

Brian's Bridges



Who creates a bridge, I wonder. A bridge starts out as just air. There is a space over the river or highway where the bridge will cross. Many years later, the plans are drawn, and construction equipment appears at the site. For those not familiar with the process, the design and construction of a great bridge must all seem a little mysterious. Somehow the piers appear in the harbor, and towers rise out of the water. If it's a suspension bridge, cables are strung from the top, and pieces of deck are lifted to make the span. The whole thing is connected, paved, and blessed, and on the appointed day, the signs are unsheathed, the lights turned on, the speeches made, and the wondrous structure assumes its place in the pantheon of anonymous infrastructure.

When I was a toddler, my parents drove to Grandma's house, and we passed the site of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. This magnificent structure was under construction across the Narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island. The partially built towers leapt out of the water on their artificial islands. Huge cranes hoisted the steel, and giant spools strung the cables. This made a big impression on my four-year-old eyes, and soon I was building suspension bridges with my toy blocks. I received an early structural education in this way, figuring out the best way to anchor the string cables. After experimenting, I used heavy pieces at both anchorages to resist the tension. I mimicked the construction process, using my toy boats to transport the deck sections in the "harbor" and raise them into place. When the structure was done, I contacted the owner and showed him my work.

"What do you think of my bridge, Dad?" I said to the client.

"Nice job," he responded.

If it was a special creation—and the suspension bridges usually were—the other client allowed it to remain overnight before cleanup the next day. There was a streetlight outside my bedroom window, and I remember going to sleep with the dim glow reflecting off the string cables.

It appeared that I was a budding engineer, so my mother wrote to the governor and got tickets to the opening ceremony of the Verrazano Bridge. A big crowd gathered at the Staten Island toll plaza on a bright and sunny November day for long speeches and pontification. Most of the participants didn't have much to do with the bridge's design and construction, other than to show up for the dedication. Robert Moses, the chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, pointed to the chief engineer, Othmar Amman, but didn't mention him by name.* This was as close as the speakers got to acknowledging the engineers, since Amman himself was not invited to the podium. I still have the Opening Day brochure and commemorative stamps in my bridge scrapbook. My mother wrote on the front of the scrapbook, "Brian's Bridges."

A great bridge is the product of the imagination and sweat of hundreds of people. Maybe this is why a bridge is not easily identified with individuals and why a bridge's creation and birth seem anonymous. Very few of the structures are named in honor of the people who created them. In fact, most bridge names honor people who had nothing to do with the work. In the case of the Verrazano Bridge, naming the structure after its creators would have required a very long name. Society expects that engineers and constructors will fade into the background, like the bridges. The builders can be proud of their creations but must be satisfied that the symbolic act of naming, the official recognition of the creation, will be transferred to someone else.

In March 2003, my father visited Boston. It was a warm afternoon after a long, bitter winter. We went to visit the Zakim Bridge, just days before the first part of its staged opening. The Zakim Bridge stood tall and sleek in the middle of dowdy, old downtown Boston. Hundreds of thousands had watched the structure appear from nothing, with its futuristic concrete pylons and slender cables strung to the deck one piece at a time. Upon completion, the structure quickly became an infrastructure icon for the city, with its image appearing on bank advertisements, at the

*Caro, Robert. (1975). *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, Vintage, New York.

beginning of newscasts, and in dozens of unrelated publications. On the Fourth of July, the blue tower lights were supplemented by a red glow at night, so with the white cables, the bridge was patriotic, a giant cable-stayed American flag.

We stood by the bridge. I had little direct involvement with this bridge design, but I said to my father:

“What do you think of my bridge, Dad?”

“Nice job,” he replied.