

# Do classics exist in megaproject management?



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## KEYWORDS

- Megaprojects
- Conventional classic
- Kuhnian classic
- Citation classic

## Article Highlight:

This article gives an insight into classic texts in the field of project management and delivers the results of a study that aimed to define the Top 10 classic texts in the field, before delivering insight into whether the term 'classic' can actually be used in this relatively young area of research.

## What does the paper cover?

The paper comes from an invitation to Bent Flyvbjerg from a book publisher to edit a volume provisionally called *Classics in Megaproject Planning and Management*, which had the purpose of identifying and publishing the classic texts in the field. The author set out to gather potential articles for the book and, in doing so, discover whether classic texts actually exist in project management.

## Methodology:

In addition to his own identification of potential articles for the book, Flyvbjerg conducted a survey of experts in the field, inviting 114 scholars, academics, researchers and consultants to submit their Top 10 most important and influential journal articles in the field of megaproject planning and management. Respondents were asked to identify the 'classics' in the field, as well as book chapters containing seminal work. These were ranked in order of citations.

The authors then looked at a bibliometric study of publications in megaproject management: *Bibliographic and Comparative Analyses to Explore Emerging Classic Texts in Megaproject Management* by Li et al. (2017). The study benchmarks megaproject management against five established fields in the management literature, namely institutional theory, organisational effectiveness theory, stakeholder theory, top management theory, and resource dependence theory.

## Research findings:

With a response rate of 44 per cent, the authors received 172 different proposed 'classics', which resulted in the Top 10 list of classics in megaproject planning and management below:

1. Flyvbjerg, Holm, Buhl (Flyvbjerg et al, 2002) **Underestimating Costs in Public Work Projects: Error or Lie?**
2. Pickrell (Pickrell, 1992) **A Desire Named Streetcar: Fantasy and Fact in Rail Transit Planning**
3. Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, Rura-Polley (Pitsis et al, 2003) **Constructing the Olympic Dream: A Future Perfect Strategy of Project Management**
4. Hall (Hall, 1980) **Great Planning Disasters**
5. Miller, Lessard (Miller and Lessard, 2000) **The Strategic Management of Large Engineering Projects: Shaping Institutions, Risks and Governance**
6. Stinchcombe, Heimer (Stinchcombe et al, 1985) **Organization Theory and Project Management: Administering Uncertainty in Norwegian Offshore Oil**
7. Kahneman, Lovallo (Kahneman and Lovallo, 1993) **Timid Choices and Bold Forecasts: A Cognitive Perspective on Risk Taking**
8. Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, Rothengatter (Flyvbjerg et al, 2003) **Megaprojects and Risk: An Anatomy of Ambition**
9. Lovallo, Kahneman (Lovallo and Kahneman, 2003) **Delusions of Success: How Optimism Undermines Executives' Decisions**
10. Miller, Lessard (Miller and Lessard, 2001) **Understanding and Managing Risks in Large Engineering Projects**

However, the authors state that this list should "be taken with a pinch of salt" as there was little agreement among the respondents regarding what should be considered a classic. It was expected that works by Albert Hirschman, Peter Hall and Peter Morris to be identified as unequivocal classics by a majority of respondents, but this was not so.

The bibliometric study found that it takes 20 years or more after initial publication for a text to have the surge in citations that's characteristic of a classic. It also found that the most cited texts in megaproject management are too young to have gone through the full cycle of a classic text, including the surge.

Given the results of their survey, Flyvbjerg and his publisher decided to change the title of the planned book from *Classics in Megaproject Planning and Management* to *Planning and Managing Megaprojects: Essential Readings*.

## Conclusions:

The authors identify three types of classics: conventional, Kuhnian and citation, and find that the answer to the paper's title depends on the definition of 'classic' employed:

- **'Citation classics'** do exist in megaproject management and they perform remarkably well when compared to the rest of the management literature.
- There is no indication that **'conventional classics'** exist in megaproject management, i.e. texts recognised as definitive by a majority of experts.
- There is no consensus as to whether **'Kuhnian classics'** exist, i.e. texts with paradigmatic clout.

The importance of classics seems to be accepted, however, just as work to develop, discuss and consolidate classics is essential by megaproject scholars. Going forward, the authors suggest the following tasks to stimulate and improve scholarship in megaproject management:

- The classics that have emerged over the past 10 to 15 years, new and old, should be further developed and consolidated.
- New classics should be developed, focus on high-quality data, and use the strongest theories from across the social sciences.
- Ignored classics should be revisited and taken seriously.
- Debate should continue and be encouraged about which texts may and may not be considered classics.

## Significance of the research:

The McKinsey Global Institute estimates global infrastructure spending at USD3.4 trillion per year between 2013 and 2030, or approximately four per cent of total global gross domestic product, mainly delivered as large-scale projects. If the many other fields where megaprojects are a main delivery model are included – oil and gas, mining, mineral processing plants, aerospace, defense, IT, supply chains, mega events, etc. – then a conservative estimate for the global megaproject market is USD6–9 trillion per year, or approximately eight per cent of total global gross domestic product.

Given this, never has sound academic knowledge about megaproject management been more important. The industry needs high-quality texts to better understand the megaproject phenomenon and inform policy, practice and public debate in this costly and consequential area of business and government.

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## Complete article

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## Glossary:

<b>Citation classic:</b>	A highly cited publication as identified by citation indices.
<b>Conventional classic:</b>	A written work that's generally recognised as definitive in its field by a majority of experts in that field.
<b>Kuhnian classic:</b>	Thomas Kuhn's definition of a written work whose "achievement was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity."

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