

BUILDING FORWARD

How Do We Get Innovative...Again?

Perspectives on Housing, Construction, Infrastructure,
and Canadian Competitiveness

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Introduction

Few phrases quietly kill more innovation than:

“This is how we’ve always done it.”

Close behind are its corporate cousins:

- “That’s how we normally do it here.”
- “That’s what’s always worked.”
- “We tried something like that before.”
- “That’s not industry standard.”
- “This is how I did it at my last job.”

At first glance, these statements sound reasonable. In many cases, they come from experienced people trying to avoid mistakes, reduce risk, and protect quality. Experience matters. Proven systems matter. Standardization matters.

But there is a dangerous assumption hidden inside these phrases: the assumption that because something worked in the past, it must still be the best solution today.

Markets change. Technology changes. Labour availability changes. Customer expectations change. Economics change. Regulations change. Yet many organizations continue operating as though the environment around them is static.

Over time, processes that were once efficient become institutionalized inefficiencies. And the most dangerous part is that nobody notices — because the process feels familiar.

Familiarity is often mistaken for effectiveness.

The Causation Trap

Organizations frequently assume that because a company, project, or individual succeeded while using a certain process, that process must therefore have been the reason for the success.

But success is rarely caused by a single variable. A project may have succeeded because of market timing, exceptional people, favourable financing, strong leadership, lack of competition — or dozens of other factors unrelated to the specific process being defended.

The process becomes mythology. Just because an outcome occurred alongside a process does not prove the process caused the outcome.

The Transplant Problem

Someone arrives from a successful company and immediately starts saying:

“This is how we did it at my last job.”

But rarely examined is whether the previous organization succeeded because of that process, despite that process, or whether the process was merely compatible with a completely different environment, culture, scale, or market cycle.

Best practices are not universal laws of physics. They are context-dependent solutions.

The Construction Parallel

This is especially visible in industries like construction, where risk avoidance is deeply embedded into the culture.

Buildings cannot fail safely. Mistakes are expensive. Safety matters. Coordination matters. Reliability matters. But industries built around minimizing risk can unintentionally become resistant to improvement itself.

“At some point, ‘proven’ stops meaning ‘best’ and starts meaning ‘least questioned.’”

Innovation rarely dies because there are no good ideas. Innovation dies because systems are optimized to reject deviation.

What Should Stay Constant

This does not mean all tradition is bad. Far from it. Some principles should remain rigid:

- Safety
- Ethics
- Quality
- Accountability
- Durability
- Professionalism

But principles are not the same as processes. The principle may stay constant while the method evolves.

The Right Questions

The goal should not be reckless disruption. The goal should be continuous re-evaluation. Organizations should regularly ask themselves:

- If we were starting this organization today from scratch, would we design this process the same way?
- Are we protecting quality — or protecting familiarity?
- Which processes genuinely add value?
- What assumptions are we treating as permanent truths, even though they were created for a different era?

Every generation inherits a system. The successful ones are willing to question whether that system still fits the world they now live in.

Canada's housing crisis, productivity challenges, declining economic competitiveness, and weakening global influence may ultimately be symptoms of the same underlying issue: a growing inability to challenge institutional inertia at scale.

If that is true, then the conversation extends far beyond construction.

The next question is not simply how we build faster. It is whether Canada still remembers how to think boldly enough to build the future at all.