The stated objective of this book is to make the reader aware of and understand the concepts of cost control. Its intended readership is "... all professionals who either use or are engaged in the contracting business ... not only those with particular responsibility for costs, but clients with building programmes ... of value to both undergraduates and postgraduate students of construction and business management".

The book identifies many of the critical areas of cost control for construction. The broad ranging text covers the issues of cost control from initial concept through to final disposal. It's nine chapters deal with: the background issues of cost control, financial accounting practices, investment procedures, feasibility and viability issues, risk and uncertainty, information systems, basic economic cost theory and concludes with final chapters on the application of cost control for owners and contractors.

It will be an illuminating text for construction industry practitioners and indeed clients in providing sufficient information for them to recognise how important construction cost control is, and how important it is to appoint the appropriate construction professionals. Students, however, will be unlikely to have sufficient understanding to succeed in undergraduate examinations. There is a significant lack of reference to other published works in the text that makes it difficult for the reader to select appropriate supplementary reading from the brief further readings appended to the end of the text. Indeed, the further reading does not follow the chapter headings of the text but follows a much vaguer pattern of headings. It is not a book to recommend as an essential text to financially distressed students.

There are also some technical problems that need to be addressed. This revised and updated second edition of the original version published in 1985 shows many signs of remaining rooted in the 80's. Some of its received wisdom of management theory of the 80's has recently been challenged. Empowerment and other people related issues are barely mentioned, yet the implications for cost control appear obvious. Relational contracting issues are rather preemptorily dismissed, for example, "Exceptionally, in some instances, a contractor may misguidedly believe that it is to his advantage to maximise the capital investment of his client" (p232) - not the sort of mind set that we would like to see inculcated in students.

Neither do we find any reference to different procurement methods, contractual arrangement, tendering or bidding, prequalification or competitiveness, motivation or incentives. We do however get plenty on systems, probability distributions, utility, variances and network analysis. Speaking as non-engineers we would say that this book is clearly written by an engineer for engineers and in an engineering way. It treats cost control in the same way as ground water control might be treated. The author thinks of every thing that does and might go wrong (without distinction) and then describes a system that he thinks will counter all these. He then
instructs the managers in how to manage the system and 'Hey Presto' the problem is solved. This might be alright if cost control was similar to ground water control (although we have some doubts even on this). But 'costs', to our minds at least, are rather different. After all, the famous mathematician Euler, did give up studying economics as being too difficult a subject!

The main point is that, economics, and its more versatile uncle, management, is not to do with anything so 'simple' as the physical world that is so much the province of engineers. Economics and management concern human behaviour and all the unpredictability that that entails. Controlling costs is not so much about 'controlling' money as about 'managing' people. This means, like environmental issues, finding ways of preserving and supporting what is good about people for the common cause. It does not mean adopting an ironclad regime where the ends must somehow have to justify the means, as has been evidenced in the recent demise of Marxist regimes.

In Pilcher's own essentionalistic terms, the business of cost control is not about 'engineering', it is about 'business' and all that that entails. Recent changes in emphasis of quantity surveying degree courses, where incidentally the subject is usually given a no less ingenuous treatment, support that view. As such, the subject as a whole is better viewed within a business environment, which implies as much consideration of the business itself as the 'consumers' of its activities (if not, we would adopt a Pilcher-like stance in saying that it must be so!).

In ambitiously attempting to cover a broad range of cost issues in a standard length text (384 pp) this has necessitated a brevity of treatment that creates a lack of depth in many places. Most areas are treated superficially and fail to offer the necessary understanding. The brevity of the text was to be supplemented by the extensive use of illustrative examples. However, these examples contain errors that could cause confusion. If examples are to be used, they need to be carefully crafted to provide clear explanation of each and every step in the process. Often the examples fail to illustrate intermediate steps, numbers appearing in equations without explanation. Some of the examples also have incorrect or misleading mathematical annotation.

It is not an easy book to read. Complex sentence structures sometimes disguise the true intent, necessitating re-reading sections. A reliance on spell-check has left many typographical errors. What is needed is a thorough final edit to remove all of the niggling faults and repetitions. The general impression is that it offers a poor example of proof reading and editing to the student reader.

The most disappointing feature of the book however is the incessant heavy prescriptive tone used throughout. "It is essential that all members of the construction team ..." How many times do we tell students not to use such phrases in their dissertations. Surely, we say, it is far better to say what is rather than what should be and certainly not what must be - descriptive before prescriptive and never normative - only fools go where angels fear to tread. And yet here are these very words right at the top of the sleeve of
"Almost all the decisions which a construction manager makes will have an influence on some or other component of cost in a project. "
"It is necessary to understand the implications of such decisions ..."). "Systems need to be adapted..." "Software companies need to produce updated versions of their products" "... the financial aspects of a company have to be judged by their published accounts."
"There is much information in these accounts that will enable an outsider to review the progress of the company ..." and all this on the first page of the preface. Later we learn that performance on a company's individual project must inevitably be reflected in their accounts, project managers must be able to implement a high degree of control, technologies must be selected by taking into account total estimated capital costs, construction methods and processes must be taken into account when considering the whole of the facilities' future life, the project manager must appreciate the consequences of varying the planned course of construction. The list is endless. So many things are essential, are necessary, must be done, need to be done. If we were students we would be quite terrified by the whole business.

One major 'plus', however, does occur at the end of the section on the investment decision where we are advised to take the greatest care to ensure that every possible alternative is examined. How ironical and what a pity the author does not follow his own advice in this book!

Are there really no alternatives to Professor Pilcher's exhortations? Are the opportunities for imagination, innovation and experimentation so limited? Techniques, we are informed, are to be used as an aid to decision-making rather than a means by which a decision can be reached for this involves the application of sound judgement consisting of a blend of experience, commonsense, hunch and probably a knowledge of human behaviour. But how we are to acquire such personalised skills is not explained. Nor is it easy to see how they could be acquired by anyone who seriously tries to follow the author's vast array of do's and dont's.

Perhaps what is most lacking in this book is a concern for the welfare of the cost controllers themselves. They have a very difficult job to do and this cannot be helped by 'advising' on a series of constraints to which the cost controllers must adhere. What is needed is some ideas on how to do the job better and achieve more satisfaction in what after all is not the most glamorous of jobs. As a book on some possible techniques, and these (though by no means a comprehensive account of all that is available) cannot be faulted, its clear exposition on these techniques is its big (only?) advantage on its competitors. But the book is equally clearly not designed to inspire, except perhaps by coercion, their adoption. How much better it would have been to offer these techniques perhaps in comparison with current practice, and have left the reader to decide for himself on wither to go.

But, on the other hand, maybe Pilcher is right. Perhaps he does know all the answers. At the end it is a matter of faith and maybe we are too much a pharisee. Fool or angel? Well, read the book.
and decide for yourself.

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