SUBLIMATION (FOOTBRIDGE TRANSITION)

Guillem COLLELL MUNDET

Civil Engineer
IDEAM SA
Seville, Spain
guillem.collell@gmail.com

Summary
Footbridges and the visual impairment are not disconnected. Footbridge designers should not only design for the public realm but most importantly to include those with visual disabilities. Accessibility and adaptation means are often seen as insufficient or at worst, missing from pedestrian infrastructures in our urban context. It is imperative that all users, including physically impaired, deserve to enjoy the beauty of pedestrian infrastructures, such as footbridges, in one way or another.

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Fig. 1. A beautiful footbridge, in braille.

For some time now, footbridges have become a contemporary design phenomenon due to both: the unimaginable proposals born from a structural expressionism approach and to the radical slenderness of some footbridges constructed through exquisite structural analysis. But what comes after visual and structural language? And what lies beyond slenderness?

The aesthetical approach to astonishing footbridges is always related to visual perception. Nice, smooth and stylish designs with an often complex structural behavior invite us to enjoy footbridges through visual delight. But could another design approach be possible if it addressed other senses rather than relying on sight alone? The answer is yes. It is necessary to design beautiful footbridges for visually impaired people.

Observing beyond of what the eyes can see may help designers to develop footbridges not just with the rules of proportion, materials and color palettes. If footbridges are designed to be enjoyed by those who cannot see then they will be more than a place to look at, they will be a place to be and experiment the space with the whole being. To design for all senses creates a richer multisensory environment that really responds to a more inclusive and more equitable design. Through this, we all must have the chance to experiment footbridges with all senses in a deeper level.

How can you know everything coming out through public space if you cannot see? How can you cross a footbridge if you are a blinded person? How can you feel footbridge beauty without the sense of sight? The
answer is in other senses. Hearing, touching, smelling and savoring are, in fact, fundamental aggregates through which we become aware of the world around us, including footbridges. But if one of these senses is not present, footbridges must remain beautiful nevertheless.

In recent years designers and artists have generated a growing interest in footbridges, taking attention away from the visual aspect of the footbridge while focusing on other senses. The following pictures are two examples of beautiful footbridges that can be experienced with all senses.

Fig. 2. a) Harmonic Bridge Installation by Bill Fontana, London, UK 2006. Picture by Art on the Underground, b) Fog Bridge #72494 Installation by Fujiko Nakaya at The Exploratorium, San Francisco, United States, 2013. Picture by Inhabitat.

For beautiful footbridges the structure holds it all because it is meaningful, unwavering and powerful enough to provide an architectural entity, however, non-visual footbridge design need to be based on a dissenting conceptual idea: beauty that cannot be seen, cannot be hidden beneath the structural frame. Although we would like the structure to disappear, it could not do so, but the idea of footbridge interaction as a catalyst for the aesthetic exploration on how users sense and make sense the footbridges; it seems to be the right design approach for those who cannot see.

Such as nature’s conditions, non-visual aesthetic experience depends on constant and combined interaction between the footbridge and user wishes. The whole experience needs to be experienced in a number of different ways, some days to cross the footbridge can be a beautiful moment, while other days the footbridge will remain mute and users will pass by it looking for an unexpected response. Within these attractive conditions all users will be able to see more than just with the eyes, they will be able to interact with the footbridge halo as a unique experience. In addition, to date it is possible to develop new technological solutions that would allow people with visual disabilities to interact with the footbridge with multiple choices.

Footbridges have always become a meeting place, providing a path to connect aesthetic experiences and therefore to join people. Footbridge designs also offer a rich repertoire of perception with the superposition of all senses registers. Even the visual creates in us a major influence, we must go beyond the sight, we must cross a footbridge as a blind person. Moreover, we all must cross a footbridge with a person who is blind. Helping each other is a good way to enjoy footbridge designs. That said, footbridge frames will disappear in front of us as a wholesome aesthetic experience, lived with all senses and with the human environment in which we live.

In physics, sublimation is the transition of a substance directly from the solid to the gas phase without passing through the intermediate liquid phase. In psychology, sublimation is the transformation of unwanted impulses into something less harmful. In footbridge design, sublimation could be described as the transition to footbridge visual dissolution, a preliminary step to move forward from visual beauty and from slender structures. Let us hope that from now on footbridge designers shall no longer be blind and shall design beyond visual aesthetics.