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Danish Prof Talks at GSD

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By **NOAH S. RAYMAN**
Contributing Writer

Danish urban planner Bent Flyvbjerg has a love-hate relationship with the Sydney Opera House.

"It's my favorite building," he said. "But at the same time, I hate the project. The Sydney Opera House is a megaproject disaster."

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Flyvbjerg, a professor at Aalborg University, discussed the budget overruns that are common to large infrastructure projects, or megaprojects, at Harvard's Graduate School of Design last night.

According to Flyvbjerg, nine out of every 10 infrastructure projects have these fiscal problems.

"So don't believe that all projects have cost overrun," he joked to an audience of over 70 students and faculty from graduate schools across Boston. "That's an exaggeration."

He attributed the overstretched budgets to optimism biases and "strategic misrepresentation" in the original construction plans.

Flyvbjerg said planners often overestimate revenue and underestimate costs in order to ensure funding for their projects, comparing this "culture of misrepresentation" to pork barrel spending.

"You get rewarded for misrepresenting projects and you get punished if you are honest," he said, adding that he often receives e-mails from planners confessing this. "It's like I'm some Catholic priest."

The problem is pervasive, said Flyvbjerg. Boston's Big Dig—a 16-year project that spent an estimated \$22 billion on a 3.5 mile highway beneath the city—was one of the nation's largest and most expensive megaprojects, said Flyvbjerg, resulting in a 224 percent cost overrun.

And construction of the Chunnel, a tunnel connecting Britain and France under the English Channel, caused such high cost overruns that the British economy may have been better off without it, he said.

Flyvbjerg recommended that planners adjust their estimates based on budgetary overruns from similar projects in order to combat this problem.

He cited the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain as a successful project that resulted in a zero percent cost overrun.

Jerold S. Kayden, the co-chair of the GSD's Department of Urban Planning and Design, said that Flyvbjerg's expertise on the costs and benefits of megaproject construction is especially relevant today.

"Today, infrastructure is sexy," he said, explaining that these large-scale projects become fixtures in many cities but that budgeting them remains a big political problem.

Some members of the audience, however, were surprised at Flyvbjerg's approach.

"It's pretty rare to hear people criticize the consequences of engineers with big imaginations," said Travis P. Dunn, a civil engineering student at MIT. "His perspective is unique."

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