

Q&A: HARRY DIMITRIOU

Looking at transit success and failure

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The Channel tunnel connecting London and Paris, Boston's Big Dig, the Shinkansen bullet trains in Japan – these are the sort of massive infrastructure projects that make or break political reputations.

But why do some succeed while others fail? And how can success be defined? These are key questions for cities like Toronto, which is haltingly moving forward on a \$50-billion regional transit plan. And this is the focus of years of research by the Omega Centre, based at the Bartlett School of Planning at University College London.

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The director of the centre, professor of planning studies Harry Dimitriou, will be in Toronto for the three-day Meeting of the Minds conference starting Monday, where he will discuss their work into so-called "mega urban transport projects." He spoke recently to The Globe and Mail from his home in Britain.

How do you define a mega-project?

Many are not projects at all, they are programs of projects. They have within them real estate, environmental agendas, a whole host of dimensions. So the question really is, what is the boundary of the project? When you're going to judge these projects, are you looking in a more holistic manner at the communities that are being impacted? And are you looking at the agent of change functions they may have?

Can you expand on the notion that mega-projects are agents of change?

Very large projects change the territories they serve or traverse. What we're very bad at is looking at history and getting some idea as to what kind of changes are likely. But change they will bring. Our argument is that it seems really – I'm being polite – strange that these projects cost billions of dollars and lessons have not really been collated, in order to anticipate how these agents of change might perform.

Toronto has been wrestling with transit. Can any project be considered successful unless it gets the public onside from the start? Or can the public be brought along, shown that it works?

One of our conclusions is that the earlier you bring them in the better. The second issue has to do with trust. Transparency is important. But those impacted may not be prepared to sacrifice short-term cost for next-generational benefits. The question is who should lose and what compensation should there be. A more transparent approach might increase the compensation and make projects more expensive.

Politicians and the public think these projects cost much much less than they do, and they think they should cost less. But actually they have always cost more, it's just that some of these costs have been hidden.

The research looked beyond the 'iron triangle' – finishing a project on time, on budget, within specs – as the sole mark of success. What more needs to be looked at?

The iron triangle is important – don't misunderstand me. But it's a model which has a short time span. The project organically changes, and so your specifications will change. Costings change because of inflation. Design technology changes. So how else do you judge their success? I think they need to be judged in terms of the sustained economic growth they spawn.

Let's talk about what works. You've studied mega-projects all over the world. Are there common themes that can be identified?

Very definitely. You can identify politically powerful, influential, committed persons who pushed the project through. And handing on the baton from one administration to another is a key issue. Political champions is most important, it's especially important where the government itself doesn't believe in visions. There is this other dimension: serendipity.

So a certain moment is right for that plan.

It may not even be a plan. In the case of the Olympic games, in London, things just come together. What else? There's no doubt context is everything. A project can be a great disaster in one context and be determined a success in another. I think timing is significant.

Based on your research, any advice for a city like Toronto?

It would be a foolish person to give advice about a place he didn't know. My first point is how little we learn from the lessons of the past. Look in Canada and elsewhere and pick up lessons that matter. Don't go along with the myths, or whims of politicians who have a gut feeling. Use these projects to mould future visions Canadians wish to have. With climate-change issues coming rapidly to the forefront, with population densities mattering more and more, with energy peak problems likely to become more aggravated, I think Toronto shouldn't building infrastructure of the 20th century, but they should be looking ahead.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Oliver Moore is The Globe's urban transportation reporter. He will be moderating a workshop on transit at the Meeting of the Minds conference.

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