silverstone as an F1 racing circuit faced escalating annual race promotion fees. Simply hosting motorsport events was no longer enough to sustain Silverstone financially or keep pace and fund the speed of *improvement* needed.

In the early 2000s, the circuit was leased to a management organisation (with a metaphoric *pot of gold* [transcripts]) with significant to funds to invest in modernising the venue. Silverstone's owners relinquished responsibility (but retained ownership). However, the management organisation struggled to develop a sustainable business model amidst promoting F1 races at Silverstone and heavily investing in an ambitious modernisation programme. They broke the contract in 2004, which left the BRDC with a financial windfall but a significant upgrade programme that needed financing. The BRDC decided to *go it alone* (transcripts and formal letters) rather than immediately seek another lessee for the venue but only for a short while.

In the late 2000s, a major development brief exercise was undertaken for the site. The wider economic benefits of the circuit to the local area and region were recognised which sit in *motorsports valley* (planning applications, transcripts and masterplans), a UK cluster of motorsport related firms. As such, stakeholders then included the venue owner, broader stakeholders and local councils working together on *diversification* schemes. Therefore, economic benefits of Silverstone being the UK's only licenced F1 circuit to *motorsport valley* becomes an argument used to aid in *keeping F1 at Silverstone* and *diversification*. Another common rationale is to smooth out the footfall at the venue more evenly across the year to address a problematic *peaks and troughs* (transcripts, annual reports and planning applications) business model. This aids in *diversifying* business streams and increasing profits to *keep F1 at Silverstone*.

From the contextual evolution since the 1970s, attention is now turned specifically to the HEC. The first mention of developing a museum (restyled as HEC) to celebrate the history of the venue occurs in the early 1970s. A museum is again mentioned in the mid-1970s

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(planning application), late 1980s (masterplan) and multiple times during the 2000s (annual report and masterplan). However, in the early 2010s, it gains more traction in an era when the need to *diversify* became a higher priority. The ways in which a project celebrating the "heritage" of Silverstone was defined changed through time. In the 1970s, the idea was to present archaeological findings from the Silverstone site to the wider public, but this was dismissed. In the 1980s, it was proposed among a number of potential avenues for diversification. In the early-2000s, there was mention of a museum and visitor attraction which brings it closer to the *catalyst* for further developments in a proposed programme of construction projects which it became in the early 2010s. The HEC began to develop significant momentum in 2011 at which time the *diversification* and *pot of gold* rationales were competing. This led to multiple attempts to lease the venue to yet another *pot of gold* organisation, who would take all reasonable action to *keep hosting F1* and *improving* facilities, while the HEC was developing. However, the HEC presented a realistic opportunity to significantly spread visitor numbers across the year (thus a version of *diversification* and changing the *peaks and troughs* business model).

5.2. Discursive project definitions

A feasibility study developed by BRDC group project advocates to gain approval for the HEC from the board of directors in 2012 states a rationale of the project is to "*Act as a catalyst for other developments e.g. hotels.*" (Silverstone Circuits Ltd, 2012a, p.3).

This rationale for the project is defining the exhibition of the heritage of Silverstone as a catalyst for further diversification of the business by significantly raising the footfall of visitors to the Circuit throughout the year. This increased footfall aids in supporting business cases for other diversification projects such as constructing a hotel. However, in a bid document developed by the same BRDC group project advocates to a heritage grant funding body sent in 2012, a compelling and competing rationale for the HEC construction project is used as follows:

> *The site could easily be turned over for more of a 'motor sport resort' and Business Park in the next few years. Not only will the chance be missed to push and interpret the extremely important heritage elements of the site, but there is a real danger that they will be concreted over in any new development* (Silverstone Circuits Ltd, 2012b, p.8).

The construction project here is to create a building with the intention of making the venue heritage accessible through exhibitions and conserving the extremely important heritage assets across the site. The first rationale is directly using the HEC as a *catalyst* to enable further commercial diversification through enabling construction projects such as a hotel at the venue. The second argument directly uses this future development of the venue to instil a feeling of fear of losing valuable heritage signalling that there is a *Heritage* repertoire. Project advocates use rationales drawn from the *Guardians* repertoire (e.g. keep F1, peaks and troughs, pot of gold, diversification) to gain support from BRDC directors for the project. The same advocates also mobilise an incommensurate rationale with heritage grant funders who are more concerned with the protection of heritage assets and making them accessible to the wider population. BRDC project advocates are therefore found to use contradicting rationales drawn from two different repertoires, one being *Guardians*, the other *Heritage,* to define the project to different audiences at the same time.

BRDC group stakeholders also used the argument of *no Government help* (transcript, annual report) skilfully to attract help from potential funders. Project advocates claim they do not attract financial help from the UK Government. However, local government policy documents contradict this claim, showing how public money has been used for significant

infrastructure upgrades which aid in improving visitor transport on race days. Further to this, the HEC, though ring-fenced as a charity, is being constructed through grants and loans from a public heritage body and local government. The HEC is being used indirectly to change the *peaks and troughs* business model through being a *catalyst* for wider development whilst benefitting *motorsport valley*. The venue is attracting government help, just not to directly aid in paying fees to annually promote an F1 race.

Fluctuating priorities of rationales led to the original opening date for the HEC of 2014 being altered many times to summer 2019. This led to delays and rework owing to project redefinition. To meet the strategic brief, three separate design proposals were being developed at different periods. From 2012 to 2013, the proposal was to demolish a former aircraft hangar (dating back to 1943) and construct a modern, iconic new building at the entrance to the circuit. From 2013 to 2015, the proposed location moved to a greenfield site in the centre of the circuit (while remaining a new iconic building). The final proposal was to retain and refurbish the dated aircraft hangar prominently located at the circuit entrance whilst constructing a new build extension, thus linking the past, present and future. These proposals morphed owing to changes made to the masterplan of the venue. With each potential new venue lessee and business model, the masterplan changed which led to delays and added pre-construction cost for the HEC.

6. Discussion

The analysis of rationales used to strategically define the HEC resonates with the emerging on-going briefing process school. Lindahl & Ryd (2007), Tryggestad (2010) and Thomson (2011) made strong cases for increasing the emphasis of temporality during briefing processes. Building from this, the mobilisation of the concept of repertoires and their rationales developed through this research supports that notion by seeking greater empathy for how stakeholders define projects through time. This case has shown how enduring, contested rationales for action can lead to projects taking almost 50 years to be realised.

Stakeholders are found to use contradicting rationales, simultaneously, to strategically define the HEC to different stakeholder groups. This shows how the strategic definition of the HEC was manipulated to realise discursive interests. During the briefing process, any attempt at strategic definition is therefore specific to a given time and particular audience. Positioned against currently dominant rationalistic assumptions, this research supports assumptions underpinning the on-going process perspective of strategic briefing which accommodates discursive and temporal articulations of project definition.

7. Conclusions

This paper began by critiquing the historically dominant, rationalist briefing literature that focussed upon the inferred assumptions in the literature, arguing that during strategic briefing more attention could be paid to stakeholders rather than solely clients and that briefing needs to be conceptualised as an on-going process of strategic definition. The case study shows the discursive and temporal nature of rationales used during briefing can be understood as existing in a constant state of flux. It further demonstrates that the rationales used by stakeholders can be grouped into repertoires. Current dominant practices and briefing models fail to reflect the realities experienced by such stakeholders in any meaningful way. The research demonstrates the challenges of realising the interests of all the stakeholders at any one time and how interests can gather around certain projects at certain times over very long periods of time.

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