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Bridge memorial proposals emphasize memories

BY ROBERT BEHRE
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Will the rapidly disappearing Grace Memorial Bridge ever have a memorial on the Charleston side of the Cooper River? The answer now depends on you.

Charleston recently wrapped up a design competition for a possible memorial to the Grace, whose delicate steel trusses defined the Lowcountry skyline for more than seven decades.

All 15 entries can be seen at the city's Civic Design Center, 85 Calhoun St., and there will be a public reception at 5:30 p.m. Thursday to honor the winners and hand out the prizes.

The entries range from the whimsical and silly - such as a series of automobiles nestled around the Pearman support to create "Gracehenge" or a pelican constructed of the Grace's salvaged steel beams - to more serious ideas that could form a foundation for a real project.

The city already asked the state Department of Transportation not to tear down one of the concrete supports from the old Silas Pearman Bridge, and this torii gate-like remnant stands today at the base of the pedestrian path on the Ravenel Bridge.

Civic Design Center Director Michael Maher devised the design competition to figure out how to memorialize the Grace. He acknowledges the 15 entries are just the first step. "I don't know what will happen from here," he says.

Four judges - city architect Eddie Bello, Robert Miller of the Clemson Architecture Center, curator Mary Jane Jacob and East Side resident James Smart - picked their top three.

They include Simons Young's plan for a series of copper-plated light piers extending from Morrison Drive out to the river along the path of the Grace. The piers would resemble pilings for an old dock.

Maher says this idea is interesting because it would be more striking at night, whereas the profiles of the old bridges were more noticeable during the day. (They weren't lit nearly as dramatically as the new bridge.)

Another winner is a plan by Gordon Nicholson and Alice Guess for a support of the Grace encased in glass with rivets outside and covering Morrison Drive with a textured, riveted-like surface in the spot where the Grace once passed overhead.

This plan is oriented more to motorists, who would experience subtle vibrations when passing over the Grace.

"You'd feel it in your backside, just like you did when you drove over the old bridge," Maher says.

And Cummings and McCrady won for its proposal for a Grace Memorial Park complete with paths across Morrison Drive, water and plantings. Its entry also suggests inscribing the words of Mayor John P. Grace (which Maher included on the competition entry form): "I love the past, but I am living in the present and

feel that it is the future to which we must look - even, thank heaven, as our fathers did."

(Robert Mullally III of Columbus, Ind. was the sole student to enter, and his plan had a Grace structure leaning toward Morrison Drive while suspended from the Pearman remnant).

The judges' decisions aren't the final say. Those attending Thursday's reception can vote for their own favorite, and this group's decision might echo or differ from the judges' picks.

Maher says the judges' decisions seemed to de-emphasize saving part of the Grace's signature superstructure and to emphasize the bridge's memory through marking part of its path across Charleston.

"It wasn't so much about the actual elements as the memories," he says. "The things that we remember are more important than the things we actually touched. The memories resonate much stronger."

Still, many questions remain: Will the city or others rally around an idea and try to get it built? How much will it cost, and where will the money come from? How will these design ideas affect the planned redevelopment of the bridges' footprints just west of Morrison Drive?

Maher says the judges' picks, unlike some other entries, seem modest enough in scale that they could be done for less than \$1 million.

"You could take all three of them and put them together and have something quite nice," he says. "If there is some sense of energy that can come out of this, we certainly would be supportive of it."

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