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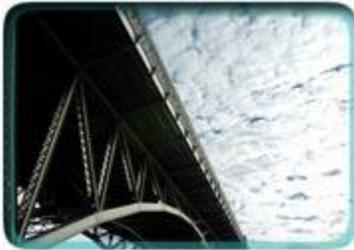
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CITYSPACE

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structural sufficiency: The Strawberry Mansion Bridge is more than an example of transportation infrastructure. It's an important part of Philadelphia's urban landscape. By: Michael T. Regan

Bridges should play a big role in Philly's waterfront development plans.

by Joanne Aitken

In 1800, the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia gave birth to an engineering marvel: the mammoth long-span, timber truss bridges that put audacious American builders on the map and sparked a new era in bridge-building worldwide.

The earliest was the Permanent Bridge at Market Street, the first covered bridge, followed shortly after by the Colossus at Fairmount, which spanned an incredible 340 feet and drew skeptical European engineers who doubted that such a span was possible. Both bridges were as elegant in appearance as they were bold and innovative in design. But not quite 200 years later, demonstrating atrophied civic pride, we replaced the Walnut Street Bridge with an ugly chunk of steel and concrete that might easily be mistaken for a piece of the King of Prussia interchange.

With Mayor John Street's welcome announcement that Philadelphia will turn its attention to waterfront development, it's time to consider the role our bridges might play. Despite a number of handsome spans, Philadelphians seem to have little affection for their bridges, with the possible exception of the Ben Franklin. For other river cities—Pittsburgh, New York, Chicago, Boston, Paris—the identity of bridges and the city is intertwined. If Philadelphia wants to improve its quality of life by embracing its rivers, our bridges need to be part of the solution. But for that to happen, some attitude adjustments are needed.

First, let's stop thinking of our bridges as transportation infrastructure and start viewing them as integral pieces of the urban landscape. Bridges are big, freestanding, long-lived objects. What urban bridges look like is important. When faced with the prospect of a new downtown span, Boston had the good sense to demand a structure that matched the design quality of its best buildings. The stunning result that now distinguishes Boston's skyline shows that elegant engineering is every bit as important as appealing architecture.

Second, let's value our historic bridges just as much as we value our historic buildings. If you take the riverboat tour of Chicago, you'll find that the historic bascule bridges, each with its own distinctive headhouse, are as much a part of the tour as the city's famous skyscrapers. In contrast to the well-cared-for Chicago River bridges, Philadelphians might recall the flowing design of the ornamental iron guardrails, now gone, that graced the former Walnut Street Bridge, suggesting—unlike its replacement—that a bridge can offer visual delight. Or consider Paul Cret's handsome University Avenue Bridge, which lost the ornamental guards marking its approaches during recent repairs.

And before it's gone, take a look at the South Street Bridge. From a distance you can still admire its graceful piers and the unusually slender profile of its span, the result of the engineer's decision to use the beams both to support the deck and serve as guardrails. There will soon be many new residences with a view of its replacement, but chances are it will not be so fine as the one we have now.

Third, let's remember that urban bridges are an integral part of the street grid which, though it serves cars, belongs primarily to pedestrians. The walk across the Walnut Street Bridge to a performance at the World Café should be just as pleasant—if not more so—than the walk down South Broad to the Kimmel. The pedestrian scale lighting added to the bridges in 2000 was a move in the right direction, as are the new connections to the Schuylkill River Trail, but traffic-calming measures are sorely needed and narrower travel lanes, dedicated bike lanes and wider sidewalks would be good places to start. Add shops and sidewalk interest at the ground floor of buildings all the way up to the water's edge—as Penn's eastward expansion promises on the western bank—and the visual appeal of well-designed guardrails, sculpture, seating or plantings, and pedestrians might be encouraged to stop midspan and take in the view. Alternatively, if Chattanooga's recreational riverfront commands a bridge dedicated solely to nonvehicular use, why can't a major city such as Philadelphia follow suit?



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urreal architecture on view below the abutments that begs for an

ds—bridges included—to develop a vibrant and beautiful river's edge.
potential. In the first decade of the 19th century, Philadelphia's focus on
the Schuylkill showed the world something it hadn't seen before. Surely we can approach the Schuylkill with just a
fraction of that civic pride of place in the first decade of the 21st.

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