CIRCULAR BUILDING GOING IN CIRCLES: CHALLENGES IN CIRCULAR BUSINESS MODEL IMPLEMENTATION IN THE DANISH CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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Developing a circular built environment is essential for achieving climate goals, yet the Danish construction sector faces significant challenges in adopting this transformative production model. In this paper, we investigate how a major contractor in Denmark aims to tackle these challenges by combining internal strategies with innovative collaborations, ensuring both sustainability and business viability. Based on a longitudinal study, the findings reveal a multi-level approach to implementing circular initiatives, partially centrally coordinated to align with the company's strategy. The contractor assumes a dual role as both producer and consumer of circular materials, partially creating a closed loop to enhance resource efficiency. Strategic alliances with non-competitive partners are critical, enabling access to expertise, resources, and scaling opportunities. Furthermore, investments in a building material platform are made to facilitate the development of new markets and businesses, underlying the importance of collaboration in overcoming the sector's barriers and fostering industry-wide transitions to circularity. However, these collaborations do not deliver the expected financial results, and the circular business models tend to stay in the inner circle.

Keywords: circular business model; construction industry; implementation; silo effects; symbolic action

INTRODUCTION

Circularity in the building sector is progressing slower than anticipated. Despite over a decade of promotion from various stakeholders, including knowledge producers (Ellen MacArthur, 2015), regulators (EU, 2018), and consultants (Jensen *et al.,* 2016), recent evaluations reveal a rather bleak picture. Reports highlight a low overall degree of circularity (Circle Economy, 2024), inadequate regulatory frameworks, and the persistence of fragmented, isolated circular building projects (Teknologisk Institut, 2024; Boverket, 2024). This status remains far from what is required to meet the 2030 climate goals (Teknologisk Institut, 2024; Boverket, 2024).

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Several factors contribute to this stagnation. Firstly, the impact of European legislation has been overestimated, with policy measures proving insufficient to drive large-scale change. Secondly, the positioning of "circular construction" as a consultancy commodity has diluted interest, overshadowed by newer concepts and trends. Thirdly, there has been limited progress in developing platforms for the circulation of used building materials, coupled with inadequate digital infrastructure to support these efforts.

Within this challenging context, our study examines the journey of a particular contractor from 2021 to 2024, aiming to understand how a company navigates these persistent obstacles through a combination of internal strategies and innovative collaborations. Acknowledging the scope for firm-level strategising, we conducted an in-depth investigation of a Danish contractor, CDK, as it attempted to advance its circular business practices. Adopting as strategy as practice and process perspective (Burgelman et ala 2018).

CDK, a large-scale company with multi-100-million-euro revenue, experienced significant growth prior to the study period and maintained this scale throughout. However, rather than operating within a steadily evolving market, CDK's efforts unfolded in a fragmented and often resistant landscape where circularity remained elusive. Our study provides insights into how an established construction firm sought to adapt its practices while confronting structural, logistical, and regulatory barriers that continue to impede broader transitions toward circularity.

METHOD

To understand how circular business models develop over time, we build on a qualitative longitudinal research approach, tracking four companies from 2020 to 2024. This approach provides in-depth insights into how businesses formulate strategies, adapt to market conditions, and engage with stakeholders to implement circularity. By focusing on changes in a longitudinal manner, we hoped to explore the development of circular strategies, their challenges, and the adjustment process.

The case studies include four companies: A contractor, an architect, a civil engineering and a material supplier. Data was collected through two rounds of semi-structured interviews with key representatives from the four companies - 8 in 2022 and 14 in 2024 -. Additionally, four workshops were conducted to support collaboration and refine circular strategies. They involved representatives for the four companies. Workshop 1 (Autumn 2022) established a framework based on initial interviews to clarify visions and ambitions. Workshop 2 (Spring 2023) focused on identifying challenges, mapping networks, and defining key partners. Workshop 3 (2023) provided tailored sessions to refine circular business models. Workshop 4 (2024) validated findings, gathered feedback, and reflected on strategic progress.

The workshops created a collaborative learning environment where stakeholders could exchange ideas, test concepts, and refine their strategies. However, this paper focuses on how one specific company successfully navigated challenges, adapted its strategies, and built partnerships to promote circularity within its context. The choice of CDK as the main case is opportunistic, as it was the only one among the four studied companies to develop genuinely new business models. The architectural firm's circularity initiatives came to an end when the unit was dissolved as part of an organisational merger. The consulting engineering firm experienced significant employee turnover, which led to a shift in strategic priorities. Lastly, the material producer made incremental improvements by optimising existing processes but did not engage in the development of entirely new solutions. The findings offer valuable insights into the practical steps and collaborative efforts required to achieve circularity in the construction industry.

Conceptual Framework

In our review of circular business model literature, we encountered various definitions and interpretations of circularity and the circular business models (Kirchherr *et al.,* 2017; Ludeke-Freund *et al.,* 2019).

Traditional literature often frames circularity through technical processes such as recycling, reuse, resource efficiency, and closed-loop systems. These approaches tend to focus on optimising material flows and minimising waste within predefined supply chains. Circular business models are typically described through strategies that prioritise resource recovery, product life extension, and the creation of secondary markets for reclaimed materials (Jayakodi *et al.,* 2024).

These models also imply that circular business models involve more than technical optimisation; they require a fundamental restructuring of supply chains. Moving away from linear models, circular approaches should build on demand interconnected and adaptive systems where suppliers, manufacturers, and clients are integrated within a continuous loop of material use. This restructuring should be facilitated by strategic alliances, joint ventures, take-back systems, leasing models, and collaborative networks aiming at enhancing resource efficiency and creating value from what would otherwise be considered waste (Rao *et al.,* 2025).

Theoretical background

The strategy-as-practice and process (SAPP) approach emerges out of an extension of the strategy-as-practice (SAP) perspective (Burgelman etal 2018). SAP and SAPP emphasise that strategy is not a static plan or a singular executive decision but is instead something people do. It focuses on the micro-level activities, routines, and interactions through which strategy is enacted by practitioners such as managers, employees, or even external actors (Johnson *et al.,* 2007). Strategy, in this view, is not merely something an organisation has, but something that is performed and negotiated in everyday organisational life (Mantere, 2005). The SAP approach centers around three key elements: practices (the tools and routines employed), practitioners (the actors involved), and praxis (the ongoing activities through which strategy unfolds).

By contrast, the strategy-as-practice and process (SAPP) approach extends the SAP view by incorporating a processual perspective on how strategy unfolds over time. It brings together both the practical actions of strategists and the longer-term, often unpredictable development of strategic change (Burgelman *et al.,* 2018). SAPP is concerned with both the micro-level activities emphasized by SAP and the macro-level dynamics of strategic evolution, power struggles, and organisational learning. In other words, SAPP examines how strategy is both practiced and processed, emerging through a complex interplay of decisions, actions, and contextual change.

As such, strategy rarely materialises through a linear plan or a single visionary blueprint (Mintzberg *et al.,* 1998). Instead, it unfolds as a dynamic, iterative process shaped by internal negotiations, external pressures, and continual reorientations (Burgelman *et al.,* 2018). Strategising occurs through the interactions between actors, organisational routines, and contextual shifts, making it an empirical question as to which actors drive these processes—whether senior executives or more distributed, even informal, agents (Mantere, 2005).

This perspective resonates with critiques of the business model literature, which often treats business models, including circular business models, as static templates. In contrast, both SAP and SAPP highlight the fluidity and performativity of strategy and emphasize the mobilisation of ideas, tools, and alliances, whether drawn from within the firm or borrowed from external sources. Strategic episodes may be seen as critical moments (Clausen and Koch, 1999) or as evolving sequences of decisions and actions (Hendry and Seidl, 2003), each shaping how strategy is made and remade over time. Below we simply refer to "SAPP" appreciating the huge overlap between SAP and SA

The case of CDK

CDK is a nationwide construction company in Denmark with around 700 employees. The company positions itself as a market leader in renovating public housing, including schools, daycare centres, housing cooperatives, and homeowners' associations. Beyond renovations, CDK is also involved in constructing new residential buildings, public institutions, and commercial properties.

Our study revealed that CDK's journey toward developing a circular business model was gradual and complex, involving a series of strategic decisions, alliances, and practical challenges over time. From 2014 to 2016, CDK's parent company initiated its first circular economy project, aiming to explore the feasibility of integrating reused materials into their operations. This early effort laid foundational principles that would guide future circular practices. However, the initial project remained largely experimental, with limited structural integration into broader business strategies.

By 2016, CDK began to systematically incorporate circularity into their bids, reflecting an increasing awareness of sustainability as a marketable and strategic asset. Circularity was gradually integrated into renovation projects, where material reuse could be practically tested. This incorporation remained fragmented and project-specific, lacking broader cohesion within the company's strategic framework.

By 2020, CDK's engagement in several R&D projects focused on material reuse demonstrated a growing commitment to circular practices. These projects were often conducted in partnership with external research bodies, reflecting CDK's effort to leverage external expertise to refine and expand its approach to circularity. The R&D projects also aimed to establish legitimacy and credibility within an emerging market for circular building practices.

In 2022, CDK acquired a 20% stake in PRB (Platform for Reuse of Building Materials), a platform specialising in recycling and selling second-hand building materials. This acquisition marked a strategic shift from exploratory projects to more concrete and commercially integrated practices. Through PRB, CDK aimed to deliver resource-efficient, closed-loop material flows by supplying recycled materials for both new construction and renovation projects. Instead of incinerating materials, CDK sought to redirect them towards reuse, preserving their environmental and economic value.

The acquisition also opened new revenue streams, allowing CDK to position itself as a supplier of recycled materials rather than merely a user. This dual role—both a producer and consumer of recycled materials—was seen as a means to differentiate CDK from competitors. PRB provided a structured platform for integrating recycled materials into CDK's existing projects, making circularity more than an aspirational goal but a concrete business proposition.

However, interviews revealed that scalability remained a persistent challenge. Procuring enough uniform materials for large-scale projects, such as acquiring 100 identical doors for a school, proved difficult. Limited access to standardised products was anticipated to become a significant bottleneck for PRB's ambitions to scale its operations. Without consistency in material availability, CDK found it challenging to integrate reused materials into larger, commercially viable projects.

Furthermore, the acquisition of PRB reflected CDK's broader strategy to increase the volume of recycled materials available in the market, thereby making circular practices more accessible and attractive within the industry. The strategy aimed at creating economies of scale by enhancing the visibility and availability of reused materials. CDK recognised that if recycled materials could be provided at scale, their appeal to other developers and contractors would increase, thereby normalising circularity within the construction industry.

Additionally, a retail partner acquired 20% of PRB in 2022, creating a three-way partnership. The retail partner's network of 22 wholesale centers across Denmark played a crucial role in raising awareness of CDK's circular profile among various market segments. These wholesale centers served as distribution points for PRB's recycled materials, enhancing accessibility for both professional contractors and private customers.

For private customers, value creation was primarily tied to reduced costs and the social capital associated with building sustainably. Recycled materials appealed mainly to those engaged in renovations or DIY projects who valued contributing to a greener lifestyle. The branding of PRB products often highlighted their environmental benefits, tapping into broader cultural narratives about responsible consumption and ethical building practices.

Additionally, the storytelling aspect of recycled products emerged as a strategic tool for engaging customers. Materials with unique histories, such as oak planks from the Opera House, added an element of authenticity and cultural value to CDK's offerings. This approach proved particularly effective for marketing to private consumers who valued the idea of incorporating historical or prestigious materials into their projects.

CDK's renovation activities further reflected their strategic focus on circular business models, particularly in leveraging materials derived from renovation projects. The study identified resource mapping, marketing of materials, resale, and integrating recycled materials into construction projects as CDK's core competencies. These activities were essential for establishing circular networks between companies and fostering collaborations that laid the groundwork for more complex and ambitious circular business models.

Despite these efforts, scaling CDK's circular model to professional projects did not meet expectations. A major obstacle was the lack of reliable documentation for the lifespan and quality of recycled materials, which acted as a barrier to integrating these materials into new projects. This issue was particularly problematic for projects requiring long-term durability or structural integrity. Without established standards for assessing the quality of recycled materials, CDK's attempts to integrate them into larger projects were often met with scepticism from clients and regulators.

Furthermore, the general shortage of recycled materials created additional difficulties in scaling CDK's business model. CDK's strategy of acquiring PRB, fostering partnerships, and emphasising resource mapping proved effective at a smaller scale but faced significant barriers when applied to larger projects.

The logistical challenges of managing warehouse functions also emerged as a significant barrier. Storing and sorting reclaimed materials required substantial investment, and the costs associated with these activities limited PRB's ability to scale effectively. Without adequate infrastructure for warehousing, the ambition to provide consistent supplies of recycled materials remained constrained.

Lastly, external regulatory frameworks and the broader consultancy-driven commodification of circularity added complexity to CDK's efforts. While CDK sought to build a cohesive strategy for circularity, the lack of comprehensive regulations and the fragmented nature of industry standards hindered their progress. As "circular construction" became increasingly commodified by external consultants, CDK struggled to differentiate its own practices from market-driven narratives.

Throughout this process, Adam, the sustainability manager, emerged as a critical champion within CDK, driving most of the changes during the time of our study. His role was not only operational but also strategic, as he actively shaped the company's circular business model through ongoing negotiation, coordination, and advocacy. Adam's efforts to establish PRB, facilitate partnerships, and promote storytelling around culturally significant materials were instrumental in CDK's progress. His capacity to bridge internal operations with external networks demonstrated how strategic agency within organisations often hinges on individual actors who push for change.

Adam's contributions also illustrate how strategy emerges through practice. Rather than adhering to a fixed blueprint, Adam continually adjusted CDK's approach based on feedback from partners, clients, and regulatory bodies. This iterative process reflected his ability to combine routine practices with experimental initiatives, facilitating a more adaptable and resilient approach to circularity. His engagement in navigating logistical, infrastructural, and regulatory challenges underlines the significance of practitioners in the construction of strategy.

Overall, CDK's journey toward a circular business model was marked by incremental progress, ongoing negotiation, and persistent obstacles. While Adam's role as a champion provided direction and coherence to CDK's strategy, external challenges and infrastructural limitations continued to constrain scalability. Nonetheless, CDK's strategy-making process demonstrates how circularity is enacted and constructed through a complex interplay of tools, interactions, and practices.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From a Strategy as Practice and Process (SAPP) perspective, CDK's efforts to establish a circular business model can be understood as an ongoing process shaped by the actions, interactions, and tools employed by various practitioners within and outside the organisation. Rather than viewing strategy as a static plan, the SAPP approach reveals how strategy emerges through situated practices performed by key actors, particularly Adam, CDK's Sustainability Manager (Burgelman *et al.,* 2018, Jarzabkowski *et al.,* 2007; Whittington, 2006).

The incorporation of circularity into CDK's project bids from 2016 onwards illustrates how strategy was constructed through routinised practices. By embedding sustainability principles into project bids, CDK began to formalise circularity within its everyday business operations. However, this routinisation was largely experimental and lacked coherence, reflecting the gradual and adaptive nature of strategy-making within CDK (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Nicolini, 2012).

Adam's leadership in initiating R&D projects on material reuse by 2020 highlights the role of non-routine practices in strategy formation processes. These projects functioned as experimental sites where alternative approaches to circularity were tested and refined. From a SAPP perspective, these efforts demonstrate how practitioners engage in strategic experimentation over time to explore new possibilities and overcome existing limitations. Adam's ability to connect internal efforts with external research bodies also shows how strategic agency involves bridging knowledge domains (Burgelman, 1991; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl, 2007).

The establishment of PRB in 2022 marked a critical shift towards developing a formalised circular business model. The creation of PRB reflects how strategy is enacted through practices of institutionalisation, where experimental efforts are transformed into structured routines that can be scaled and commercialised (Golsorkhi *et al.,* 2010). By promoting PRB as both a platform for sourcing recycled materials and a marketplace for selling them, CDK sought to integrate circularity into a cohesive, market-facing strategy. However, from a business model perspective, the development of PRB also reveals significant limitations in CDK's capacity to challenge the existing supply chain structures. While CDK succeeded in creating a platform for recycling and reselling materials, the circular model largely remained internal to the company's own operations. Instead of reconfiguring external supply chains or fostering broader industry-level change, CDK primarily operated as both a client and provider of its own recycled materials (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). This self-contained approach restricted CDK's ability to scale its circular practices beyond its own organisational boundaries.

Despite efforts to institutionalise circularity through PRB, CDK's business model was characterised by a lack of engagement with external suppliers and clients beyond the retail partner. Rather than creating an open network where recycled materials could flow across various actors, CDK's model was primarily centered on circulating materials within its own projects. This reliance on internal systems illustrates how CDK's strategy was constrained by its inability to mobilise external supply chain partners or influence broader industry practices (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Partnerships were central to CDK's strategic efforts. The acquisition of 20% of PRB by a retail partner in 2022 expanded CDK's network, providing new distribution channels and enhancing visibility. From an SAPP perspective, these partnerships were not merely formal agreements, but ongoing negotiations shaped by interactions and adaptations. Adam's role in managing these relationships highlights the significance of building alliances as a way of advancing strategic goals. However, these alliances remained largely instrumental to CDK's own operations rather than facilitating a broader transformation of industry practices (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Burgelman *et al.,* 2018, Rouleau, 2005).

A key aspect of CDK's approach to promoting circularity involved the use of storytelling as a branding tool. Adam championed the idea of marketing materials with unique histories, such as oak planks from the Opera House, to appeal to customers who valued authenticity and cultural heritage. By framing recycled materials as products with stories, CDK enhanced its appeal to private consumers who associated sustainability with social capital and ethical behavior. This approach illustrates how strategy-making is not only about material practices but also about crafting narratives that resonate with stakeholders (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

From a SAPP perspective, the limitations of CDK's business model highlight how strategy-making is shaped by broader institutional and infrastructural constraints. Despite Adam's efforts to build partnerships and institutionalise circular practices, the company's circular model remained confined to its own operations. The lack of reliable documentation for recycled materials, regulatory fragmentation, and logistical difficulties with warehousing all contributed to CDK's inability to expand circularity beyond its own projects (Nicolini, 2012; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015).

Adam's role as a champion within CDK was central to the enactment of strategy. His engagement was visible in his efforts to establish PRB, facilitate partnerships, and promote storytelling as a strategic tool. However, Adam's efforts were not always supported by top management. While he worked to push circularity as a core strategic priority, he sometimes encountered indifference from leadership who remained focused on short-term profitability and conventional business practices. Adam's strategy-making involved not only working with top management but also working against them when necessary to advance his circular agenda. His ability to navigate these tensions, adapting strategies based on feedback from partners, customers, and regulators was a process of iterative learning (Mantere, 2005; Golsorkhi *et al.,* 2010).

However, from a business model standpoint, Adam's efforts primarily succeeded in consolidating circularity within CDK's own organisational framework rather than creating a broader network of material flows that could engage multiple actors across the industry. CDK's reliance on internal networks and partnerships with the retail partner suggests that its circular business model remained largely self-referential, without challenging or transforming external supply chains (Whittington, 2006; Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

Overall, CDK's journey toward a circular business model illustrates how strategy-making is constructed through a complex interplay of tools, interactions, and practices. Adam's role as a practitioner was critical to this process, but his efforts were continually shaped and constrained by broader institutional and infrastructural conditions. CDK's experience demonstrates how circular business models can be limited by their inability to extend beyond organisational boundaries and reconfigure supply chains to include broader networks of actors. While the SAP perspective highlights how CDK's strategy emerged through the situated actions of practitioners like Adam, the SAPP lens brings additional attention to the longer-term, emergent processes and structural shifts involved in institutionalising circularity. CDK's trajectory reflects the tensions between micro-level agency and broader organisational and industry-level constraints—illustrating how strategy is both enacted in the moment and shaped through unfolding processes, alignments, and path dependencies (Burgelman *et al.,* 2018; Whittington, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of CDK's circular business model development demonstrates how strategy-making is shaped by a complex interplay of practices, interactions, and constraints. From a Strategy as Practice and Process perspective, CDK's approach to circularity involved efforts to institutionalise new practices through PRB, build partnerships, and enhance legitimacy through storytelling over a longer process in time.

Adam played a central role in driving these initiatives, sometimes working alongside top management and at other times pushing forward despite their passive resistance or reluctance to fully engage with the circular agenda. His strategic efforts were characterised by experimentation, negotiation, and adaptation, illustrating how practitioners actively shape strategy through their actions. However, CDK's reliance on internal structures and partnerships limited the scalability of its circular business model. The company's strategy-making process was further constrained by logistical challenges, fragmented regulatory frameworks, and an inability to effectively engage external supply chains. Rather than transforming broader industry practices, CDK's circularity efforts remained largely internalised and self-referential. While Adam's contributions were essential in advancing circularity within CDK, the broader system of material flows and partnerships necessary for genuine transformation remained underdeveloped. To mobilise such practices across the industry, future efforts could involve building shared platforms for traceable material exchange, forming precompetitive alliances, or introducing policy mechanisms that reward open innovation and collaborative circular practices. Without such collective infrastructure, the scalability of circular business models risks remaining confined to individual firms.

Ultimately, CDK's experience illustrates how circularity remains elusive when confined to organisational boundaries rather than integrated into broader networks. Despite substantial efforts, circular building appears to be going in circles.

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