The Other Side of Bridges

BY Stephen Harby

The trussed framework in **Untitled** (1960; oil on Masonite, 36x28), by William Harby, portrays the bridge in its most basic essence of engineering and function—to convey people speedily across the landscape.

We tend to think of bridges as works of engineered infrastructure: highly utilitarian and essential for crossing over obstacles such as rivers, canals and uneven terrain. That concept brings to mind one of my first artistic influences—my father, William Harby (1927–2015), a part-time visual artist. He, being influenced in turn by abstract expressionist Franz Kline (1910–1962), created large paintings that celebrated the power of bold, iron bridges and fast movement high in the air—all the better to zoom from one side to the other. No time to stop for the view—that would cause an accident. (See *Untitled*, opposite).

Our journey, however, takes us around the world and back in time to a slower, preindustrial era when, traveling by foot, there was time to stop midspan to enjoy the view, set up shop or have a meal with friends. These bridges transcend the mere necessity of getting to the other side. Functional engineering gives way to complex architecture, and utility is enhanced with a sense of place that can be occupied and enjoyed for a more sustained visit during the course of a journey.

We travel first to Italy, discovering the Ponte Vecchio, spanning the Arno as it passes through Florence, (see *Ponte Vecchio*, top), then continue north to Venice to see the Rialto Bridge, crossing the Grand Canal (see *Rialto Bridge*, above). Both bridges, of comparable span, are, in effect, continuations of the urban fabric of street and shops. They provide accommodation by way of flanking walkways, as well as a place at midspan to pause and admire the view of the Arno and the Grand Canal, respectively.

The Rialto Bridge was designed in the late 1500s by Antonio da Ponte and Antonio Contino. The great Renaissance master builder and architect Palladio had also submitted a design. Although his proposal

Ponte Vecchio
by Stephen Harby
graphite and watercolor
on paper, 7½x11¼

The Ponte Vecchio (old bridge) is perhaps the earliest example of a bridge that combines the needs of basic transport with commerce and habitation. There has been a bridge at this spot in Florence since Roman times, but the current structure dates from 1345. The span crossing the river is surmounted by the Corridoio, a corridor designed in 1565 by Vasari to connect the Palazzo Vicchio and Uffizi (then Medici ducal offices, now a museum) with the Pitti Palace. Below the corridor is a collection of small structures—house shops with dwellings for merchants on upper floors. At midspan, three open arches allow people to gather and look out at the river.

Rialto Bridge
by Stephen Harby
graphite and watercolor
on paper, 7¾x11

The Rialto bridge, designed by Antonio da Ponte and Antonio Contino and constructed from 1588–91, follows the pattern of the Ponte Vecchio, with shops along the pathway. Here, however, a unified composition of seven identical arches on either side of the span climbs to the taller arch of a central gabled pavilion. In addition to an inner walkway, there are two flanking external walkways, affording river views throughout the crossing. Below the walkways, a single arched span allows unimpeded passage for traffic in Venice's Grand Canal.

Palladian Bridge
by Stephen Harby
graphite and watercolor on paper, 4½x6½

The 18th-century great house in Stowe, England, has extensive gardens populated with various follies (decorative structures with the appearance of a functional use), one of which is the Palladian Bridge, likely designed by James Gibbs in 1738. Unlike the Ponte Vecchio and the Rialto Bridge, the central passage of this Palladian structure is covered. Once on the bridge, one has the impression of being inside a room.

U Bein Teak Bridge
by Stephen Harby
graphite and watercolor on paper, 2½x8

Technically, the U Bien Bridge, near Mandalay, Myanmar, isn't a bridge but a causeway—a raised passage over water or wetland. This kilometer-long walkway, supported by regular teak pilings (columns sunk into the ground), crosses a broad marshy expanse and, in the middle, a tributary of the Irrawaddy River. Constructed in 1849–51, the causeway isn't wide enough for carts or cars, and bikes or motor bikes are prohibited, but a constant stream of walkers uses it to pass between two hamlets and the main highway. Several roofed pavilions provide shady spots to pause along the way.

wasn't executed at the time, we can journey to Stowe Garden, in England, where we find a smaller bridge based on Palladio's erstwhile Venice project (see *Palladian Bridge*, opposite, top). It's a roofed bridge with a superstructure of Doric columns and gabled roof.

To see a non-Western version of the same idea, we travel halfway around the world to Mandalay, Myanmar, where a kilometer-long teak bridge spans a river and swampy wetlands to connect two small farming communities (see *U Bein Teak Bridge*, opposite, bottom). In addition to being a marvel of functional engineering in wood, the bridge also serves as a gathering place where locals congregate to sell their wares, catch up with the daily gossip or pause for a meal.

Finally, we return to the present day and travel to Tehran, Iran (which I visited in 1998 and 2016, during more peaceful times), where the Tabiat Bridge (Persian for "Nature Bridge") spans a ravine and a freeway (see Aerial Parkway, right). Created in 2014 as a pedestrian link between two public parks, the bridge provides a gathering place on two levels with places to sit and several restaurants. Showcasing a high-tech tubular metal space frame, it was designed by Leila Araghian and won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2016. This structure brings us full circle to where we began this journey—with the celebration of the marvels of engineering.

These five bridges from three eras and three diverse cultures have in common the fact that they offer identifiable and memorable spaces where people can gather and do things, whether it's selling gold, hawking vegetables or meeting friends. As such, they've metamorphosed from simple bridges with one function to complex enclosed urban settings that add social interaction to the mundane activity of getting from point A to point B.

Stephen Harby is an architect, watercolorist, former faculty member of the Yale School of Architecture and founder of Stephen Harby Invitational, which organizes travel opportunities for small groups.

AERIAL PARKWAY

The Tabiat Bridge gets its name from the Persian word for "nature." For my overview painting (top), I wanted to capture the idea of the bridge's organic form, immersed in a natural setting between two parks. To do this, I used the green tones of the landscape to define the tubular struts rather than actually painting or drawing them in. This also conveys the idea of transparency that the structure possesses. My close-up view (above) reveals the multiple levels of the bridge, including an open observation deck at the top.

TOP TO BOTTOM
Overview of Tabiat Bridge - Tehran, Iran
by Stephen Harby
graphite and watercolor on paper, 4½x6½

Close View of Tabiat Bridge - Tehran, Iran
by Stephen Harby
graphite and watercolor on paper, 4¾x6¾