

Formal Description of a Generic Multi-Model

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Abstract—Multi-Models address issues of nD modeling problems in construction information processes. They provide a temporary and loose coupling by aggregating instances of possibly orthogonal domain models and expressing explicit relations between their elements. To provide a base for prototypical and specific multi-model support as well as the development of generic multi-model based tools, the authors propose a data schema for a generic multi-model, consisting of an ID-based link model and two elementary model representations. Specifications of optional meta-data provide structural and semantic description of the data.

Index Terms—Multi-Model, Linking, Data models, Document handling, Collaborative work, Civil engineering, Information management

I. INTRODUCTION

Construction information processes are affected by the character of the underlying construction and management processes. Not only the building as the final product itself but also the construction site, its environment and the composition of the stakeholders - including owners, planning team, construction companies, users, creditors or building authorities - are absolutely unique. While it is not possible to rely on product prototypes nor mass production-like optimization, planning and construction processes are traditionally based and driven by models - e.g. drawings and plans - which are typically represented by computer information models nowadays - e.g. in computer aided design (CAD), finite element method (FEM) or scheduling software. Due to the inherent complexity of the building product and process as well to its corresponding high number of orthogonal domains, many different information models are used in present projects. Hence this results in the occurrence of so called nD modeling problems in construction information processes [1].

As they address some issues of nD modeling, multi-models are one promising approach to improve interoperability in construction information processes [2], [3], [4], [5]. They aggregate model instances of unmodified existing data schemes of possibly orthogonal domains and allow explicit relations between the instances by linking their elements. In the same way they aim at achieving instant adoption for prevalent and legacy construction software applications. While current research is directed towards providing valuable services on multi-models, e.g. multi-faceted information retrieval [6] or automated linking,

further investigation and development suffer from lack of an appropriate formal definition of the multi-model itself. Therefore the authors developed a data schema for a generic multi-model as well as definitions of related terms.

II. RELATED WORK

Distributed building information models were already subject of research in the past.

WILLENBACHER proposes a link-based building modeling approach where the entire information is split into partial models and held together by links between them [7]. It aims at handling structural changes of the partial models as well as seamless and frequent data exchange between them. Therefore the main focus is on dynamic and semi-automatic creation and management of mappings what is realized by a hybrid model approach with a single central component for this task [8]. YE presents a method for accessing construction project management data through a centralized data-model by the use of Data Warehousing and sophisticated visualization technologies [9]. WENDER describes an information seeking environment which uses identifiers which are linked to real world object representations in particular discipline specific documents [10]. Those identifiers allow a central management and information access by an additional navigation layer.

However there is a gap at the technical specification of the links - especially it is not known how a decentralized and neutral persistence and data exchange of linked domain models could be achieved. As the central approach assumes an ideally complete integration of the underlying documents, questions arise on (1) how to provide a general but preferably complete identification and linking of all real world objects, (2) how to handle data with different levels of granularity and (3) whether it is possible to provide detailed information for different tasks basing upon one fixed link configuration.

TULKE proposes a method for integrating scheduling into planning based on building models [11]. Here a general linking language is specified whose main focus is on spatial querying and object splitting to identify the elements to be linked. In that approach data is exchanged via the building product model *Industry Foundation Classes* (IFC) ¹ only, where tasks, building elements and the specified links between them already have modeled data types. That way

¹<http://www.buildingsmart.com/>

the linking component of the approach is not a negotiable solution for the multi-model exchange problem.

The term *multi-model* already occurs in construction informatics and computer science. In [12], [13], [14] it is used for models of structural analysis systems in the context of system identification via measured data. DENTON et al. describe a general platform for multi-modeling [15]. Although their scope is on Domain Specific Languages and data exchange between the models, the term is used in a similar manner to the authors' definition which is provided in section IV.

III. GENERAL MULTI-MODEL CONTEXT

A. Field of Application

To provide deduction of requirements, the multi-model's application context is analyzed in the following.

Nontrivial construction projects usually involve many different domain experts like architects, structural engineers, bidding experts or controllers. All of them use professional software applications with distinct data models. While this high specialization is required to manage the complexity of the building product and construction process, it is also essential to combine data of such different models to query for multi-domain information. Today combination is made manually or by software like RIB iTWO², an application to support planning, cost estimation and others. Both kinds of combination processes produce implicit multi-model information. The authors suppose to expose them to provide a neutral data exchange for further processing by the explicit use of an underlying generic data model. Moreover that model can be used by common services for creating and using multi-model data at all.

Multi-models in general are intended to support preferable any type of building information model of all life-cycle phases - including planning, production and operation. They should be domain-unaware of the contained information and provide a way to express linked data of the underlying domain models. Adoption should only be limited by technical characteristics of a domain model, which will be discussed in section IV. From an economic point of view, standardized data models are seen as most eligible - they would cover the bigger part of current data exchange amount. Examples of such relevant models are IFC and the German specifications model *Gemeinsamer Ausschuss Elektronik im Bauwesen* (GAEB)³.

The generic multi-model approach aims at exchanging linked domain models relevant to a particular task of the entire information process. Producing those links as described formerly is seen as a complex and expensive work, hence the results represent high domain knowledge and should be accessible for further information processes. So the approach is not intended to give a single central

access to a construction project's complete information resources. Therefore it is not necessary to exchange data between different domain models, avoiding the need for implementers to develop preferable complete mappings on schema level. Rather than that, linking is intended to work on instance level, expressing the user's ambition to describe a relation between *some* real world objects which are represented by different data models. As such relations have a task-specific semantic and allow a different interpretation without further context information, the sender's original intention must be recognizable by a multi-model receiver to facilitate correct further processing. Hence the concept is seen as a temporary and loose coupling of elementary models. Therefore the approach also does not provide change management. Like the underlying domain models, the multi-model is only capable of representing one static information state.

B. Challenges due to Project Progress

In the context of the generic multi-model approach, a set of basic role definitions is required initially: A person who develops a specification for a multi-model scenario by use of the proposed generic multi-model system or by deriving from that is called *specification developer*. A person who uses an implementation of such a specification for the purpose of working with instances of a corresponding multi-model is called *user*.

While working on different research and development projects, the authors identified 2 general stages when introducing multi-models:

(1) In the early project phases there is a minor knowledge of the relevant elementary models, their semantic and the information benefit of their linked data. Instead of that there is a need to quickly produce prototypes of multi-model instances and to experiment with the gained linked information. Therefore there has to be a generic multi-model system, which has to work completely out of the box without need for further programming or configuration. As a drawback of this generality, the system would most likely not be able to reflect any semantic of the project's domain. So the system has to have the additional ability to store - but not necessarily to structurally represent - the probably semantic orthogonal domain data.

(2) Experiences made during the first stage - especially the recognition of the core semantic aspects - lead to a demand for individual specification. Examples are modeling the participating elementary models of a self-contained multi-model scenario as explicit data types, choosing a compressed and ciphered serialization or adding a sophisticated meta-data model for editor and change history information. Thus a generic multi-model system must be open-ended. The authors suggest to distinguish between extension, where specification developers extend the given generic schema and adaption, where specification developers create their own independent multi-model schema and produce converters to the generic multi-model

²<http://www.rib-software.com/itwo>

³<http://www.gaeb.de/>

schema, e.g. for compatibility to generic based tools. While extension is seen as a quick way for individualization of the multi-model system, adaption offers full flexibility to specification developers but obligate them to create additional converters, which may be a voluminous work.

C. Requirements

The multi-model system to define must satisfy the following requirements in order to address the former described challenges:

- 1) There must be a schema of a multi-model which is *generic* by the meaning of *domain unaware*.
- 2) The schema must be *concrete* by the meaning of allowing the *ad hoc creation* of valid multi-model instances.
- 3) The schema must be able to *store* (possibly semantic orthogonal) *domain models*.
- 4) The stored domain models must *not be modified*.
- 5) References between elements of different domain models must be *persistable* and *restorable*.
- 6) Those references are binary up to n-ary.
- 7) The schema must be *extensible* and *adaptable* (allow to create converters).
- 8) There must be a *standard implementation* which supports instantiation and manipulation of conform multi-model instances.
- 9) There must be a *standard serialization format* for multi-model instances.

IV. THE GENERIC MULTI-MODEL

A. Approach

Prior a further detailed discussion of the authors' approach, relevant terms have to be defined. The following definitions apply in the former described scope of the multi-model context:

Definition (Elementary Model, EM): *An Elementary Model is an exchangeable instance of a data model with a delimited domain and an appointed semantic.*

That means an Elementary Model does not require a corresponding explicit schema - e.g. XML-documents without XSD - but the semantic of the data must be known.

Definition (Link Model): *A Link Model is a serializable instance of a data model with a schema that stores references between elements of different Elementary Models.*

Definition (Multi-Model): *A Multi-Model is a serializable composite of a set of Elementary Models \mathcal{E} and a possibly empty set of Link Models having elements of \mathcal{E} as subject.*

Due to the general acceptance in software development as well as to the existence of a comprehensive tool support, the authors decided to create the multi-model schema under consideration as an object oriented model. Therefore requirement 7 is native met, because the system is extensible (e.g. by sub-classing) as well as formally adaptable due to the existence of a schema at which a converter from an

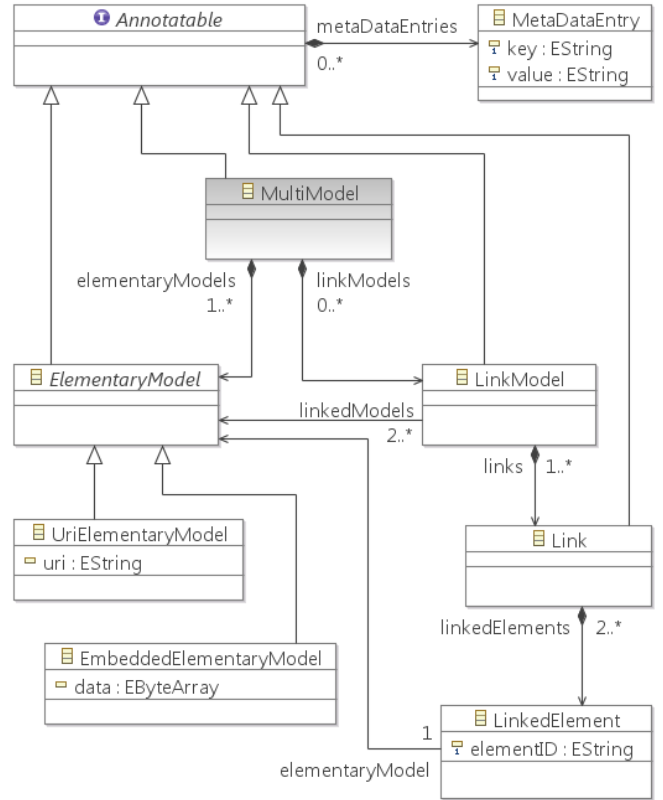


Figure 1. Ecore class diagram of the generic multi-model. Abstract types are written *italic*, interfaces are marked with an I-symbol.

individual multi-model system may work for a complete mapping.

B. Multi-Model Schema

The model was defined by the use of the Ecore meta-model provided by the Eclipse Modeling Framework (EMF) [16]. Using that tool, a standard Java implementation as well as a corresponding XML serialization were generated directly out of the model - addressing requirements 8 and 9. The resulting class diagram is shown in Fig. 1. The hereby introduced classes describe the realm of linked EMs regardless of the inherent domain of an EM instance (requirement 1). In fulfillment of requirement 2, concrete classes are provided for the creation of multi-models without need for sub-classing - as well as a meta-data mechanism that allows most of the objects to carry yet unspecified data by key-value-pairs.

Requirement 3 is addressed by two subclasses of ElementaryModel. EmbeddedElementaryModel allows embedding of the original domain model as a ByteArray into the multi-model. As this amount of data can be large - e.g. several 100 MByte are not unusual for IFC files - the class UriElementaryModel enables referencing the model's physical location by an URI instead.

Requirements 4 and 5 are met by the explicit externalization of references between EMs. As most of the existing

construction information models have identifiers for their elements, the authors chose an ID-based linking. That way links can be held outside of the domain models. Here the class `LinkModel` represents the idea of task-specific linking - each instance stands for a distinct combination of some of the EMs. Each contained link is expressed by an instance of class `Link` where the n-arity of requirement 6 as well as the ability to have a higher cardinality are implemented by a collection of contained `LinkedElements`. Each instance of that class represents one EM-element by using its ID in the attribute `elementID`.

For further convenience the class `LinkModel` provides a reference to `ElementaryModel` having all the EMs which are subjects of the contained Links. Therefore an user or application does not have to inspect all `LinkedElement` instances to discover whether a `LinkModel` is relevant to it.

C. Constraints

Additionally to the Ecore-model of the generic multi-model there are constraints which cannot be expressed by the graphical notation. All constraints described in the following apply for the same `MultiModel`-object:

$mm \in MM \mid MM$ are the instances of class `MultiModel`

1) All referenced `ElementaryModels` of a `LinkModel` must be unique:

$lm \in mm.linkModels$

$em_1, em_2 \in lm.linkedModels$

$\forall em_1, em_2 : em_1 \neq em_2$

2) All referenced `ElementaryModels` of a `LinkModel` must be contained by the `MultiModel`:

$\forall em_1 : em_1 \in mm.elementaryModels$

3) The referenced elements of the `ElementaryModels` of all `LinkedElements` of a `Link` must be unique:

$l \in lm.links$

$le_1, le_2 \in l.linkedElements$

$\forall le_1, le_2 : le_1.elementaryModel \neq le_2.elementaryModel \vee le_1.elementID \neq le_2.elementID$

4) The referenced `ElementaryModel` of a `LinkedElement` must be referenced by the containing `LinkModel` too:

$\forall le_1 : le_1.elementaryModel \in lm.linkedModels$

5) The keys of all `MetaDataEntries` of an `Annotatable` must be unique:

$a \in A \mid A$ are the instances of class `Annotatable`

$mde_1, mde_2 \in a.metaDataEntries$

$\forall mde_1, mde_2 : mde_1.key \neq mde_2.key$

D. Methods for Identifying Elements without ID

As the authors' approach strongly relies on the existence of IDs for the EM elements, fallback strategies are necessary in case they are absent. This may happen e.g. due to a faulty model serialization or by a schema lacking ID-attributes for some or all elements at all. Although it violates requirement 4, a multi-model implementation could try to fix missing IDs in an EM. It could (1) generate and set IDs according to the EM's directive. Then the implementation should mark the EM with the `MetaData`-key `cib.model.generatedID` and its mandatory value `TRUE`. (2) In case no ID-attributes are

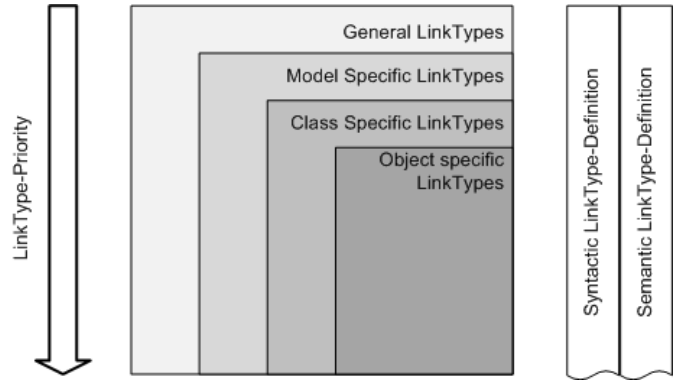


Figure 2. Link Type Hierarchy

intended, they could be added if this is supported by the serialization format, e.g. XML or JSON. Implementations should choose a unique but representative attribute name and propagate it as value for the EM's `MetaData`-key: `cib.model.artificialIDAttribute`.

Non-manipulative methods could (3) use primary keys of models stored in relational databases as native ID-substitute. The primary key is used as value for the attribute `elementID`; the `MetaData`-keys `cib.linkedElement.artificialID.rdb.pk.{db | schema | table | column}` may be used to specify the corresponding element location. The following methods may not provide unique results, are domain specific and rely on particular conventions between sender and receiver. Therefore appropriate `MetaData` has to be defined by a specification developer. IDs could be represented by (4) feature paths (e.g. `Root->Building->Roof` for a building element), (5) collection indices (e.g. `Root->Building(1)->Wall(17)`) or (6) by a query (e.g. `building.name='garage' && wall.height > 3.5`).

E. Operational Link Type Specifications

The specifications of link model and links introduced in the previous sections created the necessary prerequisite for connecting elements of EMs with each other. But initially no general statement could be derived as to the meaning of these connections. So an interpretation of the relations between various objects forming the basis for validity tests and inference technologies is difficult to achieve. In this paragraph with the definition of link types a generalized realization concept is formulated to add structural as well as semantic information with the aim of improving coherence of models. Here, instead of a prescriptive approach a purely descriptive one is preferred to preserve the generic character of the multi model. Thus, the following specification of link types is merely to be understood as optional and not as obligatory, so that the user is not restricted when defining links.

The core structure of the link type concept builds a top down design defining link types at varying degrees of detail

and abstraction. In this concept four abstraction layers for link type definition can be distinguished (see Fig. 2):

- General link types,
- Model specific link types,
- Class specific link types and
- Object specific link types.

General link types form the highest level of abstraction. They offer the user the opportunity to define link types model-, class- and object-independent. On lower layers new link types can be added or link types with a higher degree of abstraction can be specialized using layer specific entities (model type, model instance, class, object). To avoid ambiguity and inconsistency in the meaning of link types by specializing them on lower layers, priorities can be established corresponding to reverse order of degree of abstraction. This priority concept follows the concept of inheritance and method overriding known from object oriented programming languages.

Link type definitions can be formulated on each abstraction layer with a unique syntax and semantics. The focus of this paper is on the formal description of structure which is supplemented with an intuitive and informal semantics. For describing the structure of link types formal and in a general manner the Backus-Naur Form (BNF) is preferred.

At first, to achieve such a general description of structure mathematical properties of relations, which are relevant for the use of a multi-model in civil engineering, are identified and analyzed with regard to realization in BNF:

- 1) Arity of relations: For link type definition n-ary relations are reduced - without losing any information - to binary representation: $R(x, y, z) \rightarrow R(R(x, y), z)$ or $R(x, R(y, z))$ or $R(R(x, z), y)$
- 2) Direction of relations: The direction of relations is encoded via the order of the involved entities.
- 3) Cardinality: Cardinality is encoded as prefixes, which are prepended to all entities.
- 4) Identifier for link types: Identifier are Strings and part of the relation properties. They are obligatory.
- 5) Symmetry, transitivity: Symmetry and transitivity are also relation properties. They are added at the end.

Next to the formalization of mathematical properties the possibility is given to specify inherence between link types by encoding the parent link types as relation properties.

This results in the following BNF representation:

```
synLinkTypeDef ::= prop(card(Entity), card(Entity)) |
  prop(card(LinkType), card(LinkType)) |
  prop(card(Entity), prop(card(LinkType), card(LinkType))) |
  prop(prop(card(LinkType), card(LinkType)), card(Entity))
card ::= 0 | (natural numbers) | *
prop ::= identifier [{identifier}, mathProp] |
mathProp ::= symmetric | transitive
Entity ::= identifier |
  modelType[className[objectName]] |
  modelName[className[objectName]]
modelType ::= (string corresponding to a model type)
modelName ::= (string corresponding to a model name)
className ::= (string corresponding to a class name)
```

```
objectName ::= (string corresponding to an object name)
identifier ::= (string starting with a letter)
```

The description of link types is realized by the two strings key and value of the class MetadataEntry. With the key definition `cib.link.type` the link type specification in BNF can take place. From the technical point of view general link types can be used to annotate a MultiModel instance, model and class specific link types can be applied on LinkModel instances and object specific link types can be specified for Link instances.

F. Discussion

The presented data schema is only one of many potential solutions to the given problem. However a development of an optimized schema according to further formal quality criteria is out of the scope of this work. The fulfillment of the given requirements have been validated informally by usage of the prototype implementation which is described in the following section.

V. APPLICATION AND ADOPTION EXAMPLES

A. M2A2

The prototypical implementation of the proposed data schema and its constraints was done within the Multi-Model Assembly and Analyzing Platform (M2A2) at the Institute of Construction Informatics at the Dresden University of Technology. This application is a further development of the framework described in [2] and intended to create and inspect instances of the generic multi-model. It provides a graphical user interface for editing the elements of a multi-model. It is currently used in the HESMOS-project⁴ for investigations of multi-model arrangements in the domain of energy efficiency and building automation systems. Fig. 3 shows a screen shot of the application.

B. Mefisto-Platform and Container

Multi-models are widely used in the MEFISTO-project⁵. A lean central registry is used to find multi-models with specific properties of granularity (e.g. the level of detail of a building model's geometry), the completeness of the linking process or the purpose of linked elements (e.g. for bidding). Therefore particular Metadata specifications are under development, describing common qualities of the 7 defined EM-types. Multi-models are exchanged by a special Mefisto-container which is a compressed archive of several data files and folders. Adapters bridge the gap to the here presented generic approach and its M2A2 implementation. As only binary and single-valued relations are structurally possible there, arity and cardinality of relations have to be defined by additional Metadata.

⁴<http://hesmos.eu/>

⁵<http://www.mefisto-bau.de/>

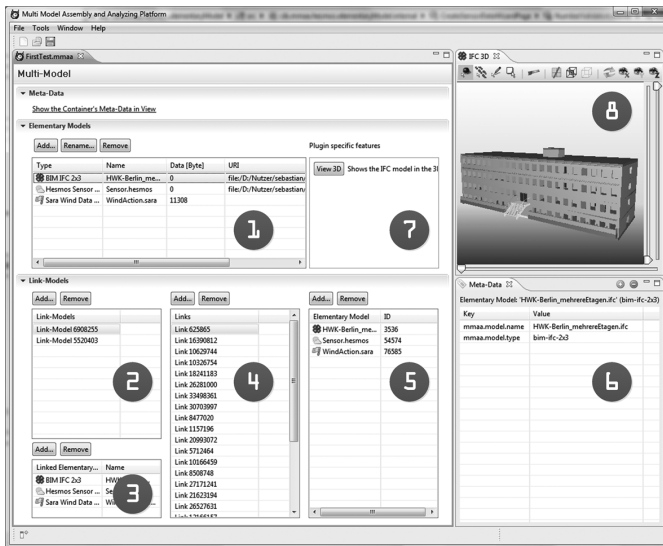


Figure 3. Screen shot of the M2A2 application showing the representation of a multi-model's elements: all ElementaryModels (1) and all LinkModels (2), all referenced linkedModels (3) and all Links (4) of the selected LinkModel and all LinkedElements (5) of the selected Link. All MetaDataEntries of a selected Annotatable are shown in view 6. Extensions may place user interface elements specific to the type of the selected EM in area 7, e.g. showing an IFC model in a 3D-viewer (8).

VI. SUMMARY AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The proposed schema for multi-models enables links between domain models to be made explicit, exposed and neutrally exchanged beside the models. Optional predefined meta-data support further structural and semantic description to avoid wrong interpretation as far as possible. The system is generic and extensible but also ready for use out of the box. This allows the future creation of multi-model tools working on a common base, including (semi-) automated linking, multi-model filters and visualizations.

As the focus of this approach is on data exchange, the responsibility for multi-model interpretation and domain semantics is deferred to specification developers and implementing applications. Further research is necessary to provide semantic safe model linking and to minimize the amount of manual specification.

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