

Spanning the Bridge Color Gap

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It is a short step in New York from emergency to esthetics. Alarm about whether the city's bridges were falling down has been replaced by concern about their color. Possible disaster has been averted by a \$244-million Federally assisted rehabilitation plan that will include the repainting of 186 of the city's 1,336 publicly owned bridges. This effort at protective maintenance has triggered an esthetic debate equaled only by the controversy over the Empire State Building's living color.

Councilman Henry Stern, possibly influenced by the arrival of spring, is calling for colors inspired by nature — sky blue, forest green and cloud silver. Who, in this city of inspired controversy, is going to decide the correct combination for the George Washington Bridge and the Palisades — autumnal rust or high-rise beige? If nature proves insufficiently inspiring, should the Triborough Bridge, the next scheduled to be painted, be the mud-and-concrete color of Bruckner Boulevard for the Bronx or a mélange of tasteful speculator-brick tones for Queens?

A few years ago, a team of architects selected a galaxy of colors for the footbridge to Randalls Island across the East River; it suddenly blossomed in bright purple, hot pink and chrome yellow. But the trendy colors, alas, have faded to give the bridge the look of a party favor left out in the rain.

How does the City Art Commission, which has jurisdiction over city-owned structures, feel about the

matter? Well, the commission is not about to make the plunge like Steve Brodie. There is no precedent for having an opinion about color; but it will write a letter to Transportation Commissioner Ameruso, suggesting that it is an esthetic decision. Meanwhile, the vacuum is being filled by politicians of every stripe and hue.

As a rule, not many people pay attention to the color of bridges. Left to their own devices, engineering and maintenance departments tend to favor poison green or battleship gray. When the dowager span of the East River, the Brooklyn Bridge, was repainted, the Landmarks Preservation Commission insisted on a return to the original tones of tan and brown, a scheme that has been followed for the Queensboro Bridge as well. Except where historical precedent is a factor, quiet shades of silver or blue-gray will strike the right note with any sky or setting.

Decorator colors do not belong on bridges, certainly not on New York's great beauties. These bridges are the city's spectacular adornment — and its last ceremonial entrances. Once one came into New York like an emperor, through the tepidarium of the Baths of Caracalla that was Penn Station; now one scuttles in underground or through an anonymous airport, like a mouse. To come by way of the bridges at night, when they are strung with necklaces of lights, is still to be promised the enchantment of which city myths are made. No color embellishment is needed for one of the most dramatic views in history.

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