



Essay: Reflecting the Impact and Legacy of Peter Morris

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Abstract

This essay considers the role Peter Morris's had in shaping both the thinking and the direction of the research and writing that formed part of the career of Professor Donald Lessard that was focused on projects and their management. The essay notes how Peter Morris's early insight in the way that projects were shaped and evolved during delivery challenged the orthodoxy of project management being primarily concerned with 'execution' of the project as a technocentric management challenge. This insight, and others, has influenced and directed the work of not just this author but many others. The essay concludes with the legacy that Peter Morris has left us – one that we should nurture and progress.

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The Management of Projects was a third act in my academic career. Although I had done feasibility studies and risk-sharing designs for extractive projects in the 1970s and had participated in the design and advocacy of a mega sea-land transport and manufacturing zone project in the 1980s, my serious engagement with MOP began in 1998 when Roger Miller invited me to join the IMEC study, an ambitious case-based study of large-scale infrastructure projects modeled on the MIT *Future of the Automobile* study. This project resulted in our 2001 book, *Strategic Management of Large Engineering Projects*, and gave me entre to the project arena. I subsequently received serious tuition in MOP as director of the MIT-BP Projects Academy from 2002 to 2007, which afforded me the opportunity to work with hundreds of real-life project managers and deep dive into 20+ major projects.

Peter's work was a major inspiration for Roger's vision, and Morris and Hough (1988) was my first reading assignment from Roger. Roger's vision was like the one Peter laid out in *Anatomy of Major Projects* – projects are dynamic, iterative processes that must be viewed in context, over the full life cycle, and based on intensive case studies. These perspectives contrasted with the then-current Taylorist conception (Taylor, 2003, 1911) of project management as execution, where the thinking had been done in project design and the job of the project manager was to break the work down in bite-sized pieces and deliver them on cost and schedule. In our case studies we saw that that projects were shaped rather than selected and that they remained dynamic through much or all their lives, largely mirroring Peter's insights. For us, project management was the episodic

shaping of the project followed by an often-iterative execution of the project. Further, we saw project dynamism – often referred to as scope creep – as a feature rather than a bug. Finally, we noted that projects (our focus was on large-scale infrastructure projects) occur in institutional context but, due to their scale and nature, they often shape the context as well.

Peter had a major influence on my subsequent work as well, but only in writing this essay did I appreciate how strong his influence was. He spoke to the need for project managers to understand the strategic context of the project and to interact with and influence the relevant public or private leaders, a central focus of the Projects Academy. Further, his focus on interdependencies in projects shaped my thinking and that of my student Vivek Sakhrani on how to model complexity through the build-up of structure, process, and behavior (Lessard, Sakhrani, and Miller, 2014).

I also came to understand that the reflexive process between projects and their context takes place at the organizational as well as institutional levels -- projects are shaped by the organization of the executing firm or coalition, but the organization in turn is shaped by its projects. As described by Morgan, Levitt, and Malek (2008), business organizations typically develop new capabilities through projects, and the firm can be seen as a punctuated series of projects and continuous improvement episodes. I subsequently incorporated this insight into my work on corporate strategy and MNC capabilities (Lessard 2022).



As a latecomer to the field and to Peter's work, I will not try to provide another review of his contributions. Rather, I will try to imagine what Peter would be saying now. First and foremost, I believe Peter would advocate the delivery of multiple types of values (including costs) to multiple constituencies, not just the delivery of a single (typically financial / economic) value and certainly not only delivering on time and on budget. These values would include private economic value, public economic and social value (perhaps extended to include both public goods and common goods), and project externalities including the project's contribution to climate change and community displacement. I also believe Peter would advocate exploring the "trade space" among different types of values as part of the front end and urge project managers to be sure that they make efficient choices that are not dominated by others in the multiple dimensions of value.

Further, I think that Peter would tell us to focus on the values frontier in managing change, rather than limiting consideration to the cost and schedule impacts of the change as is typically the practice. And he would emphasize the dynamic nature of projects, the knowledge that even under the best of circumstances projects are often reshaped and that the management of change (MOC) process should include ways to simulate likely trajectories as well as processes to determine whether and how to modify the project design in the face of changes in circumstances.

Peter would emphasize the impact of projects on climate change and other dimensions of sustainability, and I expect he would exhort

project managers to push out the frontier and find a sweet spot between financial value and external impacts. And I expect that in analyzing the success or failure of projects, he would include organizational and institutional factors and not just focus on the qualities of the leaders.

Finally, I expect that Peter would have an interesting take on the ongoing debate over the desirability of megaprojects. He would agree that small projects are easier, and if they can deliver an efficient frontier of values, they dominate megaprojects. On other hand, he would understand that the scope of a project is often dictated by the institutional context, especially if one of its goals is to reshape that context. Boston's Big Dig, for example, would have been much easier (and less prone to cost creep) if it had been confined to Boston and Cambridge rather than encompassing a much greater number of cities, towns, and authorities. In fact, bringing each jurisdiction on board was one of the major reasons why the project grew in scope and cost. (See Gil and Fu (2022) for a fuller development of this concept). However, to transform mobility in Boston, the project had to be at least metropolitan in scale, and possibly even bigger. The failure is often not that the project is "too mega", but that it is not the right mega to match the institutional order. I also expect that he would recognize that the best of both worlds is likely to be a mega program made up of many more micro projects that scale within an overall coherent and coordinated design or policy context. Peter also would argue that successfully changing energy, transport, or urban systems at scale will require much more integrative thinking on role



of projects, project organization, and institutions.

It was my pleasure to join Peter on the Grand Challenges panel at EPOS where he passionately advocated that climate should be our central focus. I wish he was still at the table as we continue to observe, debate, and shape the management of projects with an eye to transforming large scale systems for greater sustainability.

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