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Whose data is it?

A field-first answer for the AI era.

By Brett Grendahl, founder of Built Data

This is a question that comes up often in my conversations about construction, technology, and Built Data's method and patented tool for taking unstructured field data and making sense of it all.

I grew up in a commercial MEP family. I was an HVAC journeyman and pipefitter and did building controls. As my father used to tell me, "The mechanical contractor occupies a unique place in the trades. We are there when they begin to move dirt and put in a foundation, we are there during the entire construction project, and we continue to be there after the occupants move in, after the Certificate of Occupancy is given, as the building owner and tenants learn the operation of their building's systems: the HVAC, the plumbing, the electrical, the temperature controls. The mechanical contractor lives the life cycle of the building."

So that is my perspective on construction: a holistic one.

> **“The mechanical contractor lives the life cycle of the building.”**

Now, back to the question: "Whose data is it?" Here is a thought experiment to illustrate the many facets of this question.

Let's begin with the owner. The owner has a dream and the capital to build a building. They hire an architect to design it. Engineers are brought in to expand on that design and make it functional. A general contractor or construction manager is hired to build it. Trade contractors are assembled to take these designs into physical reality.

The trade contractors employ skilled craft labor to use their art, their means and methods, to turn the digital bits of designs into the atoms of our physical reality.

The trade contractors install equipment specified by the architect or engineer. They purchase this equipment from wholesalers, generally on credit terms. That equipment is installed by the trade contractors and their skilled craft workers while the contractor is floating the capital. Given typical payment terms in the industry, the equipment is generally installed before the trade contractor is paid, and before the equipment manufacturer is paid.

So when that equipment is installed, and that only happens with the effort of the skilled craft worker using the knowledge of their craft, it leads to a question: "Whose data is it?"

This question exposes some very outdated thinking. Many who pose it to me are entrenched in a "mine versus yours" mindset.

Given the 2025 commercial viability at scale of our new cognitive utility, AI, that hoarding mindset belongs to the past. We are at the very beginning of AI's viability at scale, and the road ahead will be bumpy. But determining "Whose data is it?" is a fundamental and strategic question for every AEC actor.

It is also why I led a completely new architecture of the Built Data platform and our entire legal framework for the data. Its core tenets deal with ownership and access, built to match the highly complex business relationships that make up a construction project.

So, ask yourself: "Whose data is it?" We answered that before we wrote the code, from lived experience, designed for AI before it became a household name.

THE BUILT DATA ANSWER

Many hands. One record. Clear ownership.



Orange: the trades and craft workers who turn designs into the building, often while floating the capital.

01 **The organization that pays owns its data.**
Each company on a project owns what its own people create. A seat in the project hierarchy does not hand over someone else's record.

02 **The people who do the work get credit, permanently.**
Every record carries who did the work. The craft worker's name stays on it.

03 **Sharing is by agreement, never by default.**
Companies share through agreements between them, backed by an audit trail and chain of custody that hold up in a dispute.

These are the principles behind the Built Data legal framework, summarized in plain words. They are not legal terms or legal advice.

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