

August 14, 2024

To the Portland Design Commission

I'm writing to offer the strongest possible endorsement of the "inverted Y" option for the new Burnside Bridge. For over three decades, as a writer, curator, and activist, I've advocated for strong design in Portland's architecture and infrastructure projects. For about half that stretch, I've lived in the Buckman Neighborhood and have used the Burnside Bridge more days than not with all four modes of transportation, but most often by bike.

Sometimes "strength" in design means deference to our stunning natural landscape or our fabric of small blocks and clusters of historic buildings. But other times, "context" can be heightened by a powerful contrast: a gesture that crystalizes the relationship between new and historic. The new Burnside Bridge calls for the latter kind of strength.

The geographic symbolism is potent: at the intersection of Burnside and the Willamette, Portland's quadrants converge on a span connecting one of the region's longest streets. The most prominent buildings are towering and new and provide the perfect backdrop for the sharp punctuation mark of the inverted Y. For drivers and bus riders, it offers a gateway, for pedestrians and bicyclists, more unobstructed vistas. For everyone, the inverted Y will be a more impressively scaled, sculptural expression of the bridge's engineering.

The other two options fail to meet the opportunities and challenges of the context. The proposed basket-weave arch, like all the other arch options, combines clumsily with the rest of the bridge. It will look like what it is: two bridges pieced together. The cable-stay options better combine for a singular composition. But V option imposes its bulk over pedestrians and bicyclists. And viewed against the backdrop of vertical buildings at either end, it will create visual tension reminiscent of the Guggenheim Museum's relationship to the horizontal ground—novel at first glance, but ultimately headache-inducing.

The Design Commission needs to strongly weigh in on this decision. The CDAG's potential reliance on the County's public survey in its decision is worrisome, particularly when the survey Multnomah County created is so deeply flawed: it only measured the opinions of who happened to hear about and took the time; and it didn't allow users to rank their choices. If we're to decide on a momentous, publicly funded addition to our urban landscape with a survey, it should at least be built on a representative sampling of the public. Better to trust those who are professionally trained who have studied, built, and considered bridges in varying contexts all over the world. With the inverted Y option, we will add a unique new entry to Portland's bridge collection and strongly mark this geographically symbolic site, while respecting and enhancing the surrounding context--and future users' experiences—for many decades to come.

Thanks for your consideration.

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