

Chapter One

Introduction

This book aims to explore and unpack construction site *safety*. From the very start it must be made clear that this does not include its long-time associate *health*, or the more recent addition of *well-being*. The reasons for this will quickly become apparent, but are broadly due to differences in the way they emerge on sites, how they are managed in practice, and in part their very essence. As will be examined later, there are fundamental differences between them that should arguably be better acknowledged and considered within construction management, yet for this text they have been set to one side in order to ensure full attention can be paid to the specific concept of construction site *safety*. However, health in particular does still appear in general contextual discussions, placed alongside safety as part of a seemingly unbreakable, although at times impractical and often not very helpful, amalgam.

This book takes a different approach to safety on construction sites.

Rather than discussing the implementation of various regulations or seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of safety management systems against templates of 'best practice', it considers *how* people think about safety, what it means to them and how they go on to collectively use those ideas in their everyday work. This could also be deemed an evaluation of construction site 'safety culture', a notoriously problematic term and one that is discussed in more

detail in later chapters. Although to some extent, that is precisely what this book is.

This book takes the approach of asking some very fundamental questions.

- What is safety on site?
- Do we agree on our definition?
- How do we talk about it?
- How is safety associated with practice?
- Does it 'work'?

Although the last question has already been partly answered for us by the fact that we keep appearing in the list of the UK's most dangerous industries, it, and these other questions, will be explored as construction site safety is unpacked within this book.

The term 'unpacking' may seem a little odd. It comes from the way this book has been researched and prepared. It means to pull apart, to challenge, to question and to consider from as wide a variety of perspectives as possible, both academic and practice-based. It therefore lets us take safety apart within the specific construction site context to see what we can find – an ideal approach to help us answer the questions above, allowing us to explore and address them from outside the traditional frameworks of legislation, management systems and best practice. Instead, we can see how these approaches actually work in practice, how they are received by those who have to use them on a daily basis, and how they ultimately contribute to what safety actually *is* on sites. The way this process has been carried out is discussed in much more detail in Chapter 3.

The context for this book is large UK construction sites (over £15 million in value) operated by large main contractors (found within the top 30 contractors in terms of annual work won by value in the UK), rather than those operated by small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs) or micro operations and sole traders. However, smaller industry organisations inevitably participate in work on large sites as they operate as subcontractors within industry supply chains. Research has shown that subcontractors take their ideas of safety with them when they move from project to project (Aboagye-Nimo *et al.* 2012), and therefore SMEs and even micro-SMEs play a considerable part in helping to create and perpetuate what safety is on large construction sites.

Within the contemporary UK construction industry, main contractors can be seen to be actively trying to improve their safety

management through the use of structured Safety Management Systems, a focus on accident targets and various safety management programmes. In this environment, such well-implemented safety management should ideally mean zero accidents, but it doesn't. Sadly there are still incidents on large projects; the death of a worker in March 2014 on Crossrail in London occurred despite a certified safety management system and Target Zero safety programme being in place (Crossrail 2015). These environments are where 'traditional' safety management has been suggested to have plateaued in terms of what it can achieve, and so where new thinking is needed for future improvements.

Reading this book will hopefully support the development of a deeper understanding of safety on sites, which goes beyond practical frameworks of legislation and management systems, and starts to consider the answers to the questions asked earlier in detail. With a better knowledge of how safety actually 'works' within the site context, the development and implementation of management systems, interventions and initiatives can be subsequently enhanced and tailored to improve 'fit' within this environment. There is also the potential to improve existing safety management practices, by enabling a better understanding of *why* people might sometimes act as they do when they carry out safety violations, enabling the best course of action to be determined, both with the individual (to engage and educate or to discipline and punish) but also within the wider work context (to change the work method or revise payment practices, for example).

This book is intended for practitioners, academics and students of construction management. It hopes to cross the divide between practice and academia, both of which need each other to gain a complete picture of any aspect of construction management. Where some elements of this book will necessarily explore how we think about things and what this means for our social interactions from academic perspectives, there is also the need to illustrate and explain these academic considerations in relevant and representational contexts of practice.

Although the author is now works as an academic, she has over 10 years' experience of working on large construction sites in the UK, including several years as a construction section manager. During this time she was directly involved in safety, and has therefore worked through the challenges of its implementation, as well as unfortunately been witness to the repercussions when it has sadly failed.

This book seeks to draw on both academia and practice, and it is hoped that from either perspective, the other viewpoint proves illuminating and that both can be brought together here to give a different, informative and most importantly *useful* understanding of safety on construction sites.

References

- Aboagye-Nimo, E., Raiden, A., Tietze, S. and King, A. (2012) The use of experience and situated knowledge in ensuring safety among workers of small construction firms. In S.D. Smith (ed.), *Proceedings 28th Annual ARCOM Conference*, pp. 413–22. Association of Researchers in Construction Management, Edinburgh.
- Crossrail (2015) *Health and Safety* [Online]. Available: <http://www.crossrail.co.uk/sustainability/health-and-safety/> [30 March 2015].