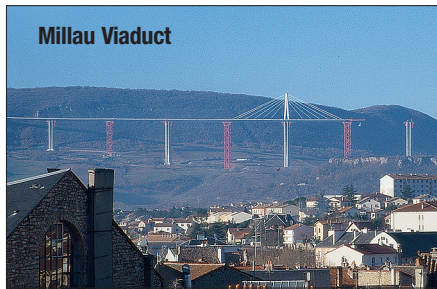


America Can Build Better Bridges

When he first saw the design for the Bay Bridge reconstruction, former California Gov. Jerry Brown (D) said it “speaks of mediocrity, not greatness.” He could just as easily have been describing most bridges designed and built in the U.S. in the past 20 years.

When it comes to innovation in major bridge projects, we in the U.S. have taken a back seat to our counterparts in Europe and Asia. One case in point is the Millau Viaduct in France. Built for \$523 million, the Millau boasts the tallest piers of any bridge in the world. Perhaps most impressively, the 900-ft-high, 8,070-ft-long structure opened just 38 months from the day construction started.

That is just one example of the international community’s growing superiority at constructing signature bridges that marry beauty,



Millau Viaduct

functionality and constructability. Asia also has some beautiful spans. One is the Sutong Bridge in China, which will become the world’s longest cable-stayed bridge when completed in 2007.

Contrast these structures with the much-maligned San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, which is almost 300% over budget and months behind schedule. California State Sen. Tom McClintock (R) called it, “The biggest fiasco in California transportation history.”

The Bay Bridge may be an extreme example of the troubles plaguing U.S. bridges, but it is not an isolated case. The chronology of bad decisions and missed opportunities is a case study of where we go wrong in the design and construction of major bridge projects.

Here are the four major areas where I see U.S. bridge professionals misfiring:

- Designs that only look good on paper. We may have lost our edge when it comes to designing and building great bridge structures, but we’re still the best at selling them. Time after time we see wild, crazy design concepts that are not supported by real-world details and sound engineering. When these “dream designs” go out to bid, reality hits home because most contractors run for cover. Those that do bid come in way over budget. The design team then sits around wondering what went wrong.

- Living in the past. Pricing also is a problem because the people specifying these jobs keep relying on the past to dictate the future. It’s time we realize that we live in a volatile market where material prices and availability fluctuate constantly. You can’t expect concrete to cost \$200 cu yd simply because it once did. You need to consider inflation, availability and accessibility when specifying jobs.

- The famous “CYA” syndrome. When things go wrong, instead of pulling together and working toward solutions, we too often point fingers and cover our own butts while the project languishes in limbo.

- Big egos. Too many designers focus more on figuring out how to get the lion’s share of the credit instead of looking for ways to get the job done in the best, most efficient way. I’m convinced this is one reason we don’t embrace the “master builder” concept that seems to work so well both here and abroad.



FINLEY

I appreciate the challenges of building a major bridge project in the U.S. And I’m not un-American. In fact, I’m drawing attention to this problem because I believe that American bridge designers and builders belong among the world’s elite. I believe we can get there again.

We just need to tap into the American creative spirit and can-do work ethic that delivered world-renown bridges such as the Verrazano Narrows, the Golden Gate, and even the relatively recent Sunshine Skyway. We need to stop letting the ways of the past bog us down, set aside our own egos and focus on the best way to deliver bridges that look good, can be built efficiently and give owners the best bang for their buck.

The sooner we begin approaching projects with those goals in mind, the sooner we can regain our stature as world leaders in innovative, creative bridge design. ■

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