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## Building success

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Issue 33, p34-37, Spring 2006

Being in charge of a capital project will never be an easy job – there is too much to go wrong. But knowing the traps will help you avoid the worst problems, as Adrian Ellis explains

In a letter to Museum Practice's sister publication, the Museums Journal, Tony Baker drew attention to the 'tears, frustrations and absences from work through stress-related illnesses caused by lottery-funded building projects' in the UK. Although the point of his letter is that the vagaries of the funding system are a major source of stress, he concedes that inexperience, understaffing and the sheer complexity of planning and executing a building project are all major contributors.

My own hair turned grey and I got shingles when I managed the setting up of the Design Museum in London, 1986 to 1989, long pre-lottery. But after nearly two decades as a student of the tangles that the cultural sector gets into when planning capital projects, I can see more clearly that the sense of impotence and isolation felt by pretty well everyone who manages a building project in the arts has common causes.

Although the details of what is ahead on a capital project are unknown at the beginning of the journey, there are systemic forces behind those details that are indeed predictable.

That sense of stress has claimed its victims in the largest projects. But there are two reasons why the stresses are particularly acute for staff at smaller and medium-sized museums. First, the management team is smaller and probably less experienced, so the sense of isolation is usually much greater.

Secondly, in larger museums there is often a sort of 'political underwriting' that follows the decision to proceed. If you owe the bank £50,000, you are the one with a problem, but if you owe the bank £50m, the bank has the problem, as the saying goes. When you are big enough and loud enough, then the bank – or in this case 'the funding system' – has to find a solution to your problem, or its embarrassment will be as great as yours.

When you have less ready political access, and the prospect of

political embarrassment is correspondingly lower, you are much more quickly forced back on your museum's limited resources – or the consequences of their absence.

There are five main reasons why capital projects are invariably tough, particularly for the medium-sized and smaller museums. But their impact can be ameliorated where they cannot be wholly avoided, to the benefit of the success of the project and the mental health of all involved.

### **Amateurs rule**

As a museum manager, you may be a consummate professional in your core areas of competence, but planning a capital project is simply not one of them. Why should it be? Whether you started your career as an educator, a curator or a conservator, they didn't teach you about managing building projects.

You therefore have a steep learning curve to climb, and are often understandably reluctant to admit your initial bewilderment to your board, whose confidence in you and your big ideas got things this far in the first place.

By the end of the project, you have served a vigorous apprenticeship but all that knowledge is then put to one side as you swear that you will never undertake another building project.

Unfortunately, many of the decisions that really count are made at or soon after the inception of the project, when you are least experienced and most bullish. Fundamental decisions about the scale, timetable and the core content of the project are made when you, the client, have least understanding of their implications.

There is no single solution to this dilemma; you know only what you know. But there are steps likely to reduce the impact, speed you up the learning curve, and make the implications less potentially threatening:

- don't bluff, because if you do, you will forego the opportunity to ask questions that are embarrassing to ask later. Your common sense, institutional knowledge, ability to ask apparently naive questions, and generally Socratic disposition should complement the technical expertise of the myriad consultants whose expertise you will need to draw on

- talk to - and listen to - peers who have played a similar role. You will almost invariably find them open, helpful and eager to recount their war stories. More generally, become a student of capital project management - the literature, the memoirs and manuals. No area of planning a museum is actually terribly complicated. The complexity is in their interaction - the relationship between fundraising and construction, or between aesthetic and operational considerations in design

- try to make sure your board includes at least one building professional who can offer wise counsel, so you are not the lone voice. But try to make sure that their expertise is directly relevant, or that they understand how it differs from your circumstances.

Someone who does not understand the museum's needs can create as many problems as they solve

- don't underestimate how early in the project the workload becomes

oppressive when added to your 'day job' of running the museum or a part of it. Delegate tasks and put other projects on hold. If you do not, then you will become a bottleneck in decisionmaking at the time when delays can have expensive knock-on effects and demoralise those further down the line of decision-making

- avoid getting 'captured' by any single professional's perspective. The architect, the cost consultant, the structural engineer and the builder will all have differing priorities; no single perspective will wholly serve your institutional interests, and you need to decide on the trade-offs.

A large part of your job is to articulate and communicate institutional priorities honestly and clearly. If your need to be liked is so strong that you feel compelled to agree in turn with each competing perspective you encounter, you will rapidly find yourself intensely disliked by everyone.

### **Museums are bad at fast decision-making**

Museums, like all charitable organisations, are structured in a hierarchical and conservative way, with appropriate checks and balances to ensure that fiscal privileges are not abused. The structures work well enough for 'normal business', but they work less well where there is a pressure to make discrete decisions with longterm financial or physical implications quickly and with imperfect knowledge - for example, signing off a change order for the size of a new lift, delay to which will have adverse financial implications.

The museum director is often caught in a web of complex circumstances involving innate risks and without a way of communicating these risks clearly to the board.

That board, which has formal responsibility for the decisions the director is taking, may simply have lost the plot because of the project's complexity and speed. The result is that the director tends to be forced into an exposed position, moving beyond the organisation's understanding under the pressure either of events or a frustrated professional team wanting a green light.

When things go wrong, as they always do at some point, the director finds themselves isolated and exposed.

The structural obstacles to quick decision-making that come with charitable status can never be set aside but their impact can be ameliorated:

- set up clear lines of authority with clearly articulated levels of delegated decision making
- create a building subcommittee of the board. Make sure that the key board decision-makers and fundraisers are represented on it. Ensure that it meets frequently and the project management team

report fully to it and that it in turn reports back to the full board regularly.

### **Keep good minutes**

- over-communicate rather than undercommunicate.

There is a temptation to communicate less and less as problems arise because of the desire to keep team morale up and the tendency of boards to 'blame the messenger'. The temptation is to try to solve the problem and then report the problem and the solution.

Ultimately, it is more valuable to create a climate in which problems can be discussed rather than bottled up so that those who are ultimately responsible - the board - are aware of the implications of those responsibilities.

### **Not planning but bidding**

Most museums planning capital projects do so in a sort of elaborate shell-game - they are, in effect, con artists on behalf of a worthy cause convinced that the ends justifies the means. To secure the money they need the idea; to realise the idea they need the money.

So the idea is developed without the money to secure it or indeed a very clear sense of whether the capital and revenue implications are ultimately bearable.

Were all parties to see what lies ahead more clearly and without the competitive desire for peer approval that so deeply colours museum and civic leadership, they might reach more modest conclusions about the appropriate scale of their plans. As an architect once hissed at me during a planning meeting with a client: 'Son, 20:20 vision kills all projects.'

The need to put a spin on things to give the project the best chance means that what looks like planning work - fat reports with lots of numbers and PowerPoint presentations, space plans and artists' impressions - is informed by a frantic search for funding rather than a disinterested search for truth.

The planning injunction - no spin, please - is simply unrealistic. But at least undertake your internal planning on as authentic a base as possible, even if you need to put some 'systemic optimism' into the final iteration you despatch to your funders.

Rework the business plan each time your assumptions change. If you don't, the opening year of operations can bring big surprises.

We revel in the unique nature of our requirements, and so do architects. Museums are attractive to the design profession for several reasons: a public building, a client that cares about architecture, and above all a client that wants to emphasise the non-standard nature of their architectural requirements, both expressive and operational. 'Our mission is unique, and our building should reflect that.'

You don't usually get that in schools, social housing or hospitals.

Museums have therefore become the playground of ingenious structural and architectural solutions and the forum for career-making commissions. When the museum building is a historic artefact in its own right, many problems will be hidden in its walls and revealed only during restoration.

The attendant risks to timetable and budget are simply the flipside of the architectural challenges that the museum sector sets itself and its design teams. Combine this with point one above and stir.

The Latin origin of the word 'amateur' is love. Museums initially make naive but enthusiastic – sometimes infatuated – clients to the design profession and, as their naivety lessens and their infatuation wanes during the construction process, their relationship with their professional team often more closely resembles a failing love affair than a professional relationship between contracting adults. Both sides had misplaced hopes of the other that neither can live up to.

So, first, in selecting an architect and design team, take into account their experience of your type and scale of project – talk to ex-clients, look at their work methods and the fruits of their labours. Above all, make sure that the individuals you will be working with have design and professional values and approaches that complement yours.

You can fire your consultant, your project manager, your fundraiser, and no one notices. But to fire your architect involves a serious upheaval.

### **What constitutes success?**

In analytical philosophy there is a notion that certain concepts are 'essentially contestable' – that concepts such as freedom or power are always open to definitional wrangling.

'Success' is essentially contested when applied to a museum capital project. The project manager is paid to care about whether it was completed on time, on budget and met the brief.

But your colleagues will not judge the project by whether the brief was fulfilled but rather by whether it was the right brief in the first place: whether the health of the complex organism that constitutes a wellfunctioning museum has been improved or damaged by alterations to the shell in which it lives.

The public funders are looking to judge the project by its contribution to job creation, or by the impact of the iconic addition to the cityscape on inward investment or simply by the city's own self-perception.

The chair's successor will judge it by the challenges it presents three years hence to balancing the budget. The architect will judge it by how it looks, devoid of people and probably of objects, in the photographs taken at completion and before handover to the client.

The absence of clearly-articulated criteria for success, a lacuna often only realised late in the game, is possibly the most insidious challenge of all. All projects involve trade-offs – exhibition versus events space, quality of finishes versus size – and without agreed

priorities it is simply not possible to reach rational decisions on the choices that the planning and design process inevitably and inexorably generates.

New or newly-expanded museums may understandably fail when measured against all the possible dimensions of success. A balanced verdict may take some years to reach and be totally at odds with the thumbs-up or thumbs-down delivered in the hoopla surrounding the building's completion.

To attempt to mediate this from the beginning, invest time and effort in developing your brief. First, consult within the organisation and with other museums, set up a process, and report back on the results when you inevitably scale back ambitions in response to spatial and budgetary constraints, rather than leaving people with the expectation that they will get everything they asked for.

Second, spend time creating a clear consensus early in the project around what constitutes success. Discuss this regularly both formally, through the use of options analyses, for example, and informally within the museum, with the professional team, funders and other stakeholders.

Create a consensus around this, and vigorously explain it to anyone who will listen. As and when relevant, get across the message about what your ambitions are in the press.

Buildings are a means to an end, and you will only get the means you want if you are absolutely clear about your ends.

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