A METHODOLOGY USING DOMAIN ONTOLOGY AND SOA FOR BETTER INTEROPERABILITY IN AEC MASS CUSTOMIZATION

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ABSTRACT: Today, the OMG’s Model Driven Architecture (MDA) makes available an open approach to write specifications and develop applications, separating the application and business functionality from the platform technology. As well, the Service-Oriented Architecture (SOA) establishes a software architectural concept that defines the use of services to support the requirements of software users, making them available as independent services accessible in a standardized way. Together, these two architectures seem to provide a suitable framework to improve construction company’s competitiveness through the adoption of a standard-based extended environment, challenging and enhancing the interoperability between computer systems and applications in industry. Nevertheless, Domain Ontologies (DO) have been recognized more and more as a challenging mechanism to bridge knowledge. The paper, after illustrating the general motivations the construction companies have to adopt open architectures to achieve interoperability for extended and collaborative enterprise practices, presents the emerging model driven and service oriented architectures. Then, it describes an innovative methodology for better interoperability in AEC mass customization. The paper finishes with discussion and concluding remarks concerning the empirical results obtained from the pilot demonstrator.

KEYWORDS: interoperability, mass customization, domain ontology, SOA, MDA.

1 CONVERGING MASS CUSTOMIZATION AND LEAN CONSTRUCTION

As companies reverse their traditional market push systems to market pull systems, it is the consumer who drives product configuration requirements (Robertson 1998, Simpson 2005). Mass customization requires that the value chain’s primary and secondary activities are linked together dynamically according to the product and customer profiles. These links need to be seamless established and error free. Since clients require highly specific product or specific requirements, companies must be able to design products that both satisfy clients and are easily manufactured (Liker 2004, Cusumano 1998). Thus, products must be designed to manufacture.

Mass customization principles promote the individual possibilities and unique features for the customer, and this must be supported accordingly by design, production and sales processes. To compete in a mass customization strategy, companies must have capacities, competencies and resources to cope with evolving product configurations, variable output frequency and dynamic customer profiles, providing thus product and services that will differentiate from commodity type of products (Pine 1993, Guilmore 1997). Diverse solutions have been considered to sustain these business demands, like product platforms, modularity, commonality or postponement (Anderson 1997, da Silveira 2001, O’Grady 1999). These solutions imply greater efficiency of internal business processes, and effective coordination mechanisms between its different functions.

Lean construction is a research field that aims to reduce waste and maximize value in AEC projects that has been adopted mainly by contracting firms (Arburu and Ballard, 2004). Work on lean construction field has tended to focus on process tools and IT solutions to identify and minimise uncertainty and hence improve the workflow of production (Soini et al, 2004). Indeed, the effective information communication between the various parties of the construction project, necessarily requiring information integration between the various functions and specialties during the project life-cycle, is seen as fundamental to support the deployment of lean construction approaches. For the past ten years, several product-oriented approaches have been advocated to fulfil the goal of IT integration in AEC projects (see e.g. Alshawi, 1996). However, recent studies have shown that the level of IT integration within companies’ value chains is not achieved properly yet (Prodaec, 2004), if the wide scale information integration required for a systematic true lean construction approach.

Lean management and mass customisation pose business processes that can only be fulfilled if not supported by specialised computer applications, together with automation in the production line. To achieve agile and flexible response, these applications need to be integrated. Com-
mmercial ERP systems promise this integration, but real
world practice shows that too often companies choose
fragmented, vertical and functionally oriented specialised
applications rather than complete commercial ERP solu-
tions (empírica GmbH 2005). This poses challenges for
information integration and therefore systems interoper-
ability, as many applications run on disparate operating
systems and using heterogeneous reference models and
technologies.

As the AEC sector seeks to improve its productivity re-
cords, lean construction is being poised as a body of
knowledge that aims to eliminate waste through the intro-
duction of many mass production principles and ap-
proaches, but maintaining the customised nature of the
industry. Indeed, the lean construction philosophy shares
many of its main themes with the parallel movement of
mass customization in the industry. Thus, the argument
poised in this paper is that if there is similarity between
the two approaches, than lean construction must also ad-
dress the recent interoperability developments that can
support the implementation of mass customization.

2 INTEROPERABILITY FOR AEC MASS CUS-
TOMIZATION

Recent observations state: “30-40% of companies’ IT
budget is spent on integration (Gartner and AMR), 30%

of entire IT budget is spent on building, maintaining, and
supporting application integration (Forrester), 61% of
CIOs consider integration of systems and processes a key
priority (CIOMagazine), $29 billion by 2006 for applica-
tion integration by IT professional services (Gartner
Group)”.

Recent studies have uncovered the cost of interoperability
barriers of the IT systems used in engineering and manu-
facturing in the US auto industry, estimated to be of the
order of $1 billion per year. Similarly, for the construction
industry, a study prepared for NIST by RTI International
and the Logistic Management Institute, to identify and
estimate the efficiency losses in the U.S. capital facilities
industry resulting from inadequate interoperability among
computer-aided design, engineering, and software sys-
tems estimates the cost of inadequate interoperability in
the U.S. capital facilities industry to be $15.8 billion per
year (Gallagher 2004). These studies are an indication of
the industry’s inability to exploit IT to realize its full
benefits. It is in this context that standards for information
exchange are also critical in the mass customization para-
digm.

Many standard-based Application Protocols (APs) and
Business Objects (BOs) are available today, e.g., ISO
10303-225, IAI/IFC. They cover most of the major manu-
facturing and business activities, and come from ISO,
UN, CEN or OMG. However, most of these standards are
not widely adopted, either by lack of awareness or due to
private commercial interests of the software developers.
Moreover, when they are selected, they are frequently
used inadequately in most of the situations, due to an
imprecise interpretation of the scope. This results in difficul-
ties in achieving interoperability with others and intro-
duces limitations in potential future reuse and model ex-
tensibility when creating new components (Jardim-
Goncalves 2002).

Recently, XMI, one of the most promising tools for meta-
model representation, revealed very able to assist on inte-
gration based on the concept of extending and reusing
existent objects, and also on the development of compil-
ers and code generators to assist in the development of
new components (Jardim-Goncalves 2002). Complement-
ing this, ISO13584 PLib is the standard suggested for
representation of catalogues of objects and components
(e.g., Units of Functionality, Application Objects and As-
sertions, Integrated Resources, Data Access Interfaces,
Object Business Data Types, etc.), with direct link with a
multi-level multi-language ontology system. This multi-
level characteristic also assists with the development of
hierarchical components, while the multi-language
mechanism will provide the adequate description of the
objects and components in many native languages, for an
easier understanding and better usage. However, most of
the standards for data exchange contain a framework that
includes a language for data model description, a set of
application reference models, libraries of resources,
mechanisms for the data access and representation in neu-
ral format. Examples are the DOM for XML, or the Part

Ontology is the study of the categories of things within a
domain and reflects a view of a segment of the reality. Its
definition comes from philosophy and provides a logical
framework for research on knowledge representation,
embracing definition, classification and relationships of
concepts (IDEAS 2003).

Therefore, an interoperable system that seamlessly com-
unicates and understands each other requires the com-
prehensive understanding of the meaning of the data ex-
changed within the domains involved. This can be real-
ized, if the communication process is supported by an
ontology developed under global consensus (Jardim-
Goncalves 2004, JTC 1/SC 7/WG 17 2006). To obtain
this consensual model, it is necessary to classify and
merge the concepts from the different sources within the
domain of applicability, describing them in a unique har-
monized structure of classes, attributes, relationships,
knowledge components and definitions. Through a com-
bining procedure, the harmonized classification is de-
defined, structuring the various suppliers’ information from
different sources and for diverse product categories.

Despite the availability of technologies supporting inter-
operability to sustain management challenges like in-
creased flexibility and efficiency, there is a need a more
systematic approach if companies are likely to widely
adopt inter-organizational information systems across the
value chain.

3 A METHODOLOGY FOR IS INTEGRATION FOR
AEC MASS CUSTOMIZATION

Generally, the standard data access interfaces are de-
scribed at a very low level. Moreover, they are made
available with all the complexity of the standard’s archi-
tecture to be managed and controlled by the user. This
circumstance requires a significant effort from the imple-
menters to use it, and is a source of systematic errors of implementation, for instance when there are functional- ities for data access very similar with slight differences in attributes, names or data types (Pugh 1997, Vlosky 1998, ENV 13550 2006).

To avoid the explosion in the number of required translators to cover all the existing standard data models, this methodology proposes the use of standard meta-model descriptions, i.e., the meta-model, using a standard meta-language, and putting the generators to work with this meta-model information (Umar 1999, Jardim-Gonçalves 2001). A proposal to contribute to face this situation considers the integration of SOA and MDA to provide a platform-independent model (PIM) describing the business requirements and representing the functionality of their services, supported by a Domain Ontology (DO) that models and describes the concepts as they apply in the domain. These independent service models together with the DO can then be used as the source for the generation of platform specific models (PSM), dependent of the web services executing platform.

Within this scenario, the specifications of the execution platform will be an input for the development of the transformation between the MDA’s PIM and the targeted web services platform. With tools providing the automatic transformation between the independent description of the web services and the specific targeted platform, the solution for this problem could be made automatic and global. An Integration Platform (IP) is characterized by the set of methods and mechanisms capable of supporting and assisting in the tasks for integration of applications. When the data models and toolkits working for this IP are standard-based, they would be called Standard-based Integration Platforms. The architecture of an IP can be described through several layers, and proposes using an onion layer model (Jardim-Gonçalves et al, 2006). Each layer is devoted for a specific task, and intends to bring the interface with the IP from a low to a high level of abstraction and functionality. The main aim of this architecture is to facilitate the integration task, providing different levels of access to the platform and consequently to the data, covering several of the identified requirements necessary for integration of the applications.

To produce accurate mapping, the mapping tool needs to have knowledge about the mechanism for interoperability between the standards that originate the model in XMI, in order to implement in the translators the inter-reference mechanisms, accordingly with such standards. This is where the access to the DO is of major relevance in this process. For instance, the reference from one model described in STEP to PLib should be done using the PLib services, as recommended by the ISO TC184/SC4 community (Staub 1998), and assisted by a DO described in OWL.

Therefore, the proposal for the methodology for the integration of Applications in IPs must be developed at three stages: i.e., Conceptual, ADT and Mapping. At Conceptual stage, first it selects the APs, the DO and the models to be used as support for the integration of the Application in the IP, then it selects the parser, meta-SDAI and Mapping module for each of the selected AP’s language, and finally translates those conceptual models to XMI.

At ADT stage, first it selects the programming languages to be used for the implementation of the translators, then it selects the ADT generator, meta-SDAI and Mapping module for each of the selected programming language, and finally it generates for each AP the correspondent ADT in the set of selected programming languages. At Mapping stage, first it selects the set of APs that is required the mapping, the DO described in OWL, and then it defines the mapping rules between them, using EXPRESS-X. Then it selects the ADT generator, meta-SDAI and Mapping module for each of the selected programming languages, and then it generates for each mapping the correspondent inter.-model mapping ADT, in the set of selected programming languages. Finally it can be integrated the Application in the IP using the generated code.

This methodology supports the required dynamics and flexibility existing in construction supply chains and projects, allowing fast, re-usable and largely automation-generated interoperability between construction firms IT systems.

4 VALIDATING THE METHODOLOGY

To validate this methodology in the context of the application scenarios, it was considered the application of a PIM to ISO STEP APs using XMI. Construction industry cases representing common situations requiring interoperability in the construction process were analysed, where the adoption of the joint model-drive and service-oriented architectures is conceptually developed and evaluated. An example was with HVAC specialists and architects existing at different locations and using different business models. They need to interoperate, through a business model for cooperation, supported by integrated electronic exchange of information. In this case each company used its own platform, and different proprietary applications, though allowing external communication of data. Here is the point where MDA adds its great value to make a seamless integration of the services.

Their collaboration is bound to the use of Service Oriented Architectures. Each one has its own services available and with well defined different entry-points. Also, the services implementation is based on different underlying system architectures, with the HVAC specialist using web-services and the architect using CORBA. Regarding the type of information to be managed, the HVAC specialist needs the layout and properties of the rooms in the building, from the architect, in order to be able to produce the engineering analysis regarding air flows.

To achieve the aim as the proof of the concept, UNNOVA developed the STEP25 tool that translates EXPRESS-based models to XMI following the emerging ISO10303 Part25 directives. This tool is the first that we know of that implements and proves this concept for AP236 EXPRESS to XMI binding including AP225 standard modules, validating an ISO 10303 Application Reference Model.
Mass customization practices.
meta-data, data and IT interoperability towards enhanced information systems. This pose challenges in terms of changes in business can only occur if enabled by adequate relationships within its value chain but also in the network wherein consumer interaction. Changes must occur internally, aiming to stimulate the adoption of lean construction concepts and improve those practices by enhancing enterprise’s interoperability through proper integration and harmonization of model and data.

Figure 1. ARM AP236 and respective meta-model representation in XMI.

The commercial Mega Suite platform is used to import the ARM model, described in XMI, into UML, and then the facilities of this platform are used to automatically generate code ready to assist in the implementation of the translators and repositories compatible with the reference model in specific platforms. The tool was also tested with subsets of ISO13584 part 20 (automotive, building and construction, furniture, and parts library and product catalogues).

Figure 1 depicts a subset of the ARM and the respective meta-model representation in XMI resulting from the output of the execution of the developed STEP25 tool, and the DTD for the representation of the product data in XML format. It also depicts the UML representation when the XMI representation is imported into the MEGA Suite platform. STEP25 is available for use by anyone interested. Authors will be very pleased to receive EXPRESS input files to help validate the tool.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The advance of lean construction principles can only be sustainable if supported with changes in how business value is created, i.e. the way business define its goods and services, and how they design logistics, operations and consumer interaction. Changes must occur internally, within its value chain but also in the network wherein companies are embedded, further exploiting relationships with suppliers, distributors and consumers. All these changes in business can only occur if enabled by adequate information systems. This pose challenges in terms of meta-data, data and IT interoperability towards enhanced mass customisation practices.

Mass customization and interoperability can be identified as key factors for enterprise success on a constantly changing global custom-driven environment enabling companies to act in partnership strengthening their position facing the market. Based on these concepts and due to the difficulty of maintaining and integrating existing heterogeneous platforms, languages and applications, software development is urging to change to a more efficient and rapid process.

Applications developed using model-based processes present a systematic approach to enterprise application integration, promoting reuse and enabling interoperability among different enterprises. Several dedicated business models have already been developed covering many industrial areas and related application activities, from design to production and business. Most of these models were designed and developed using standard methodologies and techniques. The MDA (Model Driven Architecture) and SOA (Service Oriented Architecture) have been evolving and it is expected to prove as the standard way of handling middleware and infrastructure development for enterprise systems groups.

The building industry is moving in a reverse trend of traditional consumer/manufacturing sectors. Indeed, the building industry has always had a very much customised approach. In recent years, authors working in the lean construction approach are advocating and developing mass customisation principles in order to increase the industry’s productivity. Yet a major hurdle on the deployment of mass customisation principles is the interoperability between IT applications, since it is a very fragmented sector, mirrored in the information systems development. Moreover, this is a sector with a very poor record on ontology, requiring a sound DO development.

This paper described a conceptual information system framework to support mass customisation principles grounded in an interoperable environment in the construction sector, proposing a methodology to enhance construction enterprises’ interoperability in the support of lean construction practices using DO and SOA, keeping the same organisation’s technical and operational environment, improving its methods of work and the usability of the installed technology through harmonization and integration of the enterprise models in use by customers, manufacturers and suppliers. The proposed framework aims to stimulate the adoption of lean construction concepts and improve those practices by enhancing enterprise’s interoperability through proper integration and harmonization of model and data.

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