

# Flyover Envy

I think it must have been flyover envy that finally did it.

You'll recall, we were being told that ODOT's I-5 bridge budget just wouldn't support anything approaching the signature bridge we'd been led to believe was coming. And couldn't we please try to imagine a JOHN HANCOCK that didn't have to attract notice or become a symbol of anything special – such as crossing the Willamette at Eugene or entering or leaving the Willamette Valley?



So I wrote a Design Matters on having a cable-stayed bridge for our I-5 crossing and included an image showing how beautiful they really they are. Could there be a greater contrast, I hoped people would see for themselves, between three lovely cabled sails over the Willamette and the routine, standardized highway overpass construction we were expected to open wide and swallow?

But the ODOT team hunkered down, assuring us that matters of taste were best left in our individual mouths. "Beauty," they carefully explained, "was in the budget of the beholder;" and they were doing the beholding for our own fiscal good. But if we'd be patient, they'd soon be at a place where people could help make some of the design decisions.

With respect to bridge type, they were vintage Henry Ford, "We could have any color car as long as it was black." But they'd especially like more public input about the shape of the piers that would hold up the overpass-like bridge types that they'd decided were affordable. And did we think the concrete spans might be enhanced with the hint of an arch?

Hearts sank.

It's an old story and hard to fathom. But there really are still those who believe that design is something to be added on after the important decisions have been made. They'll insist that, "Architecture is merely the cosmetic that is painted on the face of engineering." And paraphrase my worst nightmare: "When I hear the word aesthetics, I reach for my revolver."

Can you imagine eating a meal solely for the calories it provides without a thought about how it looks or tastes? Would you buy a sex-less car?

Or a dress solely for the practicality of its fabric, without a thought about its style, color, fit or feel, and then have someone say as an afterthought about design, "you could add a few flowers on the outside as a signal that you're still in bloom."

This mindset is still creeping about. It's not just in transportation engineers conceiving river-crossing problems too narrowly, purposefully leaving out such small matters as say, creating a city entrance or making something capable of becoming the symbol of our city. Have they forgotten that they walk in the footsteps of Oregon's Conde B. McCullough, who left us with coastal bridges without peers?

Sadly, it is a widespread virus that lurks in the qualitatively challenged. It causes those infected to become quite uncomfortable when they are pushed into a world of considerations that aren't immediately and readily quantifiable. In larger institutions, such as ODOT, that virus is further transmitted into communities through good soldiering. Good soldier training enables the making of straight-faced, well-rehearsed - and especially budget-bound - excuses that justify leaving out whole regions of project qualities that create meaning in people's lives.

My mailman knows this, the one with the jaunty beret. "I loved your article in EW about having a beautiful, cable stayed bridge across the Willamette," he surprised me with one morning as he handed me the mail. It made my day!

He knew intuitively that to be a real designer, a bridge designer - any designer - is to travel beyond budget efficiency, over and beyond good management and value engineering - and go where no excusifying, qualitatively challenged and hand-wringing bureaucrat has gone before.

John Brombaugh, our inspired local organ maker, happily reminisced that back in 1961 he had proposed to his wife on a Johann Roebling cable bridge in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was a wonderful bridge they crossed together on that blustery day, he said, similar to Roebling's world famous Brooklyn Bridge in New York City. Did I think we had a chance to have anything that special built here?

"Only if people pay attention and care enough," I replied. "Only if the people on the technical and advisory committees speak up. Only if our overwhelmed public officials and well-placed congressman make it their priority." Most people won't know the difference until they see it. But then it will be too late. And this only happens once every 50 years.

And then along came Gary Rayor and Jiri Strasky's cable stayed pedestrian bridge at Beltline. You have to appreciate the irony of finally landing an impressive bridge structure and then having it turn out to be a gateway to Gateway and the entrance to sprawl instead of ennobling the crossing of the Willamette River.

Nevertheless, this was a nudge the I-5 Bridge design needed. Concrete arches were quietly raised up above the roadbed, giving the span a bridge-like look and feel at last.

This Through Arch type bridge will be a little more expensive we are told, but then we're worth it, especially if we'll just shut up about cable stayed bridges and city entrances and let them get those big trucks rolling.