

David Seymour: An Obituary

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In Memoriam

David Seymour had many talents, actor, painter, teacher, linguist, researcher, methodologist and organizational theorist. His first degree was in English Literature, and he was for many years an actor and teacher before he took up the study of sociology. After studying under Andre Gunther Frank in Montreal and Wes Sharrock in Manchester, he joined the School of Civil Engineering at the University of Birmingham, where he offered one of the country's first courses in construction management.

From the start, David struggled with what he sometimes referred to as the 'engineering mentality'. By this he meant a tendency in engineering thinking to neglect the human aspects of project organization, a tendency with both methodological and substantive aspects. Methodologically, Dave advocated a 'suck it and see' approach to social research, go out into the field with as few theoretical preconceptions as possible and find out what is really going on. This approach provided him with many substantive insights not vouchsafed to his more theoretically minded colleagues. Needless to say, they did not always find this endearing and David often felt isolated at Birmingham, and among the UK construction management community generally.

That David embarked upon and successfully completed his doctoral studies without benefit of supervision is a sign of this isolation, as well as of his ability and determination. However, the clarity of his insight and robustness of his arguments spoke for themselves, and he began to gain some recognition among his peers. His concern from the start was to explore the complexity of organizational reality. Thus, addressing the quality management movement, he set out to show not only that design specification could not capture all the technical demands of construction work, but that other concerns carried equal weight for industry members. Ultimately, he was able to demonstrate, through research into concrete cover, that the causal explanations produced on projects was so determined by contractual concerns that improvement of technical performance was obstructed. At the same time, and for the rest of his career, he was developing his critique of construction management research methodology, initially under the rubric of 'culture'.

Throughout his career also, David maintained his relationship with Wes Sharrock, whom he greatly admired. He visited Manchester, and the community of ethnomethodologists which surrounded Wes many times, and continued to draw inspiration from this source; though he later became distressed at the overly philosophical turn taken by the Mind and Society Symposium. His feeling was, that philosophical speculation could only be justified by the demands of real life problems.

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It is also through the Manchester connection that I came to be employed as his research assistant at Birmingham, where I remained for eight years. As Wes' students we shared a common approach, and I benefited much from David's experience, as well as his friendship.

In 1992, David met Glenn Ballard at a conference in Santiago, Chile, and was immediately impressed with Glenn's ideas about distributive planning. Here at last was an approach that recognized the necessity of individuals' organizational competence and perspectives in project organization. David did not attend the first annual meeting of the IGLC, but he was at the second, and from then on he attended regularly, delivering a series of eight papers from 1994 until his retirement in 2001. In 1996 he hosted the 4th Conference at Birmingham; at the time it was still a small enough group to fit around a table (though admittedly a big one!). In 1998, Glenn commenced his own PhD studies, with Dave as his supervisor. He writes, "in that time, David introduced me to the British construction community, served brilliantly as my dissertation advisor, and - with his wife Anne - provided me a home away from home. That experience shaped the remainder of my life. I miss David. He will always live in my heart."

At IGLC Dave continued to develop the same themes that he had worked on from the start, but now within the context of a developing theory and practice of lean construction. It was at the Albuquerque meeting in 1995 that he first presented his findings on concrete cover research. There is no doubt that he found himself at home among the mixed bag of academics, managers, entrepreneurs and consultants who make up the lean construction community. Moreover, in the Japanese concept of *genchi genbutsu*, he found a management practice which perfectly complemented his academic research philosophy.

David's was a complex character, blunt, even offensive at times, he cared deeply about fundamentals and did not suffer fools gladly. He was generous and loving to his friends, respectful to those he admired, but could be less than charitable to those who failed to grasp the principles and insights which he so valued. He could also be cryptic. Lauri Koskela reminded me of a comment he made about Ancient Greek philosophy: describing it as "sheer madness." Lauri understood him to mean that, "the origination of philosophy in the conditions of the time was utterly improbable, and required people beyond the bounds of what is normal, ordinary and sane." Remembering some of his less opaque comments at the Mind and Society Symposium, I wonder if a less benign interpretation may be more accurate!

David could be a difficult man, but he was above all a man of good will, who cared deeply about truth, fairness and improving the world in which we live and work. He will be very much missed.

He is survived by his wife Anne, and two sons, Thomas and John.