

NEW YORK

New York Magazine

November 24, 2008

Circulation 429,116

New York Magazine is a weekly general editorial publication geared for an audience that is generally college-educated working professionals, its readership includes both area residents and visitors interested in keeping in touch with local lifestyles. It is created to report on and interpret recent events in the New York metropolitan area, it contains news about the city as well as reporting and criticism about restaurants, the arts and entertainment, shopping and services in New York. The publication is comprised of reader letters, opinions, news, features and interviews. It has a circulation of 429,116 and a one-page ad rate of \$39,980.

Building a New WPA;

Great architects need a great canvas. New York needs infrastructure. And a lot of people need jobs. A proposal.

BYLINE: Justin Davidson

LENGTH: 2126 words



Illustration by Zohar Lazar

Over the past eight years—the time it has taken America to absorb the body blows of 9/11 and Katrina, launch two wars, watch its savings shrivel and its debt balloon, and elect its first black president—a team of experts has been studying the question of whether to fix the rickety old Tappan Zee Bridge or throw it out and buy a new one. The panel has finally plumped for the second option: a \$16 billion juggernaut, with room for express buses and

commuter rail. Hallelujah! Now all we have to do is rustle up the money, assume the budget will double, and wait another decade or two. That, and demand a design worthy of a Hudson crossing. The study group's report doesn't touch on that topic, as if actually designing a bridge were a finishing touch, something you do after the technical issues have been taken care of. Yet the need for a new bridge is a chance to build a marvel. Which is why it's time to call an artist-say, Santiago Calatrava.

Calatrava is the world's preeminent magus of bridges, a wizard of white steel spans that are always performing some aerial flourish. Tapered masts point diagonally into the sky, tethered to a deck by fine white threads. Beams bend into parabolic curves and tilted arcs. Curving columns narrow as they meet the ground, recalling graceful ankles. His bridges deny their massive burdens and seem barely anchored to the earth. Calatrava is far from the only architect capable of building a Tappan Zee masterpiece, but his portfolio reminds us that we live in a time of wondrous spans.

With another depression lurking just out of sight, a Calatrava over the Hudson would recall a period that America seems halfway ready to reprise: the New Deal. In 1933, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office, much of the country was making do with Victorian bridges, horse-and-buggy roads, and improvised sanitation. FDR began binding the country together with sinews of concrete and cable. We need to do for the 21st century what FDR did for the twentieth-invest in worn-out highways, our frail electrical grid, our public transit, brittle bridges, and water supplies. A new New Deal, equipped with an Obama-era version of the Works Progress Administration, could put millions back to work, modernize the country, nudge the economy towards recovery, and produce a barrage of working monuments. It would be a stimulus package that keeps on stimulating long into the future.

This late-model WPA would take advantage of a moment when great architecture, buoyed by a long construction boom and debilitated by the bubble's pop, is looking for a purpose. The international corps of architectural auteurs, who have spent a decade or two dreaming up fantastical museums and ever more luxurious condos, could be challenged to build in American cities-particularly ours-on the grandest possible scale. They should be given the chance to tackle society's most massive, crucial, and abiding projects: viaducts, junctions, sewage plants, power plants, and bridges.

There are negative reasons to cultivate an interest in bridges-if you don't, they might fall down-but for positive reasons, consider the ring of noble behemoths with which the visionary engineer Othmar Ammann linked New York to the rest of the world. Clunkier structures would have done the job, but this would be a poorer city without the suite of elegant structures wrought by the Swiss-born engineer. In one amazing eight-year run, he opened the Bayonne, George Washington, Triborough, and Bronx Whitestone bridges, and followed up with the Throgs Neck and Verrazano-Narrows. Ammann considered himself as responsible to the future as he was to his employers. For the George Washington Bridge, he drew up a gossamer colossus with steel latticework towers supporting a thin concrete deck. "Mere size and proportion are not the outstanding merit of a bridge," he said shortly after the dedication. "A bridge should be handed down to posterity as a truly monumental structure which will cast credit on the aesthetic sense of present generations."

Begun in plenty and completed in penury, the GWB heralded a decade of transformative public works, and we are still living off the Depression's handsome largesse. New Yorkers buy stamps at New Deal post offices, snap a Frisbee across Central Park's New Deal lawns, dip below the Hudson through the New Deal's Lincoln Tunnel, and flush their toilets out to a New Deal sewage plant on Wards Island. The billions that FDR pumped into the physical environment are still reaping a return, a fact "that should be remembered in times when commitment to public life ebbs and belief rises that we simply cannot afford to invest," writes Robert D. Leighninger Jr. in his 2007 book *Long-Range Public Investment: The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal*. "There was a time in our history when people found ways to combat despair by building for the future. The evidence is all around us." Next time you meet someone old enough to have paid taxes during the thirties, say, "Thank you."

We gawp at previous generations' epic feats of engineering, yet relegate their modern equivalents to the eye-glazing category of Infrastructure. That bleak word applies mostly to places people rush through or avoid entirely. Nobody wants to linger in even the nicest airport or have an elegant incinerator next door. Everyone is in favor of sending waste away, but do we really have to think about it, or put that new water-treatment plant ... here?

The result of this thoughtlessness is a nation of decrepitude. **Barry LePatner**, a construction lawyer who wrote the book *Broken Buildings, Busted Budgets*, is a Cassandra of infrastructure, bristling with alarming statistics. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, 38 percent of New York State's 17,361 bridges are either "structurally deficient" or "functionally obsolete." The numbers are similar in New Jersey and Connecticut. "If you knew that your children on the school bus were crossing a structurally deficient bridge, no different from the I-35W in Minneapolis"-which collapsed in August 2007, killing thirteen people-"would you stand quietly by?" LePatner says. "Until Americans understand that, we're not going to attend to this problem and we'll see an increasing number of bridges collapse." Elected officials know they stand to gain more from opposing one of these projects than from nudging it along. "Anyone in office who is told 'We need \$80 million to repair this bridge' is going to say, 'If I have \$80 million coming to my state, I'd rather use it for a park and have a ribbon-cutting,'" says LePatner.

During the presidential campaign, Barack Obama floated a proposal for a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank, which would deploy \$60 billion over ten years to guarantee loans and assist localities in floating bond issues. That sounds like a lot of money until you start going through the country's to-do list. The American Society of Civil Engineers concluded in a 2005 study that the country's infrastructure was rotting faster than it could be repaired, and that it would cost \$1.6 trillion to avert a plague of exhausted levees, rampant blackouts, crumbling bridges, dysfunctional trains, and streams of filth gushing into waterways.

A new Tappan Zee has been-and will be-a hard sell, and a Calatrava design would enliven those who are just waiting to cry boondoggle. The public generally gives the thumbs-down to projects with awesome costs, geological timetables, and abundant opportunities for mismanagement, corruption, inconvenience, and environmental misery. Naysayers will point out that Calatrava's latest achievement, a footbridge in Venice, wound up costing four times its original budget. The blame for overruns, however, usually lies more in muddled

management than in elegant design. Since the price of a new bridge climbs constantly, it's the delays and fumbles that make the price balloon. Good design can save money, trimming construction time and demanding more work from stronger steel. Ammann, for example, brought in the George Washington Bridge \$5 million under budget.

In recent years, bridges have acquired fresh flights of possibility. Thanks to technological advances, a new bridge can weigh less, stretch farther, endure longer, and bear more traffic than ever. The great span of Norman Foster's 2004 highway viaduct in Millau, France, resembles a consort of stringed instruments, lifted on slender concrete-and-steel pillars high above the valley floor. A vertical gash appears in each pylon as it rises to the roadway, so that from certain angles it appears that the traffic passes through the eye of a needle. Or consider the Millennium Bridge in Gateshead, England, designed by Wilkinson Eyre, a lovely, lyrelike thing. Its pair of steel bows strung with filaments swivels up to let ships pass beneath the arcs or down to offer pedestrians a curving boardwalk.

New York, after decades of neglecting its engineering monuments, has lately taken better care of basic maintenance than most cities do, and it's fitfully capable of thinking big. The cataclysm at ground zero unstopped a geyser of entrepreneurial thinking that has produced some fine if fantastical ideas. The architect Eytan Kaufman, to take one if-only instance, has worked out an alluring vision for a mile-long Rialto linking the Javits Center with Weehawken, New Jersey. The Hudson World Bridge would be a car-free playland of lawns and plazas, with a blimp-shaped convention or exhibit hall suspended overhead. It'll never happen, but without such untethered imagination, nothing else would, either.

One of the best places to seek uplift about the city's infrastructure is atop a cluster of stainless-steel-clad silos churning 200 million pounds of human waste. At Polshek Partnership's Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant, two quartets of shiny new "digester eggs" on blue-glazed pedestals rise over Greenpoint's industrial flatlands, dazzling motorists on the Long Island Expressway. A glassed-in catwalk links their peaks, affording views of midtown Manhattan and the seamless bulk of the great machines.

From that perch, you can see the future and smell the past. In six years or so, a closed system will trap the plumes from the plant's remaining 40-year-old open tanks, so schoolchildren won't wrinkle their noses when they file into the visitor center. Yes, visitor center: There, a fountain designed by Vito Acconci dodges between indoors and out, reminding the neighborhood that this epic-scaled apparatus is meant to cleanse water and return it to nature. At night, the eggs are washed in blue light, courtesy of the lighting genius Hervé Descottes, who turned the plant into an urban beacon visible from Manhattan's East Side high-rises. Prada recently scouted the complex for a photo shoot. "You can't hide it, so flaunt it," says Jim Pynn, the plant's enthusiastic superintendent, with a grin. That would make a fine motto for infrastructure's next wave.

What We Need New York has gotten good about fixing old infrastructure but is still slow to build anything new. Here's a shopping list.

Tappan Zee Bridge NYS Thruway Authority Constantly under repair and terminally obsolete, the 1955 bridge has already gotten all the tinkering it can take.

Hudson World Bridge Eytan Kaufman A ribbon of park plus an extension to the Javits Center, slung over the Hudson. More thought experiment than actual plan, but what a thought!

Fulton Street Transit Center Grimshaw Sure you can tuck it under a moneymaking high-rise, but then you lose the glass cupola that Grimshaw proposed, with its lofty ring of retail and views of St. Paul's.

Moynihan Station David Childs, others The perpetually deferred dream of a grand West Side terminal makes the rank, dank warren of the current Penn Station that much harder to accept.

What We Could Have Europe has done a better job than we have of nurturing and caring for its infrastructure, and its best projects have become a civilization's mark on the land.

Alamillo Bridge Santiago Calatrava, 1992 The mast, joined to the span by a choir of diagonal cables, appears to have been swept back by the wake of rushing cars. This Seville bridge exhorts traffic not to putter but to flow gracefully across.

Gateshead Millennium Bridge Wilkinson Eyre, 2002 In a bridge-rich town over the trafficked Tyne, this elegant crossing distinguishes itself by swiveling up to let ships pass and down for pedestrians.

Millau Viaduct Foster + Partners, 2004 Cutting across a valley in southern France and taller than the Eiffel Tower, the viaduct is a reminder that big roads don't have to despoil the landscape.

Pont du Gard Anonymous Roman, first century A.D. The job of getting water from spring to public fountain produced an epochal statement of Roman culture.