

THE BIG STORY

WANT AN OLD BRIDGE? MANY CITIES SAY YES.



BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

POSTING IN **ARCHITECTURE**

COMMUNITIES FIND A SECOND LIFE FOR
OBSOLETE TRAIN AND VEHICLE BRIDGES AS
LINEAR PARKS.



http://i.bnet.com/blogs/11th_street_bridge.jpeg

http://i.bnet.com/blogs/11th_street_bridge.jpeg The 11th Street Bridge over the Anacostia River lies just a half-mile from my house in Washington's Capitol Hill neighborhood. But for years, it wasn't on my radar at all. Perhaps I used the bridge at some point -- when I was unwittingly carried across it in a tangle of cars -- because I had missed my turn. And like most Washingtonians who use the river for recreation, I've headed to the Potomac River -- even if it's a farther drive to get there -- as the water body of choice. The Anacostia, among the most-polluted urban waterways in the United States, is often called the city's "forgotten river."

So when the 11th Street Bridge, built in the 1960s, was demolished last year, I barely noticed. The few times I headed in that direction, I saw there was a big construction project underway, but for me, that only meant disrupted traffic patterns. And I certainly didn't look closely enough to see that the bridge wasn't fully demolished -- or to

wonder why. By the time I understood the plan to reuse this old bridge, I realized that the leftover parts combined with the riverside development already underway were going to completely overhaul the connection I have to my own neighborhood. Just a few months ago, this space was barely part of my orbit. These days, several times a week, I orbit the 11th Street Bridge.

Value in preserving the old

According to the Federal Highway Administration, 66,749 bridges in the United States were classified as structurally deficient last year, representing more than 10 percent of our country's total highway bridges. As these bridges fall out of service, states are faced with decisions. Some bridges are disassembled and relocated, others are demolished and, increasingly, some are used for other purposes.

Of course, adaptive reuse is nothing new, and buildings such as the Old Post Office Pavilion in Washington (which will become a Trump hotel next) and the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria (now an arts center) have served multiple purposes for more than a century. But cities are increasingly defined by their civic spaces, and there is a new and growing recognition of the value of historic preservation.

Repurposed bridges are some of the most public examples, said Lionel Lynch, principal at HR&A Advisors, a real estate and economic development firm that has worked on projects including New York's High Line, the Toronto Waterfront and Brooklyn Bridge Park. "Folks are more interested in adaptive reuse, and there's a trend of us caring about our cities again," he said. "There's an interest in our leftover

[structures], and if it's something that's in the way, the question is, do I tear it down or find a way to use it?"

Manhattan's beloved High Line -- created when a dilapidated 1930s elevated freight rail structure was built into a meandering walkway on the West Side -- has become an international model for reuse. But before the first section opened in 2009, the bridge hadn't been used in 20 years.

"When there was a desire to build in Chelsea, this thing was in the way, and people were asking, 'How do we get rid of it?'" Lynch said. "So someone has to rediscover it first. To the extent that infrastructure is getting rediscovered in urban centers, there is an opportunity to make it an amenity. At the end of the day, it requires incredibly inspired design and policy decisions. It's a luxury to be able to repurpose something, but it's a great one."

Removing obstacles to the river

When the 11th Street Bridge was demolished, the structural piers of one span were left intact. I didn't notice these giant leftover slabs until Scott Kratz, director of the 11th Street Bridge Park, recently led me on a bike tour to the new vehicle bridge. The master plan, he said, is to use the old piers as supports for Washington's first elevated park. In essence, a new bridge will be built alongside the new car bridge; there will be some sort of span, but it will be used for recreation, not to support vehicles. Kratz said the goal is that the park will re-engage the community with the Anacostia River, reconnect the Capitol Hill and Anacostia neighborhoods separated by the river, serve as an anchor for

economic development and provide a safe place to exercise and play.

We stood with our bikes on the bank of the Anacostia, leaning against a shiny new railing. That spot used to be the base of the old bridge; the historic Navy Yard (where the deadly shootings occurred in September) sat to our right and the new bridge to our left. In front of us, the three old piers awaited their fate.

"For many people, the only way they experience the river is commuting over it by car," said Kratz, wearing a red Capital Bikeshare helmet. "Like many cities, we've done an amazing job at creating obstacles between people and the river. We've turned our backs on it for generations."

The 11th Street Bridge Project came about as many of these endeavors do, starting with community members tossing around ideas and generating grassroots support. In this case, Kratz, whose full-time job is at the National Building Museum, has lead the charge. Over the last 18 months, with the support of the D.C. Office of Planning, he has held more than 150 meetings to find out what residents would like to see.

"At all the meetings, I ask, 'Is this something the community wants?' I've heard a pretty enthusiastic, 'Yes,'" Kratz said. "Then I ask what people would like to see. Even with such different demographics on the two sides of the river, we've heard the same ideas." The community's wish list includes places to get food, performance space, an environmental education center, urban agriculture and demonstration gardens, canoe and kayak launches, public art and a

modern playground.

To date, the group working to make the bridge a reality has raised nearly \$500,000 to help fund a design competition and staff the project. Kratz said the design will be selected early next year, and the park is expected to open in 2017.

He and I biked on a 16-foot wide sidewalk, halfway across the new car bridge, stopping at an overlook stretching above the river. "Imagine this overlook, but it continues all the way to the banks," Kratz said. With the water about 40 feet below us, we could follow the river and see the Navy Yard, Nationals Park, planes taking off from Reagan National Airport, and far in the distance, the Air Force Memorial in Arlington, Va. "Imagine," he said, taking in the view, "morning yoga on the Anacostia."

"Unique identity for a community"

Among all the aged bridges that have been given a new life as a park or recreation area, there are countless challenges in making that reuse a reality. Some communities don't have the funding to rebuild or reinforce a dilapidated bridge or to keep programs going after an elevated park is complete.

"Each one of these bridge projects is still difficult to pull off," Lynch said, "but the ones that tend to be most transformational are ones that have that bigger picture." The bigger picture for the High Line was the argument that value could be created through tax revenue from the adjacent areas -- instead of an apartment overlooking an abandoned

railroad, Lynch said, "it now overlooks one of the most innovative spaces in the world, which makes the apartments more attractive and creates a perpetual revenue stream."

In Washington, the 11th Street Bridge will "stitch the city together," as Kratz likes to say, connecting two wards that have historically stayed on their respective sides of the river. Anacostia has been the city's most crime-ridden area, but Kratz isn't worried about crime spreading as a result of the bridge. He said the fact that this has been a grassroots effort means that community ownership over the new space will ensure its proper use and maintenance. "Safety will be a requirement," he said, "as parks turn from beauty to blight if not properly maintained."

More than anything, each elevated park across the country gives its city an opportunity to create something distinctive, something that reflects the pulse of the community it serves. "It's not only a new way to enjoy the river," said Jess Zimbabwe, executive director of the Urban Land Institute's Rose Center for Public Leadership. "It's a unique identity for a community that often draws on its industrial history. Building that identity is a national trend."

A recent report on elevated parks by graduate students in urban and regional planning at Virginia Tech says elevated parks have become trendy new places. "The 'High Line effect,' as some have termed it, has captured the imagination of citizens and policy makers alike in recent years," the report says. "As certain types of transportation infrastructure have become obsolete, opportunities arise to creatively

adapt parts of that infrastructure to meet other community needs."

Among the new linear parks or those under construction:

- **Chattanooga, Tenn.'s Walnut Street Bridge:** Constructed in 1891, the bridge over the Tennessee River served vehicle traffic until 1978 when the bridge was closed for safety reasons. A park opened on the bridge in 1993, linking downtown with the city's underserved North Side. Economic resurgence in both areas has been attributed to the rehabilitation of the bridge.

- **Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park:** The 19th Century Poughkeepsie-Highland Railroad Bridge, which was once part of a major rail corridor, was converted into an elevated park spanning the Hudson River. The park stretches 1.28 miles, making it among the longest pedestrian bridges in the world. It opened in 2009.

- **Chicago's Bloomingdale Trail and Park (part of the 606):** An abandoned, century-old, 2.7-mile Canadian Pacific Railway viaduct in Chicago will be converted to an elevated park, linking four ethnically and economically diverse Chicago communities (Wicker Park, Bucktown, Humboldt Park and Logan Square) and five neighborhood parks. It is expected to open to visitors by the end of 2014.

- **Providence River Pedestrian Bridge:** As part of the I-195 relocation project, old piers will be used for a pedestrian/bike bridge over the Providence River, connecting the Fox Point and College Hill neighborhoods. The park is expected to open in 2015.

- **Philadelphia's Reading Viaduct Project:** The elevated viaduct's tracks, which carried Reading Railroad commuter trains into the city for nearly a century, will be turned into an elevated public space, connecting economically and culturally diverse communities and spurring development in North Philadelphia.

A bridge for the community

Turning an abandoned bridge into an elevated park requires more than creating a walkway and planting some greenery. The key for all of these civic spaces is programming. Whether it's rotating art or food demonstrations, the goal is to give people reasons to use the space.

"It has to be more than just, 'Oh, I want to go look at this cool old thing,'" Lynch said. "How do you get them to want to see this cool old thing more than once?"

Each bridge is unique because it reflects the needs of the communities it serves. Kratz explained that in Washington, the bridge won't have to be flat because vehicles won't have to drive on it -- the final design might have ramps or various levels. But given that the bridge crosses the Anacostia, Kratz said, it's important that all the programming incorporate the water in some way.

The river has a way of drawing people to its banks, even if it's a waterway infamous for its pollution. The Anacostia is becoming healthier -- a long process -- but one day, Kratz said, it should even be swimmable. Knowing that, and understanding that I'll have an elevated park a short bike ride from my house -- and a nearby place to

put my paddleboard in the water -- has given me a new passion for the place where I live.

These days, instead of going to the gym in the mornings, I've been exploring my neighborhood in a new way. I've come to love the new riverfront path along the Washington Navy Yard and the adjacent waterfront park between there and the ballpark. I often find myself on the boardwalk, jumping rope or stretching in the middle of a bike ride. The path loops across the vehicle bridge, and I take advantage of that crossing to enjoy the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail on the other side. It's more than biking or running along the water -- it's crossing above the river and taking it in from all angles. The other side of the river was once far away, metaphorically; it was only a place I would reach by car, and even then, rarely. Now, it's accessible, and it's quickly become an important part of my world.

I often see great blue heron on the water. Recently, I saw a beaver swimming in the river and took it as a sign that the water is slowly becoming more welcoming to wildlife. Kratz said when he kayaks on the Anacostia, he's seen a pair of nesting ospreys; not too far away, he said there was a pair of nesting bald eagles. "Who would think," he said, "on this polluted water."

Artistic rendering provided by the D.C. Office of Planning and photo by Flickr: Glenn Harris

OCT 5, 2013

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