



A Design Debate: The Future of the I-35W Bridge

In the wake of the I-35W bridge collapse we have heard many stories of sadness, bravery and compassion. Most emotions evoked during the reporting have been coupled with great concern for those helping to find the last displaced motorists. Concern has spread to the state and even the country level asking the question, what are the conditions of our US Bridges? As we come to deal with the realities of the recovery and mourning efforts, a commitment to reconnect the banks of the Mississippi River is about to manifest in our city. In light of this tragedy, many citizens are speaking out about what they believe this bridge should be; and many are asking how the new bridge can benefit downtown Minneapolis. To properly design and reconstruct the I-35W Bridge in a timely cost effective manner, a the initial conversation should be whether this bridge should honor this tragedy in its final design or be reconstructed as the same utilitarian bridge that lies at the base of the St. Anthony Falls.

In Minneapolis, we see that the concern is not only to find why this happened, but, also, to replace one of the most traveled bridges in Minnesota. To be sure, a fair response would be to get the I-35 bridge done in an economical and functional manner so we can get our lives back on track. If this is the only goal of our administration then they are only half right, because any bridge that crosses this site will memorialize this tragedy. There is a design component to this process that has not been responsibly included, and, with the given deadline, now is the time for discussion.

Once Graduate Design Students at the University of Minnesota, we have grown up in this sophisticated design environment we call the Twin Cities. As a community of design stewards we should focus on how to take full advantage of the Interstate 35W being shut-down, and we should entertain possibility. In looking at the bridge's location, possibility is heard loud and clear. Such possibilities come with significant design questions: What would Minneapolis be without identifiable icons such as the Stone Arch Bridge and the New Guthrie Theater? Or how about the Mill City Ruins redevelopment, which arguably single handedly revived this entire district? Some possible venerated themes include reconnecting the fabric of downtown with the likes of Cedar Riverside and 7 Corners/ University West Bank Campus. 3rd and 4th streets could act as the new transit arteries for our downtown; while pulling the congestion off of our retail and pedestrian promenades on Washington Avenue. Is there an actual need for the bridge to service everyone from private commuter, bus, LRT and pedestrian? Shouldn't this structure be a memorial, emerging as the backdrop for the institution that is St. Anthony Falls? Why can't a design solution create a model for the nation, illustrating a quality, cost effective bridge design that can achieve the utilitarian needs while gracefully expressing the swift response of this tragedy?

As members of a strong local design community, we are truly here to help, and in the wake of this disaster, our intention is not to offend or make light of the situation but to mobilize public opinion about what the bridge could be. We are not forming an official design build team, or doing this through our current employers; we simply want to embrace the public opinion that design does matter, and that a successful bridge design completely integrates architecture, engineering and construction.

Design Team:

Karl Adalbert
Les Chylinski
Joshua Jansen
Benjamin Lindau

