

# Aqua Teen Hunger Force Attacks I-93!

---



---

*Are structures, such as bridges, that are designed to be sleek and “clean” destined to always remain so?*

---

BRIAN BRENNER

**I**n the “we have more things to worry about than this” department, a strange story unfolded in Boston on January 31, 2007. A cable television network unleashed a guerilla advertising campaign on the citizens of the metropolitan area. The network was advertising one of its late-night television cartoons, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. This show is about talking French fries and a meatball. The advertisements consisted of small electronic signs that lit up at night. These little signs were posted all over the city, and several were placed on bridge columns. The lights formed the shape of one of the television show’s characters. The concept behind the unconventional advertising campaign was that it would be able to bypass traditional, older outlets and methods (with their older customers). The ads were directed at hard-to-reach young men, who apparently do not read much but like to buy things and drive their cars.

At night, the small signs looked like something made out of “Lite-Brite” toy panels — not very threatening. During the day, it was a different story. The signs had wires poking out the back, with exposed circuitry and batteries. They looked like bombs. For several weeks the signs were not noticed (and that is another issue worth contemplating). Then, a transit worker saw one attached to a steel column supporting the double-deck structure of I-93 just north of the Zakim Bridge. Not knowing what it was or why it was there, the worker called in an alarm, and forces quickly mobilized to detach and destroy the threatening device. More signs were found, setting off a chain reaction of hysteria paralyzing half the city. Interstate 93 was closed, along with the Mass. Avenue Bridge and Storrow Drive. A hospital was temporarily evacuated. Sapper squads were called in to disarm more signs as they were located. The signs were blasted and disabled by water cannons. Eventually the media got wind that the devices were harmless. After many hours of massive traffic jams and dislocation that some thought rivaled the *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast in 1938, things eventually quieted down and the incident moved into the recrimination phase.

## Aftermath

Bridges are prime targets for guerilla advertisers because of their high visibility and low



**FIGURE 1.** Protest banner hanging from a bridge.

clutter. A sign can really stand out on a bridge because these structures are not designed to be billboards. Bridges also provide a built-in audience of thousands who drive across and under them. Sometimes this audience is held captive in traffic jams, and then what better place than that to provide a diversion? However, bridge structures are usually not designed for advertisements because engineers envision sleek superstructures with graceful lines and smooth surfaces. Lite-Brite advertisement panels are usually not included in construction bid documents. But the jarring discord of the ads is part of the appeal for underground advertisers, who get an effective, low-cost product that really sticks out and makes an impact. Although, in the case of the cartoon campaign in Boston, the ads also had another, unanticipated impact.

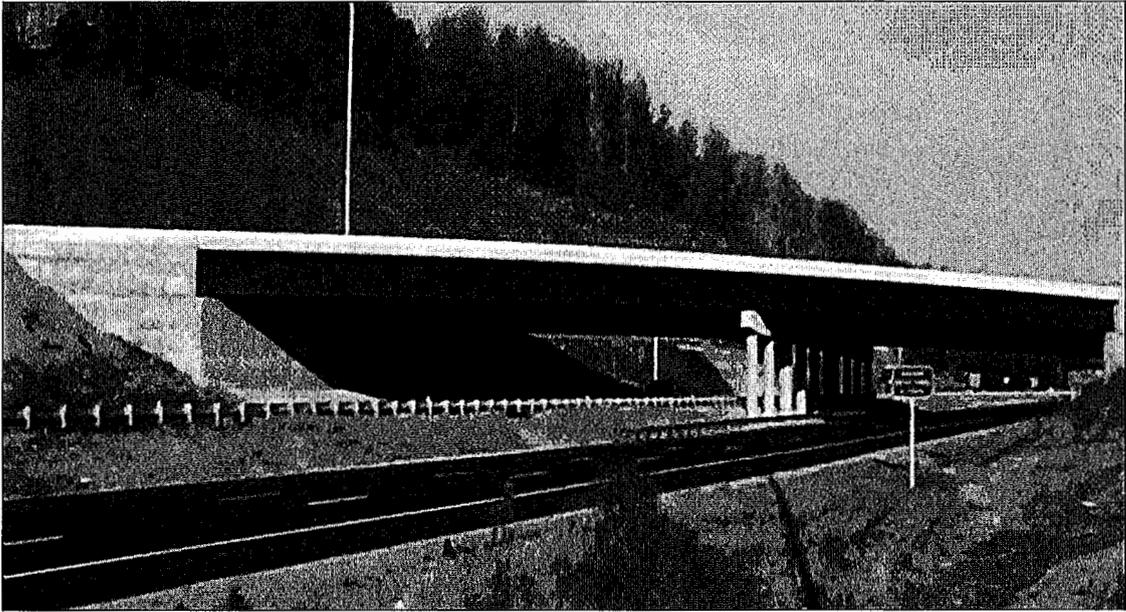
### **Public Structures & Public Forums**

Recently, bridges have started to be used for a lot more applications than just crossing roads

and rivers. Banners are now hung from bridge decks and pedestrian fencing. Many of these banners are large sheets welcoming soldiers home from tours of duty abroad. Some banners have been used as a means of protest (see Figure 1).

A website created by a group in North Carolina protesting the Iraqi war provides helpful, practical instructions on how to hang a banner from a bridge.<sup>1</sup> For example, one instruction from the site states that protesters should “attach about nine grapefruit-sized water balloons to the bottom edge of banner” to help avoid having the banner ravel and roll.<sup>1</sup> The instructions did not include asking for permission to hang the banners ahead of time, but they did suggest that participants should take photographs to document the event. This way, the protest and message could live on through the Internet and blogs.

In 2005, a bridge in England unwittingly served as the canvas for a nasty divorce battle.<sup>2</sup> The participants hung dueling banners.



**FIGURE 2. A bridge with pier cap and columns too thin in proportion to girders.**

His said: "WENDY, I WANT A DIVORCE. JBS." Hers said: "NO WAY. YOU ARE THE CHEAT! WENDY." Documentation is not available on whether or not JBS or Wendy prevailed, but apparently the bridge made it through fine.

### **Banner Maintenance**

A lot of energy goes into hanging up the banners. Not much goes into taking them down. Driving around on the freeway these days many examples of decaying banners, frayed sheets with fading, running lettering can be seen. However virtuous the original message, torn and frayed banners become no better than graffiti, defacing the bridge and its surroundings. Sometimes the message is unintentionally sad, like when a soldier is being welcomed home, but the sheet is ripped and you cannot read all the letters. At that point it is not much of a welcome.

### **The Issue of Aesthetics**

In its essence, the bric-a-brac hung on bridges is jarring because it violates the fundamental principle of "form follows function." It can be argued that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but most manuals on bridge aesthetics offer a different argument — that good aesthetics can be achieved by the proper dimensioning

of a bridge structure and the treatment of its details. This engineer-friendly approach stipulates that aesthetics can be quantified to an extent. Engineers do not have to be artists to design aesthetically pleasing bridges. Guidelines can be followed to at least end up in the right ballpark. For example, piers should be in proportion to beams, not too wide and not too thin. Figure 2 shows a beam bridge where the pier columns and caps are too thin in proportion to the girders. Bridges should appear and be proportioned with dimensions that properly reflect the structural function. To an extent, this design approach is even clear to non-engineers, although they probably do not have the vocabulary and training to understand why a particular structure is ugly.

With the basic form and shape of bridge properly determined, other treatments can be thought of as "add-ons." Context-sensitive design stipulates that structures should be designed in harmony with the surroundings and not oblivious to them. The Federal Highway Administration defines a context-sensitive solution (CSS) in this way:

"CSS is a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach that involves all stakeholders to develop a transportation facility that fits its



**FIGURE 3. The original Broadway Creek Bridge.**

physical setting and preserves scenic, aesthetic, historic and environmental resources, while maintaining safety and mobility. CSS is an approach that considers the total context within which a transportation improvement project will exist.”<sup>3</sup>

This design goal is admirable (and somewhat obvious). A subset of the approach states that the appropriate context can be achieved for bridges by improving surface, texture and color. Sometimes a context-sensitive design argument supports a false architectural façade in front of the actual structure. For example, a beam bridge may have masonry arch panels stapled in front to make it look like an arch bridge. For the Broadway Creek Bridge reconstruction in Boulder, Colorado, the original, historic masonry structure (see Figure 3) was replaced by a concrete beam bridge (see Figure 4). The new bridge had arch-shaped fascia panels.

This approach to bridge aesthetics can work if the underlying structure is properly dimensioned to begin with. The Broadway Bridge project manager commented:

“A lot of bridges, such as this one with its false arch façade, are very utilitarian in

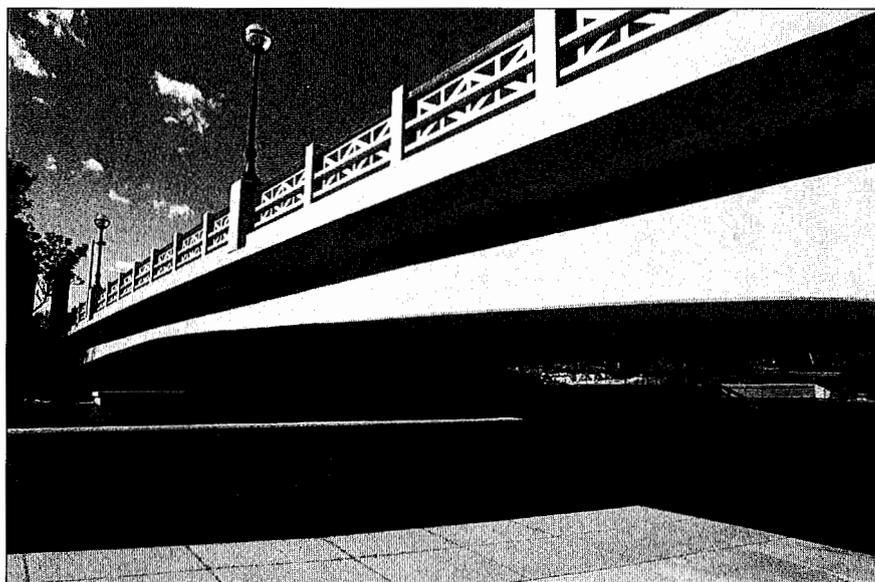
their design. . . Often in a bridge rehabilitation, the architect will cover the bridge up to look like something it isn’t. . . One of the things that we stressed in the design was that we wanted it to be elegant and pure in form.”<sup>4</sup>

So, if the underlying structure is not properly dimensioned, the results may be less than optimal. To paraphrase Dick Cheney, who paraphrased someone else, “You can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.”

### **Implications**

There has been a long-standing debate over whether we should have a squeaky clean, ordered infrastructure versus a more free-wheeling, laissez-faire approach. Some argue that graffiti is art, and others argue that it defaces the environment. Boston’s Aqua Teen bridge assault is not likely to resolve things one way or the other, or lead to a constructive contribution to this discussion. The company that conceived the advertising campaign was widely denounced for its seeming lack of basic common sense — in the year 2007, is it really a good idea to advertise with devices that look like bombs? The parent company ended up paying millions of dollars to Boston agencies

to pay for overtime and emergency services provided during the height of the hysteria, and the head of the cartoon company resigned. However, that payout was only a fraction of the total cost of the event since there were also the thousands of hours of lost time of people stuck in the traffic jams, and the ensuing lost business. Yet, the



**FIGURE 4.** The new Broadway Creek Bridge.

offending company could have easily paid ten times as much and not gotten the quality of exposure and buzz that advertisers crave. Even with the black eye, the multi-million dollar payout and a top executive falling on his sword, the campaign was probably determined to be (behind closed, hermetically sealed doors) a whopping success.

So there is a built-in motivation and drive for future guerilla marketing approaches of this type, maybe not as brazen as the Lite-Brites and, it is hoped, not as disruptive. In these future campaigns, bridges may be not just bridges but giant spanning billboards, ripe for the next huckster to sell their wares.

*BRIAN BRENNER is a Senior Principal Engineer with Fay, Spofford & Thorndike in Burlington, Mass. He also teaches engineering classes at Tufts University. He served as Chair of the editorial board for Civil Engineering Practice for seven years.*

#### REFERENCES

1. [www.nc.indymedia.org](http://www.nc.indymedia.org) [web site now inactive and not archived].
2. [www.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2005-10-14-bridge-couple\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2005-10-14-bridge-couple_x.htm).
3. [www.fhwa.dot.gov/csd/what.cfm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/csd/what.cfm).
4. [www.c-b.com/information%20center/transportation/ic.asp?fID=23&pID=216](http://www.c-b.com/information%20center/transportation/ic.asp?fID=23&pID=216).