

## “The Cabrillo Bridge”

*The sumptuous proportions, the proud dignity of the bridge, encourage great expectations, and one is not disappointed. While admiration is aroused for the engineering skill which made this bridge possible, the thought persists that the real architect of this colossal concrete viaduct was a much higher power than the official engineer.*

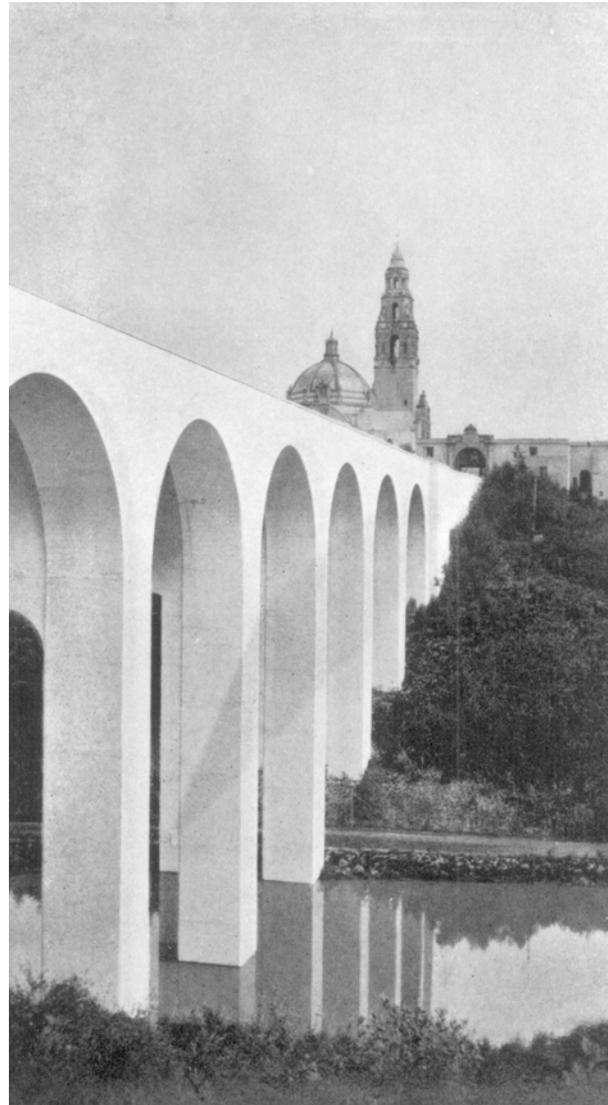
--Eugen Neuhaus, *The San Diego Garden Fair*, 1916.

With allusion to a higher power, art scholar Eugen Neuhaus praised San Diego’s newly built Cabrillo Bridge in 1915. Rising 120 feet above a picturesque canyon and lagoon, *El Puente Cabrillo* provided a majestic main entrance to the Panama California Exposition in Balboa Park.

Construction of the bridge began in December 1912 under the supervision of Frank P. Allen, Jr., the exposition’s Director of Works, using the designs of Thomas B. Hunter, a San Francisco engineer. Built for a cost of \$225,154, the bridge was an innovative multiple-arched, cantilever structure—the first such bridge in California. The 56-foot arches were not true structural arches but actually hollow, box-like pedestals that supported the 450-long roadway above the canyon. The road itself extended about a quarter mile, linking the Sixth Avenue side of the park with the California Quadrangle at the exposition’s entrance.

Hand labor did most of the work. Soaring scaffolds rose from the canyon floor as workers placed steel reinforcing and built wooden forms for concrete. In March 1914, the *San Diego Union* exulted in the “monumental structure [of] seven concrete arches, supported on fourteen huge concrete pillars, carried by caissons down to bedrock beneath the soil.” “Each pier carries a load of 1,000,000 pounds,” boasted the newspaper, “and 1,000,000 board feet of lumber were required for the forms alone.”

The design inspiration for the Cabrillo Bridge is unclear but Allen and Hunter appeared to have followed the style of historic bridges in Spain, such as the first-century Roman bridge at Alcántara, or the arched viaduct at Rondo. Critics generally approved of the design, though some complained the bridge needed ornamentation. Prof. Neuhaus thought it looked “a little naked” but noted that the warm sun of San Diego would add a “fine play of strong cast shadows within its arches.”



As the bridge neared completion, workers installed a dam in the canyon below to create a small lagoon with “water lilies and aquatic life of every description.” The *Laguna de Puente* greatly enhanced the beauty of the structure. Unfortunately, the State Board of Health soon found “the shore of the lake infested with the larvae of millions of mosquitoes.” Workers dutifully lowered the water level and cleaned out the pond.

The Cabrillo Bridge was completed in April 1914. While it was intended as a pedestrian pathway to the Exposition, Franklin D. Roosevelt, then the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, made an inaugural auto crossing of the bridge along with the San Diego mayor Charles F. O’Neill and other officials. Throughout the two-year exposition, auto traffic was reserved for dignitaries. Commoners walked across the bridge.

The prohibition on private cars seemed to relax after the closure of the Exposition in 1917. The City Park Commission announced “that as long as automobiles did not abuse the privilege or endanger pedestrians they will be welcome.”

But the bridge attracted more than auto traffic. In a city that lacked towering buildings, the height of Cabrillo Bridge made it a magnet for suicide attempts. In October 1931, Mayor Walter Austin reminded the city council that seventeen people had “made the leap into eternity” and were becoming a danger to people traveling on the road below the bridge (which ran parallel to the eastern side of the canyon lagoon).

The council ignored the mayor’s suggestion that barbed wire netting be stretched below the bridge parapets to make the bridges “suicide proof.” Besides, as one official observed, “after a council meeting there are times a councilman might want to make use of a bridge.”

In 1934 a despondent sailor jumped from the bridge but splashed safely in the lagoon in four feet of water and mud. An ambulance crew found the man, bruised but unharmed, “sitting on the side of the lily pond underneath the bridge, his head cupped in his hands,” complaining of a headache.

On February 28, 1948, “the dream of San Diegans for nearly 15 years,” became a reality when the Cabrillo Freeway opened through Balboa Park. The 7.1 mile stretch of U.S. Highway 395 (State Highway 163) passed under the Cabrillo Bridge and over the drained and filled Laguna de Puente. Interestingly, the 56-foot wide archways under the bridge fit the four-lane highway perfectly.

Travel ran smoothly on the scenic highway but once again suicides became a concern, this time as a threat to peak hour traffic. In June 1950, city workers installed high, wrought iron fencing on both parapets of the bridge. In authorizing the action, the city council made it clear that “protecting Cabrillo Freeway motorists from falling bodies was more important than in stopping self-destruction.”

In July 1951, a small fire ignited in easternmost span of the bridge. Redwood timbers, used as concrete forms in the original construction, smoldered for several hours. Once put out, the blaze was quickly forgotten. But as Balboa Park historian Richard Amero noted, the fire was an “omen,” and “nothing was done to reduce the likelihood of future fires.”

The “future fire” erupted in the pre-dawn hours of June 17, 2004. Once again, aged wooden concrete forms ignited--possibly by arson--inside the bridge columns. The fire was difficult to reach and extinguish. Firefighters saved the structure by punching holes in the bridge sidewalks with jackhammers to pump in foam and water.

A major rehabilitation of the Cabrillo Bridge followed the near-disastrous fire. A one-year Caltrans project costing \$3.5 million, repaired broken concrete, replaced corroded steel, finally removed old wood from the original construction, and ensured the health and seismic safety of the aging bridge. Now nearly a century old, the Cabrillo Bridge continues to enhance the beauty of San Diego’s huge urban park.

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Originally published as “Balboa Park's Cabrillo Bridge began as a pedestrian span,” by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 17, 2008. p. CZ.3