

The Management of Projects: A tribute to Professor Peter Morris

By Leo Garbutt

MSc Strategic Management of Projects is built upon the ideas of Professor Peter Morris, a leading theorist in the management of projects. He has published over 130 papers, written several books and worked on projects across the world. He has held executive appointments in major project management organisations and received accolades for his research and achievements. In 2002, he set up The Bartlett School of Construction and Project Management at University College London (UCL) and was its Director until 2012. This account of his career reviews his thinking and how it has shaped the development of the School.

Intellectual background

Professor Morris grew up near Liverpool in a family that owned a painting and plumbing business. As a teenager, he believed he had a duty to work for the family firm, so he studied Maths, Physics and Chemistry at A Level. Without this upbringing, he believes he would have concentrated on History and English. “There are two sides to me,” he explains, “the arts and the sciences.” He notes his intellectual interest in seeing the world from

those two different perspectives.

Morris is driven by a hunger for knowledge and intellectual understanding. However, balancing practical and theoretical work has been a priority, especially ensuring that theoretical work is valuable to practitioners. As Andrew Edkins, Professor of the Management of Complex Projects at the School and close friend, attests: “The name of the School jazz band is ‘So Wot?’ and that is all Peter Morris’s fault. He will let you witter on, me in particular, and then he’ll just cut to the chase: ‘That’s all very interesting Andrew, but what is the point? So what?’ I sit there and think, ‘damn, he’s got me again’.”

Morris believes that universities should act as centres of excellence of intellectual knowledge and criticism. He was impressed by F.R. Leavis, the critic who founded English Literature as a field of academic study at Cambridge during the 1930s to 60s. Leavis saw the university as the centre of intellectual standards. “I very much warmed to this idea and I see this as one of the things the School

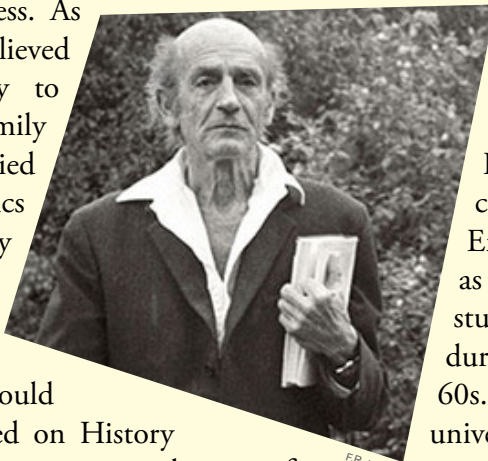


stands for in its study of projects and their management,” Morris says.

Being intellectually rigorous and critical should strengthen one’s self-confidence, Morris believes. He remembers delivering a lecture explaining his work advising a Brazilian company building a steel mill in the late 1970s. He was challenged by a member of the audience as to why he was advising on such a large project at a relatively early stage in his career. He explained that there were certain principles of management, such as matrix management, that he knew about. There are two lessons here, he argues: “As academics, we should be able to speak boldly about what we know. But also, we should make clear what we don’t know and be aware of the limits to our knowledge.”

Managing projects

Morris’s central thesis is that a project’s success is determined by the effective management of its front-end, the acknowledgment of a project’s



F.R. Leavis

context, competent management of technical and commercial issues, and knowing that projects begin and end with people. By “front-end”, he means the period in which requirements are captured and/or the preparation for the full sanction proposal for approval by the board. These breakthrough insights have won him several accolades, including the Project Management Institute’s 2005 Research Achievement Award, IPMA’s 2009 Research Award and APM’s 2008 Sir Monty Finniston Lifetime Achievement Award.

He recalls the moment his interest in project management began, when he was then employed as a site engineer on Dungeness nuclear power station in 1968: “We were just about to pour concrete when a joiner came tearing up the supply road waving a fresh set of drawings. Why, I wondered, were people issuing drawings so late? Why couldn’t there be some cross-functional integration and scheduling of design to fit the construction schedule?”

His PhD, completed in 1972, looked at systems thinking and organisation theory and has underlain much of what he

has done since. It centred upon the proposition that, as construction projects get bigger, faster and more complex, so the amount of management and, specifically, integration needs to increase: “That emphasis on integration becomes the theoretical base to project management. It is about integrating the activities of everybody so that their work comes to be an effective

whole. Thus, we talk about the ‘single point of responsibility’ or ‘accountability’ that is represented by the project manager who brings it all together.”



The Alaskan oil pipeline

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Morris learned from projects abroad. In 1975, he worked on an Iranian telecommunications programme and, in the following year, on a liquefied natural gas project in Algeria. Later, he worked in Brazil on a \$4bn steel mill and in the USA on the planning of two large cities in Saudi Arabia. He then moved to Boston to work for the consultancy Arthur D. Little (ADL) on several projects in the USA and Egypt. “This was a very interesting time,” Morris says. “My boss had been one of

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the two lead planners for NASA’s Apollo moon programme and there were many lessons from project and programme management that I learned from him.”

During his time at ADL, Morris advised Alyeska, the company that built the Alaskan oil pipeline. The project started at \$900m, but was completed at a cost of \$8bn. Law suits resulted and, as part of the firm’s defence, he collected data on about 3,500 projects. Much to his surprise, he found that only under one per cent of them came in on or under budget. Inspection of why so many

projects were delivered over budget and late showed it was nothing to do with project management as it was then conceived. Instead, it was mainly due to the impact of external factors, client changes or front-end issues such as the choice of technology.

“It made me question what constituted project management and what was needed to ensure a successful project,” Morris says. “The evidence showed that one needed to focus on more than just the ‘build’ end. You’d need to look at the whole project, including the community, finance, political support and suppliers.”

It was around this time and with these questions in mind that Morris was invited to take a research fellowship at the University of Oxford where, in 1987, he wrote *The Anatomy of Major Projects* with George Hough. Later, he wrote *The Management of Projects* (1994), which made the case for expanding our conception of the discipline of project management.

In 1989, Morris was appointed Director of Special Projects at Bovis, an international construction company. In this role he worked on a number of internal development initiatives as well as projects in the UK, Middle East, and Russia. In 1996, he was appointed part-time Professor of Engineering Project Management at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST). At the same time, he became Executive Director of INDECO, an international project management consulting company. His enthusiasm for the profession saw two leading professional appointments in the same period: he was elected Chairman of the Association for Project Management

(APM) from 1993 to 1996 and Vice Chairman of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) from 1996 to 1997.

“I believe these institutions, particularly APM, serve a very useful purpose in defining the knowledge needed to manage projects successfully,” Morris notes. “One of the characteristics of professionalism is ownership of an exclusive body of knowledge.” He wrote significant portions of APM’s Body of Knowledge based on the “management of projects” principle. In 2016, his work was honoured by a Festschrift in The International Journal of Project Management, the first of its kind in the field.

Growing the School

In 2001, Professor Christine Hawley, then the Dean of The UCL Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment, wrote to Morris asking whether he would provide the intellectual lead for the activities involving construction, project management and economics across The Bartlett. “Christine’s rationale was that the Bartlett was famous for its Architecture and Planning departments, but it was weak in the area that you’d naturally look for as an allied intellectual discipline within the building industry, namely construction,” Morris explains.

At this time, the extent to which construction featured at The Bartlett was the MSc Construction Economics and Management (CEM), the BSc Construction for Project Management and a handful of PhD students. The MSc Project and Enterprise Management (PEM)

was created under the direction of Professor Stephen Pryke in 2003. “The key thing here was, and still is, the focus on the interlinkage between running an enterprise and managing a project,” Morris explains.

Next came the MSc Interdisciplinary Management of Projects (IDMP) in 2005, now MSc Strategic Management of Projects (SMP), directed initially by Professor Andrew Edkins and currently by Dr. Efrosyni Konstantinou. Although construction featured prominently in the programme at its conception, it now approaches project management in a non-sector-specific way given its relevance in a wide range of industries, whether pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, IT, finance or fashion. Today, SMP promotes an approach to business and management that is both ethical and competitive. The programme considers the array of stakeholders who are involved in decisions and will be affected by the implications of the project.

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Pryke and John Kelsey which ran for three years. At the same time, Professor Edkins won a contract to develop and deliver a bespoke course for local authority officials leading the procurement of Public Private Partnerships (PPP) and Private Finance Initiative (PFI) projects. These programmes successfully helped practitioners think coherently, logically and rigorously about management problems. The latter programme received an award from the APM in 2009.

In 2009, The Bartlett School of Construction and Project Management was created and housed the above programmes. In naming the School, Morris was keen to include ‘Project Management’ to provide a vehicle for the School to talk about managing a whole project, rather than solely in the context of the construction site.

Three years later, Graham Ive, Senior Lecturer in Construction Economics at the School and the academic lead of the MSc CEM since the mid-1970s, had been considering where construction economics could be taken next. Out of discussions with Morris and others came MSc Infrastructure Investment and Finance. This programme was the first of its kind. It features

formal strategic involvement with the European Investment Bank and contributions from a set of leading industry players. “Under Dr. Aris



Morris outside Senate House, Central London

In addition to these programmes, an MSc was created in 2007 in partnership with Network Rail based on PEM led by Professor

Pantelias' leadership, this has been another successful initiative, really first rate," Morris says.

During Morris's ten-year Directorship, the School tripled in size. Moreover, it was rated highly in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Professor Hedley Smyth, who worked with fellow staff to achieve this rating, recalls the reaction: "It was amazing. Unlike some of the other parts of The Bartlett which had big grants, we didn't. We performed very well on publications and we remain this way." The School also achieved success in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), the successor to the RAE. "We are very well placed for the 2021 REF. Professor Andrew Davies, who joined the school as Professor in the Management of Projects in 2014, is building on this and it's going well," says Professor Smyth.

Colleagues who worked with Morris during his Directorship of the School note his supportiveness. Dr. Konstantinou says, "if there was one word that I could use in order to describe Peter, it would be 'generous'; generous in terms of his time, ideas and willingness to support and help people." When she first met Peter, he gave her one of his books and asked her to review it. "This was a very generous act," she says. "I produced 16 pages of feedback which he spent a lot of time going through with me. We had a very good discussion and we got to know each other through discussing ideas, project management and philosophy."

His colleagues build a picture

of someone who is efficient but works in a way that is attentive to new ideas. "He's very passionate



Air pollution caused by a steelworks in Benxi, China.

and a very driven person, but also very interested in hearing others," says Professor Davies. As Dr. Aeli Roberts, who has recently handed over programme leadership of the BSc Project Management for Construction, explains: "Peter speaks when he has something important to say. It's always very carefully thought out. His conciseness is excellent when you are in a situation where people are trying to gather ideas." This skill, she says, has been invaluable in summarizing what a group has been thinking yet struggling to articulate.

The future of projects

Morris has been described as the "Godfather" of the management of projects.

The proof of his status lies in the aforementioned influential books he published in 1987 and 1994, and later *The Wiley Guide to Project Management*

(2004) and *The Oxford Handbook of Project Management* (2012). He describes these later two books as "very successful descriptors of what

the knowledge is that one needs to manage challenging projects." They are, as Dr. Roberts explains, "a great body of knowledge that can only be described as seminal".

His most recent book, *Reconstructing Project Management* (2014), is the most comprehensive presentation of this knowledge. The book begins by exploring the origins and development of the discipline. This is followed by a thorough deconstruction of what is involved in managing projects. The final section then reconstructs these elements in the light of future development trends. Morris says, "I feel proud of this book. Whether that is justified, I don't know. Probably everyone knows I'm very fond of the book but are too polite to point out its shortcomings!"

Chapter 21 of *Reconstructing Project Management* begins: "As I walked away from a recent international academic project management conference, I realised that everything we'd been discussing was about means rather than ends. Indeed, not just not about ends; not even about application! [...] The result is that while mankind faces some of the biggest, most serious and dangerous issues in its history, [...] project and programme management as a discipline is almost

totally silent on addressing them." Morris's work on climate change begins to address this issue.

Climate change, Morris says,

"is one of the biggest challenges facing humankind" yet there is a dearth of literature on how project management should address the

"The implications of climate change are long-term and will require significant work jointly between practitioners, governments and academics."

subject. The result is Morris's 16,000-word essay outlining the impact of climate change and what the profession should be doing to address its causes and consequences. The essay was published in November 2017 by the APM with the explicit aim of engaging the discipline in tackling this major issue. The implications are long-term and, he believes, will require significant work jointly between practitioners, governments and academics. This is exactly where Morris began 40 years ago: merging theory and practice via projects for the public good.

Furthermore, climate change will have an immediate impact on society. As Professor Smyth articulates, "We're looking at trillions of dollars of projects over the coming decades to take us into the future and this has to be done in a sustainable way". Indeed, Morris believes that learning to live with and manage climate change will require new perspectives – for example, around

benefits, as illustrated by UCL's new Real Estate Institute at The Bartlett. "The issue here is thinking about whether we are doing the right project for the right reason," says Professor Edkins, its director. The common

conception of real estate is "office buildings, speculative developments and lots of money being made by people risking money", he says. The institute's definition of real estate is much broader: "Virtually everything that is built – including

infrastructure – is real estate. Projects are the way that real estate is created in the first place, refurbished in the second place, regenerated in the third, and ultimately demolished in the last," Edkins adds.

The thorough scrutiny of project management imparted by Morris is at the heart of the institute. "Peter has rightly said that the best time to think about a project is before it happens," Edkins notes. "You can learn from hindsight, but let's try to bring hindsight to the project's front end." Morris believes we should be tying in learning to decision-making on a routine basis. This would enable us to transform project management standards and re-imagine the built environment in the way he believes is necessary.



Morris pictured in 2013

Within the School, Morris's ideas are being continually evolved. "Peter's work was foundational in terms of establishing the School and its reputation for project management," says Professor Davies. "The management of projects, which is Peter's paradigm, continues to exist and the School is taking it forward."

Moreover, Morris's ideas are deeply engrained in the project management profession. "He has had a massive influence on project management, in academia as well as practice," says Davies, "I know this as I've been around the world to Project Management Institute

“Morris’s ideas are deeply engrained in the project management profession.”

conferences and research conferences such as IRNOP and spoken to people. They know about his work.” Professor Smyth takes a similar view: “If you had to pick out the big guns, then alongside people like Ray Levitt, Don Lessard, Jeffrey Pinto, Aaron Shenhar, Jonas Soderlund and Rodney Turner there would be Peter.”

The “management of projects” thesis will also be advanced by future generations of project managers. “It’s the case of millennials coming together,” says Dr. Konstantinou. “I have seen a remarkable change in terms of how people in business are trying to make decisions.” She witnesses this transformation every year with new cohorts of SMP students who want to be profitable but ethical. “Peter’s work is coming at a time where students are thirsty for his ideas,” she says.

It is apparent that Professor Morris's thesis will remain relevant for many years to come. He has achieved this legacy through his drive and belief in the transformative potential of the project management profession. His critical eye has contributed to vital new knowledge that has influenced projects around the world. Now, approaching a decade since Professor Morris founded it, The Bartlett School of Construction and Project Management goes forward as an international centre of excellence in the teaching and research of project management.

Find out more about MSc Strategic Management of Projects [on the School's website](#).

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