Design fantasies for obsolete Bay Bridge span
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Tuesday, January 12, 2010

It’s a safe bet that most Bay Area residents view the eastern half of the Bay Bridge as an aged structure that can’t be replaced soon enough.

But a handful of designers see much more, an icon ready for a bold new life - such as a working farm that shares the deck with a hotel. Or a park stretched atop long blocks of housing. Or a hotel shaped like the prow of an ocean liner.

As fantastical as these notions sound, they’re products of a recent graduate course at UC Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design. And the architects who conceived the semester-long studio say it starts with a valid question: Why demolish one of the Bay Area’s most recognizable structures rather than retain at least some of it for public use?

"There's no reason it can't be transformed into something wondrous, a fusion of nature and the machine," said Frederic Schwartz, a New York architect who spent last fall as the college's Joseph Esherick Visiting Professor in Architecture.

Schwartz, who studied at Cal in the 1960s under Esherick, is best known as a leader of the design team that was a runner-up in the competition to plan the new World Trade Center.

High line a model

Living and working in New York he’s witnessed the impact of the High Line, a 1.45-mile stretch of railroad tracks 30 feet in the air on Manhattan’s West Side. Once slated for demolition, the first nine-block stretch reopened last year as a landscaped promenade that has been embraced by legendarily skeptical New Yorkers.

That project inspired Schwartz and his partner in the studio, Marc L’Italien, when they set out to find a subject that would let graduate students, in Schwartz's words, "think big and dream big and take on bigger issues."

They settled on the trussed steel span from Oakland to Yerba Buena Island that is to be replaced after 2013 by a single-tower suspension bridge now under construction.

Not only is the project years behind schedule, the bridge recently was closed to repair a crack that sent 5,000 pounds of steel crashing onto the upper deck. It’s also considered at risk of at least partial collapse in a major earthquake.

Even so, Schwartz and L’Italien question spending a budgeted $240 million to dismantle a 1936 structure that’s on the National Register of Historic Places.

A range of what-ifs
"I really believe that if a choice was being made today, we'd be looking at the alternative of salvaging the bridge a lot more than in the '90s," said L'Italien, a principal at San Francisco's EHDD, a 65-person firm founded by Esherick.

The marching order for students wasn't simply to recycle, but to renew the steel bones with cultural facilities, housing, parks and transit that would "highlight environmental concerns, historic preservation and social interaction."

Three schemes show the range of what-ifs.

Nicole Lew's "A Park Above the Bay" turns the structure into an extension of the Bay Trail, with housing and shops lining the lower deck while landscaped paths of green weave up from Oakland's shore to cloak the linear community.

Open space of another sort is offered by David Dana, who fills the spans nearest Oakland with barge-like platforms for agricultural production. At the west end, a nine-story hotel would be assembled within the current tower while housing and gardens would be suspended from the deck.

The most eye-catching scheme might be from Lan Hu, who cloaks the west end with a streamlined hotel rising up from the bay and nosing toward San Francisco, as if an ocean liner was cruising into port.

Not likely now

"It's a studio about ideas, about possibilities," said L'Italien - though he also stressed that he "talked to some structural engineers beforehand to make sure this wasn't totally preposterous."

Other designers have explored schemes to reuse the landmark.

Virginia San Fratello and Ronald Rael, who served on the jury reviewing the student schemes, last year proposed "The Bay Line," which would treat the bridge as a park including such amenities as a climbing wall.

At a more prosaic level, there are suggestions to let a portion remain in place and serve as a bird habitat.

"It's such a fascinating thing to contemplate," conceded Bart Ney, Caltrans' spokesman on all things Bay Bridge. "But honestly, I don't believe anyone gave it much thought" in the original decision-making process.

Now, with the goal simply to finish the new span without further incidents or delays, don't count on decision-makers moving to turn back the clock.

"Changing the use of that structure does not change the fact that in the long run, it's (seismically) obsolete," Ney said. "We would not be allowed to leave something in ruin on the bay. The level of maintenance required even then would be enormous."

Student visions: More renderings of designers' ideas for the replaced span. sfgate.com

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This article appeared on page A - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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