A Bridge Not Too Far

When I was a little kid, we couldn’t cross the street in front of the house. So we ran in a pack on our side of the street, and the kids on the other side had their own gaggle. Every once in awhile, a parent would escort us across the street so we could have a “play date” with those strangers on the other side—but they already had their groups and all the good roles were taken, and their rules were just a little different than ours, and, well… it just never worked out really. When I was older (*much* older), I bought my first house. I was informed that “the neighborhood”—everybody on both sides of the street, from one cross-street to the other—got together in the summer for a potluck picnic. “The street” was no longer a barrier. It had become a common thread, something we all shared (a *res publica*, as the Romans called it, and the root meaning of “republic”).

We are a community divided by a river. For the most part, we stay on “our” side of the dikes downtown (well, maybe not for work or school, but for many of the things we do “after hours”). From our earliest days, the river has been a major barrier—first with only a ferry crossing, then with a single bridge (and a railroad crossing at the foot of it, with huge traffic snarls at rush hour when it seemed there was always a train going through). But it doesn’t have to be that way. In many of the recent Envision 2020 meetings, people talked about our common identity as “the river valley,” where both banks are part of the same flow.

But that common identity will be hard to nourish as long as crossing is so difficult. We have done a lot to speed the auto across the river—the old Main St. bridge has been replaced by the Veteran’s bridge (which flies above those troublesome railroad tracks), and the North Star and the Highway 14 bridges have been added. But those crossings do little for the walker or the biker. Yes, there are sidewalks—with high-speed traffic right at your shoulder, throwing up dust and street grit and pushing wind gusts that threaten to blow you off the bridge. We have two downtowns a thousand feet apart, and no comfortable way to stroll from one to the other.

Some ideas are floating around to provide pedestrian-friendly connections. Perhaps a bridge could be flown from somewhere near the Sibley Park to somewhere near the traffic light on Lookout Drive & Lee Blvd. Perhaps a bridge could fly over the dike near the beginning of Minnesota St. (behind Blockbuster), over the dike and the highway to come down on Range St. Or maybe a separate pedestrian bridge could be hung off the Veteran’s bridge. Wherever it goes, such a pedestrian bridge would have to be more than a bare, utilitarian1500-foot ribbon leading from point A to point B with no exit, no places to tarry, exposed to the winter winds and baked by the summer sun. There would have to be turnouts and overlooks, so people could sit and admire the river (don’t laugh—we are cleaning up the river, and the drought will break). Perhaps we could even do something like old London Bridge, which had shops and stalls along its sides to make the bridge itself a destination, rather than just a means to scale the distance.

It’s too soon to settle on any one idea, on any one approach. But it’s long past time for us to start thinking about ways to bring both banks of the river together. After all, we’re not children anymore.

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