

Reconstructing Project Management – Part 1

By Peter W. G. Morris
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPPI)

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Introduction

Through our common interests in various aspects of project management, we have known Peter Morris for a good many years. During that time, we have come to respect his deep practical thinking, and his fearless approach to presenting the subtle and not-so subtle changes to the thinking-of-the-day that in retrospect obviously needed fixing. And indeed there are a lot of things that are misleading in our present day terminology and standards, that continue to stand in the way of thoughtful progress and therefore still need fixing.

But this book is not just about that sort of detail. Rather, it is about painting a picture of the grand design that represents what project management presently is today, how we got here, what it should be — and thence what it should become in the future. With these thoughts in mind, we cracked the pages of Peter's latest book: *Reconstructing Project Management*, and started reading.

Believe it or not, we found ourselves so enthralled by what Peter had to say that we could hardly wait to see what he had to say in the next section – much like reading a who-dunnit. And so it was, right up to the last Part 3 of the book in which Peter describes how, in his view, project management should be reconstructed for the future. But make no mistake, this is an "academic" book thoroughly researched and covering all aspects of project management.

As an indication, there are over 600 *References and End Notes* linking to other scholastic texts and quotations that are used to make his points clear. Such a number must have taken Peter hours and hours of research time to find and set down these findings in a logically developing order throughout the book. Or rather, one suspects that many references have been noted and tucked away over a long period of gestation, ready for inclusion in the total coverage of project management that the reader will find in this incomparable dissertation on the subject.

From these remarks, you may be thinking academic books are for academics. True, but this book is well written in plain, unambiguous English. It is for all serious project management practitioners working on any significant project in any area of project management application. We'll have more to say in a later section of this review, but in the meantime you may well be asking why did we find this book so enthralling?

Well, because Peter writes with a subtle touch of typical English humor, often as a closing remark at the end of a section. Not everyone will be sensitive to this type of humor, of course, but Peter also writes with no holds barred. He takes accurate aim at our established associations on both sides of the Atlantic, to say nothing of criticizing the pontifications of his friends and colleagues in practice and academia when he fundamentally disagrees. You might think that this is being a bit opinionated and you would be right. The only problem is that when you work through his supporting arguments, he is usually and obviously correct!

About the author

Peter Morris is Professor of Construction and Project Management at University College London (UCL). He is author or coauthor of the following books:

- *The Anatomy of Projects* with George Hough, John Wiley & Sons, 1987
- *The Management of Projects* Thomas Telford, 1994
- *Translating Corporate Strategy into Project Strategy* with Ashley Jamieson, PMI, 2004

He is also co-editor of:

- *The Wiley Guide to Managing Projects* with Jeffrey Pinto, Wiley, 2005
- *The Oxford Handbook of Project Management* with Jeffrey Pinto and Jonas Soderland, OUP, 2011

Peter was Chairman of the Association for Project Management (APM) from 1993 to 1996, and Deputy Chairman of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) from 1995 to 1997. He also received the Project Management Institute's Research Achievement Award in 2005, IPMA's Research Award in 2009, and APM's Sir Monty Finniston Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008.

Peter is also author of over 130 papers with a particular interest in managing the so-called "front end"¹ of projects as a key to their eventual success.

Book Structure

The content of this book is set out in four Parts, each containing from one to nine chapters and two Appendices as follows:

Preface

PART 1 CONSTRUCTING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

1. Introduction to Part 1
2. Project Management before it was invented
3. Systems Project Management
4. The Project Management Knowledge Base
5. Developing Project Management
6. Enterprise-Wide Project Management
7. The Development of Project Management Summary

PART 2 DECONSTRUCTING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

8. Introduction to Part 2
9. Control
10. Organization
11. Governance and Strategy
12. Managing the Emerging Project Definition
13. Procurement and the Project's Commercial Management
14. Adding Value, Controlling Risk, Delivering Quality, Safely and Securely
15. People
16. The Institutional Context

PART 3 RECONSTRUCTING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

17. Introduction To Part 3
18. The Character of our PM Knowledge
19. Managing Context
20. Ethos: Building Sponsor Value
21. 'only connect' – the Age of Relevance

PART 4 SUMMA

22. Summary and Conclusions
- Appendix 1: Critical Success Factor Studies*
- Appendix 2: 'Characteristics of Successful Megaprojects or Systems Acquisitions'*

This 7"x10" hard cover book is filled with 322 tightly packed pages printed on high quality paper in single columns but with sufficient margin space for the reader to make brief notes. Each chapter concludes with References and End Notes, of which there are around 600, as noted earlier. The contents are well illustrated with 50 Figures or Tables. The book does not include a Glossary of Terms.

What we liked – Part 1: Constructing Project Management

As Raymond Levitt observed when reviewing Peter Morris's book in draft:

"[This book is] a tour de force on the philosophy, methods and practices of project and program management; a feast of PM lore, knowledge and insight . . ."²

And so it is. It is a delight to read; the more so because it confirms so much of what we have been saying for years, decades, even. But the conclusions that Peter has reached are not just the result of philosophical thought, but the careful analysis of many large-scale projects in which he has been involved, or otherwise had occasion to study. In fact, *Appendix 1: Critical Success Factor Studies* lists 64 such studies, complete with each studies' findings and topic areas.

As the introduction to the Appendix observes:³

"CSF studies identify the factors that cause projects and programs to succeed or fail. In other words, they show what factors need to be managed in order for project management to be successful in performing its delivery function.

What the following data show is that these factors consistently arise from the area of strategy/governance, technology/requirements, commercial organization, control and people, hence demonstrating the broad range of subjects, topics, functions and disciplines that managers of projects need to address.

A further observation is the high incidence of Governance and the relatively low incidence of Control – which is particularly interesting given that Control was, as we saw in Part 1, the primary driver behind the creation of the discipline, and of course still is the overriding ethos of what one might term 'basic project management'."

Which brings us back to the evolution of "basic Project Management" in Peter's first three chapters. For starters, Peter observes:⁴

"Projects are organizational entities. They differ from non-project organizations in that they all follow the same generic development sequence. Something like: (1) idea; (2) outline concept and strategy; (3) detailed planning; (4) execution; and (5) completion/close-out. *All projects, no matter how complex or trivial, large or small, follow this **development sequence.***"

Note the avoidance of the use of the term (project) "life cycle". Perhaps at last we have a new label! If "project life span" is a non-starter for some reason,⁵ then let us call it "project development sequence" or PDS – a label that has the solid backing of a renowned academic.

To quote all the interesting snippets of information would find us writing another book! But along the way, Peter describes the impacts of projects like the Giza pyramids, Stonehenge, the magnificent Roman aqueducts, roads and bridges and vaulted buildings in Roman and Arabic architecture. And more recently, Sir Christopher Wren's role, together with Robert Hooke, an Oxford physicist, in responding to the catastrophic Great Fire of London.

"The huge amount of materials and personnel necessary called for careful management of the work and control of costs. The beginnings of modern construction management can be seen in the way Wren's office was organized. The complimentary roles of architect, engineer, surveyor and contractor emerged."⁶

Then there are military projects ranging from the activities of William of Normandy to Napoleon. These examples are offered to make the point that people have been managing great projects long before the advent of the tools, language, and concepts we associate with the discipline of project management today.⁷ Peter goes on to describe the early attempts at formal project integration, by the work of people like Henri Fayol, Henry Gantt and others. His examples range from the logistics of building in less than nine months the huge Crystal Palace in London in 1850,⁸ to the systems thinking behind the urgency of the USAF's "Atlas" program, America's first intercontinental ballistic missile program in the 1950s.⁹

From here on, various project management tools appeared to evolve rapidly, but not necessarily with greater success. Peter describes several very large projects that were less than stellar. Peter then takes us through his view of various attempts at establishing formal project management knowledge bases. Of the Project Management Institute's: *A guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMBOK[®] Guide), he quoted PMI:¹⁰

"... much of the general management body of knowledge should be recognized as a given or prerequisite for project management and not included in the PMBOK[®] Guide unless it was considered that aspects of this knowledge are an integral part of the project management process."

From this, Peter goes on to say:¹¹

"This unfortunately created a fundamental shortcoming: ***the PMBOK[®] Guide did not, and still does not, represent the knowledge that is necessary for managing projects successfully*** but only that which was considered truly unique to project management. ... PMI's construct was a process ... a simple 'initiate → plan → execute → monitor and control → close' set of process groups. ... An extraordinarily disembodied and inadequate definition of the thing that PMI is the profession for!"

By way of contrast, he observes of the Association for Project Management's Body of Knowledge (the APM BOK):¹²

"The APM based its Body of Knowledge not on the knowledge that is 'unique to project management' but on what you need to know in order to manage projects successfully. In practical terms, it considered the *PMBOK[®] Guide* misguided in its omission of the front end and too narrow in its definition of the subject. APM thus produced a broader document which followed the 'management of projects' model, recognizing topics such as objectives, strategy, technology, environment, people, business and commercial issues, and so on."

Thus, Peter concludes that:¹³

"The model of project management represented by the *PMBOK*[®] *Guide* is one essentially of delivery execution: one where the requirements have at most to be 'collected'; where the cost, schedule, scope and other targets have already been set. The ethos of the discipline is then to 'monitor and control', not to actively shape and drive solutions."

In subsequent chapters in this part of the book, Peter goes on to describe, with major projects examples, a variety of techniques and tools now available to project managers, but with which most practicing project managers will be familiar.

What we liked – Part 2: Deconstructing Project Management

Author Peter Morris introduces Part 2 with the following observation:¹⁴

"Our account of how project management grew so incredibly over the last 60-100 or so years, from a largely instinctive skill to a highly popular management discipline, offering benefit to practitioners and real interest to scholars of management and organization theory, has concluded that there are still substantial differences of view on what essentially the discipline is – less perhaps what constitutes good practice but more on how the discipline, or the domain, should be seen as a whole, and how its application might vary under different conditions and contexts."

Phew! According to my word processor, that's 89 words in one sentence! The Gunning Fog Index tells us that you need over forty years of formal education in order to easily understand this text on first reading.¹⁵ In other words, several post-doctoral degrees would be handy for the job, and hence the sentence is clearly written for the edification of other academics. But not to worry, let us try "Deconstructing" it to see what it implies.

We like the phrase: "a highly popular management discipline, offering benefit to practitioners and real interest to scholars of management and organization theory". That is certainly true. Yet, according to polls over the last couple of decades, project management does not appear to have improved its "success" rates very much. Still, think of the employment it has brought, and the benefits to the economy...

On: "still substantial differences of view on what essentially the discipline is", this is very true. However, such differences, when aired, do bring serious concentration on the details at hand. Central, appears to be the difference between what project management currently is, and what some people would like it to be."¹⁶

And finally, "the domain should be seen as a whole". We could not agree more. We believe that the project starts, even if only short lived, when the organization first starts spending money on it. That is to say, immediately after the first idea or concept is posited, and then someone officially starts (and is paid!) to examine the benefits and consequences. A good start would be to persuade the Project Management Institute to redefine "project Management" away from the management of a single project.¹⁷ Instead, define project management simply and clearly as follows:

"Project Management is the totality of managing projects throughout the organization and at all levels."¹⁸

Peter then goes on to answer the question:¹⁹

"What do I mean by Deconstructing? 'Deconstruction' has acquired a specific meaning in literary, philosophical and sociological analysis following the work of Jacques Derrida from 1967 onwards."

Well, that's good to know. For more on that, you can look up Jacques Derrida on the Internet.²⁰

Peter apparently has recently (2011) proposed that the framework of "Management of Projects" should consist of three levels:²¹

1. *Level 1*, the technical core, is pre-eminently delivery oriented. It is concerned with the management of the project's technical operations. ... The key concern is with how to deliver projects *efficiently*
2. *Level 2*, the project's strategic wrap, looks at managing projects as organizational 'whole' entities, (1) expanding the domain to include their front-end development and definition and (2) protecting the technical core from environmental turbulence. This is the 'Management of Projects' conceptualization.
3. *Level 3*, the 'institutional' Level 3 is about influencing and managing, as far as one is able, the context within which the project, and other projects and programs, occurs in order to enhance their *effectiveness*. Management at Level 3 is primarily concerned with improving long-term project success ... [Thus] the focus switches "from organizations *in* their environment to the organization *of* the environment".

Such a construct looks highly attractive, even if only from an academic and teaching perspective. It digs deep into the typical organizational hierarchy, and heralds the direction that this author is heading. But one thing should be clear, the lowly project manager can hardly be held responsible for the intentions emanating from the 'institutional' Level 3. While Peter's structure probably has academic merit, in practical terms we see a more useful organizational structure, working upwards, as:

1. Project Level
2. Program Level
3. Project Portfolio Management Level
4. Corporate Executive Management
5. Corporate Board of Directors

Each has its own modus operandi and each provides the governance for the one below.

In the second part of this paper next month, we will go a little further in discussing Part 2 of Peter's book, then followed by *What we liked – Part 3*, our *Downside* view, and final *Summary*.

¹ In Peter Morris's mind, the so-called "front end" of a project is all the work in the often multiple phases in the project's life span that precedes the work of actual implementation, i.e. detailed design and construction of the intended facility, program or service.

² Raymond E. Levitt, Kumagal Professor of Engineering, Director, Stanford Global Projects Center, University of Stanford. *Reconstructing Project Management*, back cover.

³ Morris, Peter, W. G., *Reconstructing Project Management*, First Edition, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., West Sussex, UK, 2013, p 289.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp12-13

⁵ Probably because it was invented here!

⁶ *Ibid*, p15, reference Cooper, M. (2003), *A more beautiful city: Robert Hooke and the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire*, Sutton: Stroud.

⁷ *Ibid*, p16

⁸ Ibid, pp20-21

⁹ Ibid, p28

¹⁰ Ibid, p54, taken from Stuckenbruck, L. C. (1968), Project Management Framework, *Project Management Quarterly*, XVII, 2, pp27-28

¹¹ Ibid, p54

¹² Ibid, p61

¹³ Ibid, p60

¹⁴ Ibid, 116

¹⁵ Try it on the Readability Calculator at http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp

¹⁶ The subject of Part 3 of Peter's book.

¹⁷ *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, Fifth Edition, Project management Institute, PA, 2013, Glossary, p554

¹⁸ R. Max Wideman, October 2014.

¹⁹ Ibid, p116

²⁰ See for example: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Derrida

²¹ Ibid, pp117-118, described in part only, with emphasis added.