Elevating Project Excellence Through Lean Construction Maturity[1]

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Within today's highly competitive and complex construction sector, project organisations face mounting pressure to provide enhanced value with accelerated delivery schedules to achieve sustainable results, while keeping the costs within allocated budget. Traditional delivery methods, however, often fall short due to fragmented teams, rework, waste, and reactive decision-making. To overcome these systemic challenges, forward-looking organisations are turning to Lean Construction (LC), a philosophy and practice rooted in continuous improvement, value generation, and waste elimination.

The journey to realising the full benefits of LC requires structured progression, which is captured through the Lean Construction Maturity (LCM) model. The model offers a structured pathway to assess project organisation's current stage of Lean adoption, pinpoint improvement opportunities, and align operational strengths with the goal of organisational excellence. As organisations advance through successive Lean maturity stages, which is from sporadic use to fully embedded Lean practices, it is anticipated they develop not only technical proficiency but also cultural adaptability, stronger leadership, and improved stakeholder collaboration, all of which underpin successful project outcomes. The transition from maturity to excellence highlights LC's pivotal role in reshaping project organisational excellence. This context reflects an organisation's ability to reliably deliver high-performing projects while nurturing innovation, teamwork, and ongoing learning.

From Maturity to Excellence: The Role of LC in Transforming Project Organisations

Project organisational excellence refers to the capacity of a construction organisation to consistently deliver high-performance projects while fostering innovation, collaboration, and continuous learning. It is not achieved through isolated tools or temporary fixes, but through embedded systems, aligned values, and adaptive processes. In this context, LC becomes more than a productivity tool, it becomes a strategic capability.

The LCM model is structured into five ascending levels namely Initial, Emerging, Defined, Integrated, and Optimised. Each level represents a deeper integration of Lean principles into the organisation's culture, strategy, and operations. As organisations mature, they move from inconsistent and reactive practices to a high-performance culture built on flow efficiency, stakeholder alignment, and continuous improvement. This progression forms the basis of organisational excellence, characterised by strong leadership, holistic systems thinking, a focus on value generation, and the capacity to adapt.

[1] How to cite this work: YiiLiang, L. (2025). Elevating Project Excellence Through Lean Construction Maturity, Commentary, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XIV, Issue IX, September.

Level	Maturity Description	Key Characteristics
0 - Initial	Ad-hoc Lean application	Reactive problem-solving; tool use without strategy
1 - Emerging	Basic awareness and experimentation	Partial tool usage with inconsistent outcomes
2 - Defined	Structured Lean implementation	Documented processes with leadership support begins
3 - Integrated	Organisational Lean integration	Lean strategy aligned with business goals; process ownership defined
4 - Optimised	Continuous improvement culture	Organisation-wide Lean thinking; performance driven leadership

Table 1: LC Maturity Levels
(Source: Author's own work)

Level 0: Initial – Ad-hoc Lean Application

At the Initial stage, Lean methods are usually applied in a fragmented manner, typically as a short-term response to pressing issues and without any clear strategic alignment or strong organisational backing. Problem-solving remains largely in reactive mode, with techniques such as 5S or root-cause analysis employed in isolation. Although these efforts are undertaken with good intentions, they often produce uneven results and fail to establish process stability required for sustained improvement.

With respect to organisational excellence, this stage highlights a disconnect between the aspirations of leadership and the effectiveness of day-to-day operations. Project teams often observed operating in silos, knowledge is generally not systematically captured, and there is minimal cross-project learning. Excellence at this stage is hindered by inconsistency, limited accountability, and lack of shared goals.

Level 1: Emerging – Basic Awareness and Experimentation

At the Emerging stage, organisations begin to experiment with Lean methods. Pilot projects are initiated, and some training is provided. However, Lean tools are selectively used, and application varies significantly between departments or projects. Leadership may support Lean in principle, but systems for standardisation and measurement are not yet in place.

This stage marks the beginning of cultural shift. While excellence remains elusive, a growing awareness of the need for structured improvement sets the foundation for future

capability. Early adopters within the organisation begin to emerge as Lean champions, initiating small pockets of excellence and experimentation.

Level 2: Defined – Structured Lean Implementation

At the Defined level, LC practices are no longer isolated. Organisations establish documented processes, standard operating procedures, and dedicated roles to lead Lean initiatives. Leadership support becomes more visible, and there is alignment between Lean implementation and project performance goals.

As a result, organisation starts to exhibit project excellence by achieving greater consistency in results, minimising rework, and improving communication channels. Teams are equipped to address challenges through systematic problem-solving approaches, supported by a feedback mechanism that links planning with execution. The practice of recording and disseminating lessons learned further strengthens process stability.

Excellence at this level is achieved through structured governance, clear accountability, and greater transparency. Project controls are improved, and success is no longer accidental but increasingly predictable.

Level 3: Integrated – Organisational Lean Integration

The Integrated level marks a significant transformation. Lean thinking is embedded across functions and hierarchical levels. Lean strategies are aligned with business goals, and process ownership is distributed throughout the organisation. Project planning, design, procurement, and construction all operate within a unified Lean framework.

Organisational excellence is now realised at scale. Stakeholders are actively engaged, information flows freely across functions, and teams operate with shared purpose. Performance measures emphasise the creation of value rather than focusing solely on cost and schedule. Risks are also addressed proactively through early-stage collaboration, leading to greater reliability in project delivery.

This maturity level supports a performance culture where leadership is not only supportive but actively engaged in modelling Lean behaviours. Strategic decisions are informed by data and frontline feedback, ensuring both alignment and adaptability.

Level 4: Optimised – Continuous Improvement Culture

The Optimised level represents the pinnacle of LC maturity and project organisational excellence. Lean is no longer a programme, it is a mindset embedded across the enterprise. Every team member contributes to improvement, and leadership consistently fosters innovation and learning. Metrics focus on long-term value, customer satisfaction, and team capability.

At this level, excellence is embedded within the organisation and maintained over time. Agility allows the organisation to adjust swiftly to evolving market needs, technological advancements, and regulatory changes.

The organisation is now expected to operate as a learning entity, where best practices are consistently refined and disseminated across projects, departments, and supply networks. This culture of excellence is strengthened through effective leadership, stakeholder confidence, and an unwavering commitment to continuous improvement. Lean principles become ingrained in the organisational fabric, driving superior outcomes, strong employee engagement, and distinct competitive advantage.

Strategic Implications: Advancing Lean to Drive Excellence

Advancing through the stages of LC maturity represents more than incremental operational gains; it is a strategic shift that enables the project organisation to realise its full potential. Each maturity stage supports higher-value outcomes by strengthening the integration of people, processes, and systems.

- Leadership excellence develops as advancing maturity requires vision, accountability, and the ability to enable cross-functional collaboration.
- Process excellence is realised through ongoing refinement of workflows, systematic waste reduction, and minimisation of variability.
- People's excellence emerges as employees are empowered, aligned around shared objectives, and engaged in collaborative problem-solving.
- Innovation and learning excellence are achieved through deliberate experimentation, structured knowledge exchange, and adaptability to change.

Ultimately, LC maturity equips organisations with dynamic capabilities to succeed in an unpredictable industry. It fosters both the discipline necessary for reliable project delivery and the flexibility required for ongoing innovation. When aligned with wider organisational strategy, LC maturity evolves into a foundation for excellence, resilience, and long-term competitive advantage.

Conclusion

Lean Construction Maturity extends beyond tracking the degree of Lean adoption; it functions as a strategic driver of organisational excellence in project delivery. As organisations advance along the maturity continuum, they achieve not only process improvements but also deeper transformations in organisational culture, leadership practices, and value creation systems.

Through this progression, project organisations position themselves to thrive in an environment where project excellence has become a necessity rather than a choice. By embedding Lean principles into their operational core and aligning them with a wider vision

of excellence, organisations are able to deliver superior project outcomes, cultivate more capable teams, and establish a reputation for reliability, innovation, and meaningful contribution to the built environment.

Note: This article builds upon insights originally shared by the author in a Commentary previously published in the PM World Journal: YiiLiang, L. (2025). From Factory Floors to Construction Sites: The Evolution of Lean Construction Through Six Decades, PM World Journal, Vol. XIV, Issue VII, July. Available online at https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/pmwj154-Jul2025-Yiiliang-From-Factory-Floors-to-Construction-Sites.pdf.

About the Author

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Mr. LIM YIILIANG hails from the oil-rich state of Sarawak, Malaysia, and brings over 27 years of experience across the Oil & Gas and Construction sector. A certified Project Management Professional (PMP) by Project Management Institute (PMI) USA, he has worked in multiple countries, including Brunei, Germany, Malaysia, Oman, Singapore, UAE and the UK, with leading multinational energy companies such as Shell, Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR), Brunei LNG, ORPIC, OQ, and currently, Petroleum Sarawak (PETROS) as Project Delivery Manager.

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