

Archiving the Aurora Bridge

For my project archiving the city I chose to focus on the Aurora Bridge. The idea was originally to study suicide in general in public space, with the thought that it was qualitatively different from suicide performed in private. This communication act could potentially change the nature of the space in which it occurred. It is at this point that I was directed to the Aurora Bridge as a place well-known for facilitating suicide.

Background

The Aurora Bridge, officially named George Washington Memorial Bridge opened on February 22, 1932 to a crowd of approximately 15,000. The bridge opened with a great deal of fanfare including a remote opening by President Hoover, a huge American flag, fireworks, songs, and an estimated crowd of 15,000 people (Duncan 1982). Once the fanfare had died down, it was discovered that 13 other bridges in the state had been named after George Washington and the moniker “Aurora Bridge,” became popularly accepted (Dorpat 1983). Since then, more cynical types have taken to nicknaming the span “Suicide Bridge” among others (Duncan 1982, Zoretich 1979). For a sense of the dimensions of the bridge, the Aurora Bridge is 2,955 feet long from end to end. The middle section of the bridge spans 800 feet and stands 175 feet above the water of the Ship Canal (Zoretich 1979).

As for its role as a launching point for would be jumpers, the Aurora bridge has an even longer history than it does carrying cars; a shoe salesman started the legacy in January of 1932 when he jumped off the north end of the bridge, a month before the

bridge opened to traffic (Zoretich 1979). Since that time, it's estimated that over 200 people have followed suit (Mudede 2000).

Data

In order to investigate the way in which the Aurora Bridge could potentially be changed by jumpers, I decided to focus mainly on the media's coverage of the jumps. This includes articles that cover an individual jump as news and feature stories that draw attention to the bridge as a vehicle for suicide in general. I also uncovered a few references in some unexpected places including quotes in obituaries about the Aurora Bridge (Beers 1994 and 1997) and even references in the business section (Seattle Times Staff 1990, May 24). To find these articles I employed the Lexis Nexis database, the Seattle Times website, Google searches and the Northwest Newspaper Archives at the University of Washington Libraries Special Collections. I supplemented this with a few interviews of students, coworkers, and a city official with Seattle's 911 services. Links to all the applicable articles are included in the bibliography.

Patterns

Of the articles I examined, 17 were actually about a single instance of a person attempting or seriously contemplating jumping from the bridge. Most of these were from local news-in-brief sections sandwiched among other local briefs of the day. And while, I'm sure that there are more articles out there to be discovered, it definitely seems like a small amount of coverage compared to the 200+ that have jumped. Of these, 5 were instances of people getting talked down rather than jumping. The remaining 12 included 7 'successful' suicides and 5 survivors. This survival rate of jumpers represented in this (albeit small) sample of media coverage seems weighted toward survival. While no one

knows the exact numbers, survival is not likely for those that do jump. Depending on body orientation, a person jumping hits the water at about 55 mph with a force of 28,000 foot-pounds. And about 20% of all jumpers don't hit the water at all but an adjacent parking lot (Mudede 2000).

So What?

In strict terms of public health, the Aurora Bridge isn't that much of a factor. While suicide is a major problem and the second most common cause of death in the United States among adults ages 20 to 24, only 47 of the 2,663 suicides in King County between 1959 and 1974 involved jumping off the bridge (Bjorhus 1996, Read 1974). Although it's been suggested a few times throughout the years, constructing a suicide net has yet to gain enough momentum because most people agree that if not the Aurora Bridge, people will find somewhere else.

But even if it's not nearly the epidemic we make it out to be, for some of us, suicide is a part of our conception of the Aurora Bridge. A businessman at his company's annual meeting promised to jump off the bridge unless his company started performing better (Seattle Times Staff 1990). Police stop and question people who seem to linger a little too long on the bridge (Godden 2002). And people in general make comments that acknowledge that if you're looking to kill yourself, Aurora is the place (Beers 1994 and 1997, Bohlig 2004). In one satirical article, the bridge was even suggested as a means to curb population growth (Watson 1997). In this sense the Aurora Bridge acts as a "communicational resource that can be used to transmit information beyond the bounds of interpersonal contact" (O'Toole 2000). It's not just a bridge to drive over any more.

Evaluation of Findings

It's tough to evaluate how much coverage we should give to jumpers. Certainly, the percentage of jumpers compared to other ways of dying and even other modes of suicide make it a tiny minority. And there seems to be some good reasons not to publicize it as much. Police don't report the total number of jumps from a bridge because they fear it will draw more attention and bring more jumpers (Mudede 2000). And this does make some sense when at least one jumper I read about drove all the way from Bellingham just to jump (Lacitis 1994). One report even included his work telephone at the end of an article about the Aurora Bridge just in case anyone got any ideas from his story (Zoretich 1979).

In terms of emphasizing survival, it seems like it could equally help or hurt the situation. If reporter Charles Mudede is correct, people who jump at the water are secretly hoping to be part of that elite club that survives despite the odds (2000). But as one Aurora neighbor put it, "whenever a reporter writes a story about the bridge it seems to [unreadable] them and someone else jumps off in a few days....But sometimes when one jumps and lives for a while, with broken bones and in terrible pain, that seems to stop them" (Zoretich 1979). So depending on the sincerity of the individual, different stories might attract or repel potential jumpers.

Evaluation of Methodology

In gathering articles, the Internet definitely made the process pretty easy. One advantage I found over paper archives was the ability to find the news-in-brief stories that included actual accounts of jumping rather than just large feature stories about the bridge

as a whole. That being said, the archive at Special Collections let me find articles that predated what I was able to find on the internet by decades. Most of the historical information I found came from these sources.

For a follow-up to the work I've done, I think it would be interesting to focus more on interviews of those involved with the bridge in day-to-day circumstances and those related to suicides. I also think it would be petrifying. For those only marginally involved with the bridge, it would just be a matter of arranging interviews with complete strangers. But for those involved with the bridge, there is obviously a lot of emotion wrapped up in the space. Those who survive often are gushing with a new zeal for life while the family members of those who don't survive obviously have strong feelings about the bridge as well (Mudede 2000 and Lacitis 1994). It would be difficult to interview these people with the focus of the study being on the bridge as a vehicle for communication rather than something more immediately personal, though I think it would be entirely worthwhile.

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