

Go Jump Off a Bridge

What happens when an elegant and awe-inspiring structure is put to a use that its designers never rationally planned for?

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One day as I was driving, the B-Gees came on the radio. It was the song, "Staying Alive." (You know the chorus: "uh-huh, uh-huh, staying aliiiiiiiive!"). I don't think the disk jockey was doing a 70s retrospective that day or had an agenda to bring back disco. It was just one of those random radio moments. Since I didn't have a disco past, the song didn't make me want to relive my disco past. But it did remind me of bridges.

If you don't remember (or if you have purged everything related to disco from your memory), the song was from the movie, *Saturday Night Fever*. In that film, John Travolta played a character named Tony Manero. During the day, Tony was a clerk in a dead-end job, but every night he went out to clubs where he was the ultimate dancer. He and his friends wore white polyester leisure suits and they danced to Donna Summers at the discos. (Many decades later, Travolta was in the movie, *Hairspray*, where he was not a

hopeful teenage punk but someone's mother [really]. He also sang and danced, this time in a dress. So, in the arc of Travolta's movie career, there was a full circle and closure of sorts.)

Bridges Must Mean Something

What I recall most strongly about the movie was not the dancing or the cultural phenomenon of disco, but the bridges. *Saturday Night Fever* employed some crude bridge symbolism to advance its plot. One bridge was symbolic of good, and another bridge represented evil. The Brooklyn Bridge was cast as the good bridge. Doing so is not a stretch since almost everyone loves the Brooklyn Bridge. In the movie, this bridge represented hope and a successful future. It was Tony's lifeline and a connection from his grubby, dead-end life in Brooklyn to glamorous, sophisticated Manhattan. The bridge was both a physical and symbolic connection.

If things didn't quite work out, there was another bridge looming in the distance, a darker, sinister span. Playing the part of the evil bridge was the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. In the movie, this structure represented feelings of despair and hopelessness. It was a place where the film's major characters performed reckless stunts, pushing their limits. Unlike the Brooklyn Bridge, the Verrazano-Narrows doesn't have pedestrian walkways. The film writers got around this point by having the characters park their car and hang off the side. In the middle of one of these stunts,

Tony's friend realizes how futile his life is and falls to his death.

Probably the two bridges weren't requested to audition for their roles. But in casting the bridges, the director chose the soulful, grandfatherly Brooklyn Bridge to represent life and wisdom. To symbolize death and despair, he chose a sleek, soulless modern span. This choice could have worked in reverse, I suppose, depending on the type of movie and the plot. If it was a horror movie, the sleek, modern Verrazano-Narrows could have been the good bridge, representative of salvation and the triumph of modernity over feudalism. In contrast, the vaguely Frankensteinian Brooklyn Bridge, with its medieval gothic towers, could have been the evil span. So when you're going symbolic with bridges, context is important.

The Jumping Off Point

In the movie, the poor Verrazano-Narrows Bridge (my personal all-time favorite bridge) suffered the indignity of being cast as a suicide bridge. In the real world, many bridges have attracted individuals attempting to commit suicide, and these structures have had the misfortune of becoming associated with the act. Some bridges attract a reputation for being the place to commit suicide and become unofficially known in their areas as "The Suicide Bridge" instead of by their real name. A bridge across the Choptank River on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay goes by this name. There is even a Suicide Bridge Restaurant next to the bridge. Evidently, the stigma of the name has not hurt business. It's a seafood restaurant offering some good, eastern shore fare. You can dine along the river and watch the boats and birds. The present Suicide Bridge, for which the restaurant is named, is the most recent of three spans crossing the river:

"The original bridge was a wooden structure built around 1888. The second bridge, also wooden and only one lane, was built around 1910. The third and current bridge, which is also wooden but covered with asphalt, was built in 1967 and dedicated in January 1968. Local residents appar-

ently have always called it Suicide Bridge."¹

Over the years, many residents have met their end at the bridge. Most of the cases were considered to be suicide, but the documentation suggests that some may have been due to foul play. The restaurant owners don't emphasize the less palatable aspects of the location and name. Their advertisements focus on the food, the pleasant scenery and the surrounding tourist attractions. But even though it's not played up, a little notoriety doesn't hurt (as long as it's tastefully done, of course). Diners visit for the dramatically presented soft shell crabs, but the unspoken implication is that they may witness an unfolding drama of a different sort.

In Seattle, office workers next to the Aurora Bridge have suffered trauma from seeing so many people jump off it that grief counselors make regular rounds to the nearby dot-com businesses.² The Aurora Bridge is a hundred feet or so above ground, prominently crossing the canal connecting Union Lake to Elliot Bay. It is at a site that is both highly visible and anonymous, two features that seem to attract those desperately inclined.

After a while, some bridges become associated with suicide, for no other reason than their repeated selection in the past. The All-America Bridge (also known as "The Y-Bridge") in Akron, Ohio, is well known in this way.³

"But perhaps the most reasonable explanation for the suicides is this: The bridge's reputation has become self-fulfilling. So many people have ended their lives here that it's almost become the purpose of the structure."

The landing point for the Y-Bridge is not in the woods, but a densely-populated neighborhood. Over the years, residents have gotten used to the grisly events.

Top of the World

The Golden Gate Bridge is perhaps the world's most famous bridge for suicides. It has walkways that provide spectacular views

for healthy pedestrians, but they unfortunately serve as a magnet for the emotionally disturbed. Interestingly, the bridge's notoriety for suicides is one factor in the Verrazano-Narrows's lack of pedestrian walkways. Robert Moses, Chairman of the Triboro Bridge and Tunnel Authority, was determined to avoid the Golden Gate's fate for New York's signature span. The pedestrian walkways that were originally included in the design were deleted.⁴

Mitigation

The Golden Gate Bridge is currently the subject of a project to reduce suicides. Different approaches under evaluation are documented on the bridge's website.⁵ The evaluation is being conducted as part of a study using typical engineering terminology and methods, and is being conducted in phases. Phase 1 was the "Wind Tunnel Testing of Generic Suicide Deterrent Concepts." This part of the study was completed in 2007. Its goal was to evaluate how modifications to bridge parapets and railings might impact the wind stability of the bridge. The conceptual designs included additions to pedestrian railings, complete replacement of the railings and nets extending over the sides of the bridge to catch people who jump off. The concepts were modeled in wind tunnel tests to ensure that these additions to the structure would not end up damaging the bridge. Subsequent phases of the work include preliminary design, eventual final design of the selected alternative and then construction.

In this project, the terminology and methods of the engineering work, so typical and commonplace, butt against the reality of what these additions are actually being designed for. Any engineering project requires rational procedures to address predictable problems. In this case, an engineering project to prevent suicides requires rational procedures to address irrational, and unpredictable, behavior. This application results in an uncomfortable mix. Bland, systematic engineering terminology can describe and depict "options" in a "study"; however, the design objective is neither systematic nor rational.

Some argue that those desperate enough to commit suicide will do so no matter what preventative measures are taken. In that case, a nice, tall, exposed bridge provides a public service of sorts since it focuses (or localizes) the activity and thus limits its extent throughout the community. The counter argument is that by reducing the ease of the act at a person's most desperate moment, perhaps the behavior can be ultimately avoided and successfully treated.

Furthermore, heated discussion on the Golden Gate project has focused on the appearance of the end product. The Golden Gate Bridge is one of the most beautiful structures in the world. Adding nets on its sides will not be aesthetically pleasing. Maybe it is inappropriate to consider the bridge's appearance if lives can be saved. But, on the other hand, marring the beauty of the Golden Gate Bridge is something that should be avoided if possible.

Jump Start

If you're going to jump off a bridge, it's better to be attached to a giant rubber band, or at least to be wearing a parachute. These things happen on Bridge Day at the New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia. Thousands converge on the giant arch bridge every autumn. The span crosses about 850 feet above the river, making it one of the world's highest bridges. The weekend-long festival includes pancake breakfasts, rappelling off the side of the bridge, whitewater rafting down the river and parachute jumps from the span.

The Bridge Day festivities are a celebration of life. Even so, because the span is so high and exposed, the New River Gorge Bridge itself is not immune to suicide attempts. Unfortunately, bridges will continue to be associated with this difficult illness. Yet, at least for one day in West Virginia, after jumping off a bridge, you get to climb back up and do it again.

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