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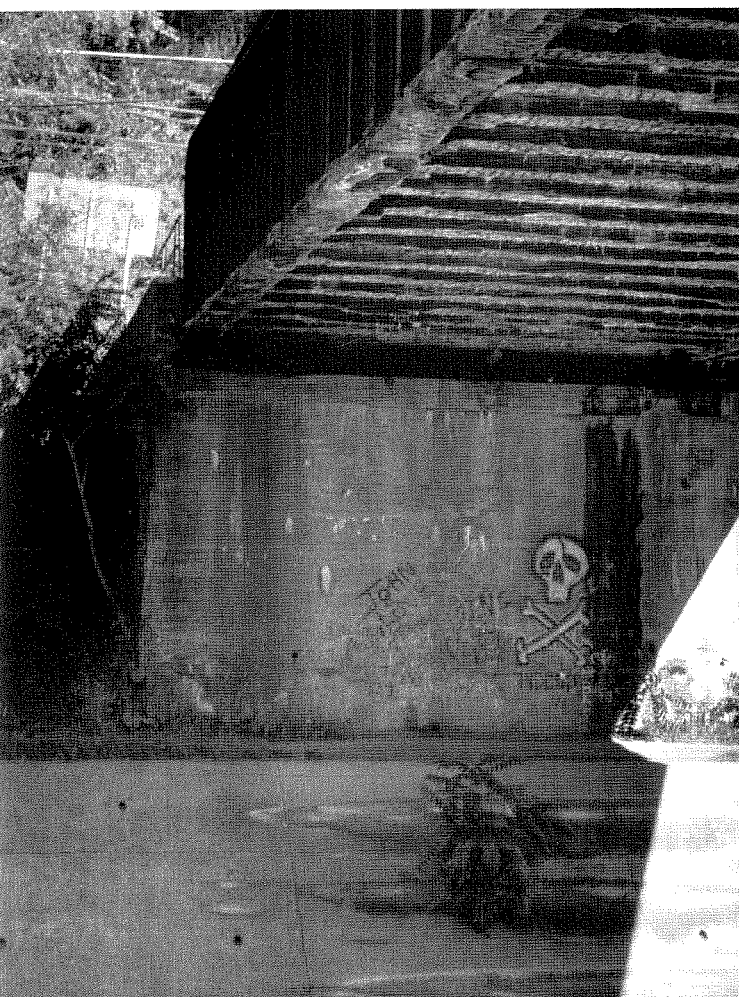
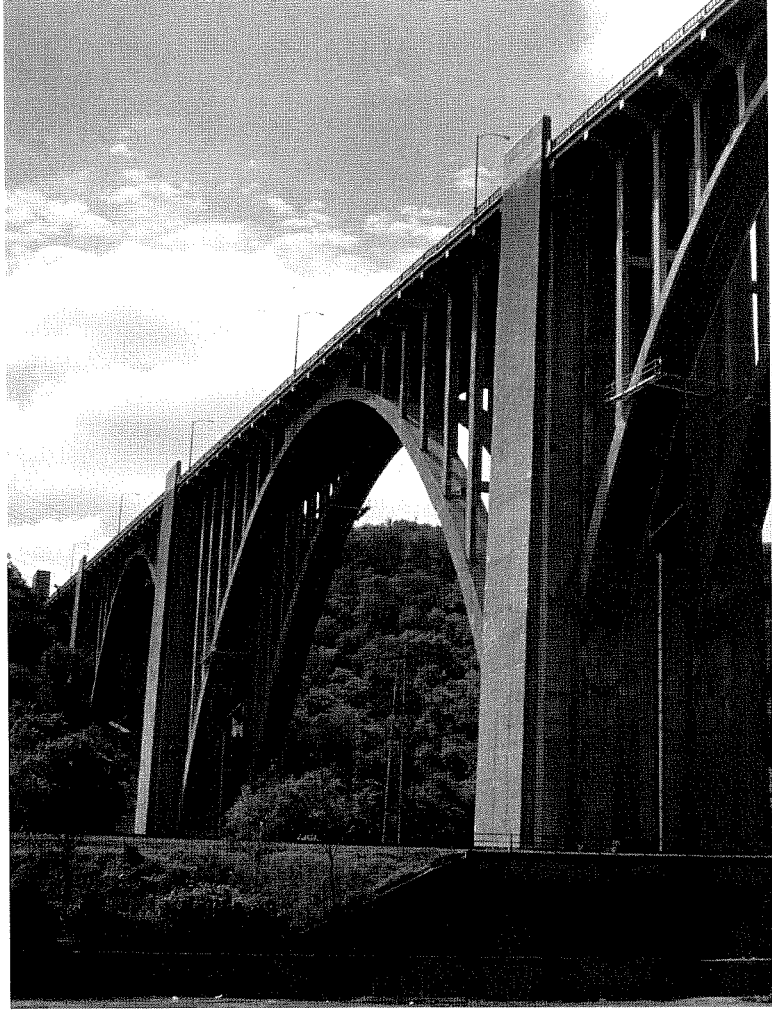
Eugene Levy

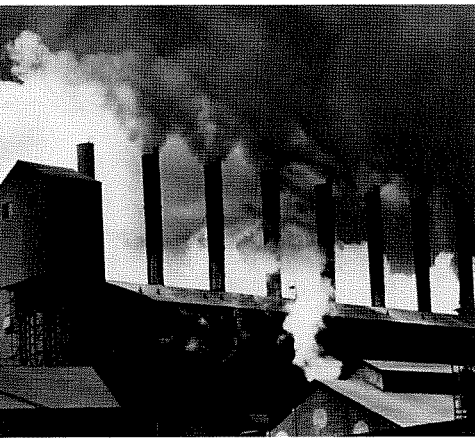
Our overall understanding of a place is profoundly shaped by how we actually encounter it. For example, walking a mile of desert and flying over a hundred miles of desert will lead to different understandings of the idea of “desert.” Similarly, viewing an industrial region from radically different vantage points will likely lead to differing understandings of the physical, social and cultural implications of industrialism. A vivid example of contrasting vantage points emerges when we view the industrial scene of Pittsburgh, Pa., from two early twentieth-century bridges crossing the Turtle Creek Valley, about ten miles east of the city.

Throughout much of the twentieth century the Pittsburgh landscape presented to viewers the wealth and power, as well as the physical grime and worker oppression, of unrestrained industrialism. Elite Pittsburghers celebrated their conception of place by creating monuments claiming technological and artistic superiority. Working-class Pittsburghers, with far fewer resources, made more modest marks on the landscape. Thus the George Westinghouse Bridge, a high bridge, is a monumental piece of architecture, with art deco bas-reliefs and white concrete spans dominating the landscape. The Wall Bridge, a low bridge, is a graffiti-ridden, decrepit steel structure easily overlooked by the casual traveler.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Northwest pylon, Westinghouse Bridge, “Electricity”; The Westinghouse Bridge from the floor of the Turtle Creek Valley; Graffiti, Wall Bridge; Graffiti, north abutment, Wall Bridge.

All photos by Eugene Levy unless otherwise noted.





Top: Lower Turtle Creek Valley. By Todd Webb, 1948, courtesy University of Louisville Photographic Archives. Center: Open hearth furnace, Edgar Thomson Works, U.S. Steel, c. 1925. Collection of William Gaughan. Bottom: Westinghouse Bridge, Sept. 10, 1932. Sign was added to the photo. From dedication booklet.

The Westinghouse Bridge

The Westinghouse Bridge carries U.S. Highway 30 over the Turtle Creek Valley a mile or so inland from the Monongahela River. U.S. 30 runs the length of Pennsylvania through Pittsburgh, then winds westward into Ohio and across the nation. In the 1920s the heavily used highway snaked down steep slopes into the valley and through the mill towns of East Pittsburgh and Turtle Creek. Travelers maneuvered their cars through crowds of workers at shift changes and along streets clogged with industry-generated traffic.

If motorists tried to bypass the crowded highway, they could easily find themselves driving down Braddock Avenue past the Westinghouse Electric plant's sprawling, multistory brick factory buildings. Constructed by George Westinghouse in the 1890s, it employed thousands of workers and manufactured a wide variety of electrical equipment. A few blocks further travelers came up against U.S. Steel's Edgar Thomson Works, Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill. A pall of smoke and grit pressed down on cars. Travelers in the 1920s on this part of U.S. 30 had no way of escaping the sights, sounds, and smells of industrial America.

In 1931, in the depths of the depression, Allegheny County managed to put

together enough funds to build a bridge to carry the highway 1,500 feet across and 200 feet above the Turtle Creek Valley. The county's Bureau of Bridges considered several conventional steel structure designs, but finally opted for a distinctive, five span, steel-reinforced concrete-arch bridge carrying four lanes of traffic and two pedestrian walkways. The new bridge would dominate the landscape, so it is unsurprising local officials named it after the inventor/industrialist who had dominated the valley.

From the beginning experts labeled the George Westinghouse Bridge an engineering venture as impressive as its contemporary, Hoover Dam.¹ The valley people were equally impressed. On opening day thousands walked the bridge's length, listened to speeches, and gazed at the factory-filled valley.

Among the dedication day speakers was A. W. Robertson, head of Westinghouse Electric; his bold rhetoric captured the epic quality quickly imposed on the bridge. Comparing the highway to Rome's Appian Way, Robertson declared that the Westinghouse Bridge's "noble arches ... will ever be a symbol of man's conquest over nature, ... a symbol of man's God-given ability to control and shape his environment to his advantage."²

The Westinghouse Bridge, like the interstates that would soon follow,



encouraged travelers to avoid intimate contact with the urban-industrial landscape and to pass over, through, or by it as quickly and in as isolated a manner as possible. This separation gave the bridge designers a fine opportunity to substitute a morally elevated view of industrialism for the gritty scene that existed on the valley floor.

The bridge designers knew they would only have a few moments to impress passing motorists, so they flanked each end of the bridge with two massive concrete pylons. Affixed to the pylons are art deco bas-reliefs — each ten by eighteen feet, carved in near-white granite and facing the roadway — that boldly make explicit the viewpoint to be taken of the Turtle Creek Valley's past and present. Frank Vittor, a respected Pittsburgh sculptor, devoted one of his bas-reliefs to the pre-industrial past, but the remaining three concern transportation, electricity, and

steel, the nineteenth-century technological innovations that still defined the valley in the early 1930s.

The northwest pylon depicts an art deco figure mastering the power of electricity through his control of a massive generator, one of the principal products of Westinghouse Electric's East Pittsburgh plant. The bas-relief emphasizes the ability of electricity and its power, under human control, to lift civilization to ever higher levels. Former Pennsylvania Governor John S. Fisher drew upon this theme at the bridge's dedication when he described enthusiastically how George Westinghouse realized electricity's "miraculous possibilities and bent the strength of all his energies to the creation of mechanisms for its generation, distribution and utilization."³

On the northeastern pylon Vittor celebrated the steel industry, hardly a surprising choice since there were four mills within a few miles. This bas-relief depicts a crouching male nude (with the stereotypical features of the Slavic workers closely associated with the steel industry) surrounded by steel-making equipment.

Motorists have a difficult time reading the incised caption beneath each bas-relief, but these messages further hammer home the idea of progress. For example, pedestrians who pause across from the pylon celebrating the steel industry can read that: **HERE IN THE TURTLE CREEK VALLEY THE STEEL INDUSTRY STRUGGLED THROUGH ITS INFANCY AND HERE IT HAS BECOME FUNDAMENTAL TO MODERN CIVILIZATION.**

Clearly the bridge and its pylons were meant, literally and figuratively, to rise above the lives and la-

Northeast pylon,
Westinghouse Bridge,
"Steel."



bors of the workers. Viewers were instructed to identify with those who led “modern civilization,” not to raise questions about the environmental and social consequences of industrialism’s achievements.

The industrial environment, however, was not so easily held at bay. Ironically, while the locomotive in the transportation bas-relief is carved in pristine, near-white granite, scores of actual locomotives moved beneath the bridge every day, belching clouds of coal smoke that blended into the pollution produced by the nearby steel mills. Over several decades, layers of soot were deposited on the bridge, obscuring the bas-reliefs’ optimistic message. Add to this the pounding of thousands of automobiles daily, and one can understand why the Westinghouse Bridge by the 1970s was a decaying, blackened hulk, its sidewalks closed and traffic reduced to one lane in each direction.

The state of Pennsylvania rehabilitated the bridge in the early 1980s. The roadway was widened, testifying to the ever-increasing dominance of the automobile, and the sidewalks, which had originally passed in front of the pylons, were narrowed and relocated into passages through the center of the pylons — which once appeared massive and solid but now resemble hollow shells.

The bridge’s rehabilitation occurred with eerie symbolism at the very time the Turtle Creek Valley entered the post-industrial era. The steam locomotives are long gone. Only one of the four steel mills still operates; Westinghouse Electric’s East Pittsburgh plant is closed; and at the nearby Westinghouse Air Brake plant, workers number in the hundreds rather than the thousands once employed. Smoke and haze now rarely obscure the view, whether you look toward Braddock and Edgar Thomson’s blast furnaces or gaze in the opposite direction over the roofs of the defunct Westinghouse plant. Yet the bridge endures; it still impresses the viewer as an imposing architectural presence, as part of America’s dominant automobile culture and as symbolic of a fading industrial era.

The Wall Bridge

Several miles east along the valley floor, just beyond the towns of Turtle Creek and Wilmerding, is the very ordinary Wall Bridge. The bridge carries traffic to and from Wall (not much now, but formerly a bustling railroad town) over the creek and railroad tracks.

The view from the bridge brings close up lingering elements of the old industrial landscape: worn steel rails, ground blackened with oil patches, and

pieces of coal. One sees the rails, only twenty-five or so feet below, stretch back into Wilmerding and the buildings of the Westinghouse Air Brake plant. As one looks east, toward Wall and Pitcairn (another former railroad town), rails lead to what once was a major repair yard of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The roundhouse is gone, but some work still goes on amidst much vacant land.

In the old days the valley floor would have been dense with coal smoke, making a clear view from the bridge difficult. In recent years, deindustrialization has altered the scene’s dominant features and brought an almost rural quality to the landscape. On each side of the valley are heavily wooded hillsides with a scattering of modest, well-kept houses. The air is clear, and the only industrial sound comes from the passage of an occasional train.

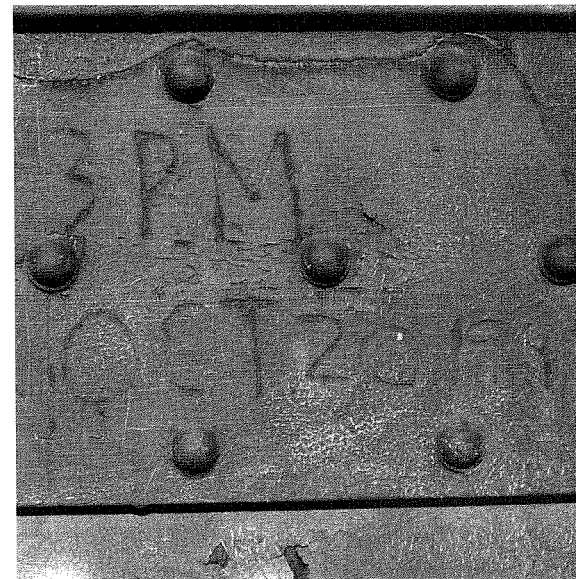
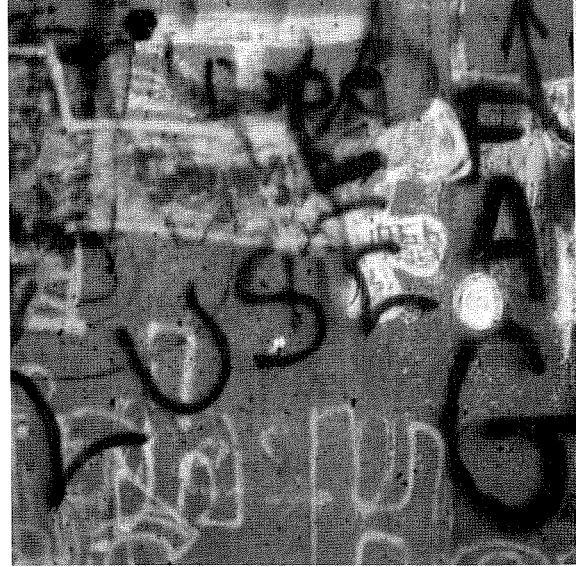
The Wall Bridge has an almost archaeological quality; it is the past existing, scarcely noticed, in the present. The roadbed, barely wide enough for two cars, is of buff-colored paving brick, widely used in the Pittsburgh region earlier in this century. Most of the dense bricks are in good condition, but the roadbed as a whole rises and dips from decades of traffic. A cracked steel plaque bolted to the superstructure indicates the date, “1915,” and the builder: “FORT PITT BRIDGE WORKS PITTSBURG PA.”



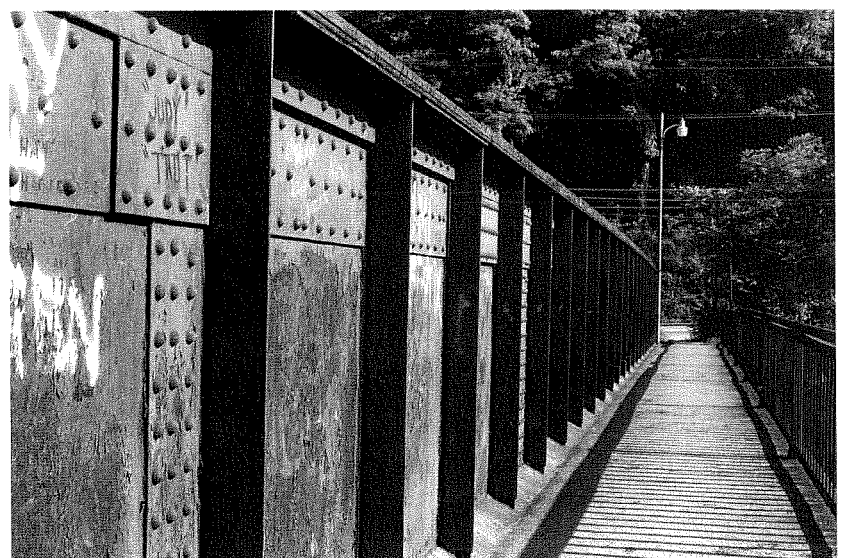
The Wall Bridge has a long tradition as a bearer of graffiti. A six-foot-high barrier of riveted steel plates separates vehicles from a heavily used walkway along the bridge's eastern side. Dozens of examples of graffiti, many dating from decades ago, are clearly displayed on the pedestrian side of this barrier, protected from the weather. The messages are scratched into the black paint coating the steel, and they articulate voices from the industrial era. The Wall Bridge graffiti thus are roughly analogous to the Westinghouse Bridge bas-reliefs: the latter speak for the region's elite, while through the former's graffiti we hear from the valley's working class population.


The older Wall Bridge markings, like most traditional American graffiti, do not draw on mass culture but refer to ordinary individuals, often at specific times and in specific places in the valley.⁴ Sometimes a name and date will do: "ROGER MAYO 1953." The youth who carved "FAY 1955" added a heart, as if he were a country boy inscribing his declaration on an oak tree. Someone else wanted to mark the time with precision: "3 PM OCT 20 1942." Nearby the message is more complicated: "J. W. DRAKE" carved the distant "ATLANTA GA," but beneath he added the hometown location, "WALL." The local scene remains vital even in the most intricate designs. Working within the outline of an auto license plate, "ED [W]ALSH" inscribed his name and the date, and above both he let walkers know where he has been — "NY" and "CALIF." Finally, to complete the message, Walsh added where he was from — "N S [Northside] - PGH - PA."

The earlier twentieth century graffiti of the Wall Bridge fits into the then "industrial village" character of valley towns like Wall and Turtle Creek.



Top and center:
Graffiti, Wall Bridge.
Bottom: Walkway,
Wall Bridge.
Opposite page: Wall
Bridge, looking west
from Conrail tracks.





With few exceptions, men who walked the bridge were blue collar workers at industrial concerns in or near the valley. Many of their offspring, who also used the walkway on their way to and from school, expected to follow the same career path. "You know," a mid-1960s Turtle Creek High School graduate recalled, "you're taught all your life that you go to work, you do a good job, you get paid and, you know, that's just the way life is."⁵ The placid bridge graffiti evident into the '60s, with its emphasis on local people and communities, is evidence of at least a public acceptance of the idea that "that's just the way life is." These teenagers, even those that raised hell and got into trouble, generally saw themselves, whether they liked it or not, as part of stable, working-class communities.⁶

More recent graffiti conveys a considerably different message. Aerosol cans make graffiti relatively easy to create, requiring little time or physical effort. Nationwide, much of the newer graffiti comes out of the anger of inner-

city youths and their efforts to delineate gang territory. Such graffiti shows great awareness of mass culture, whether represented by rock groups or political movements. Recent graffiti are likely to be disintegrative, setting the individual or group against a hostile society.⁷

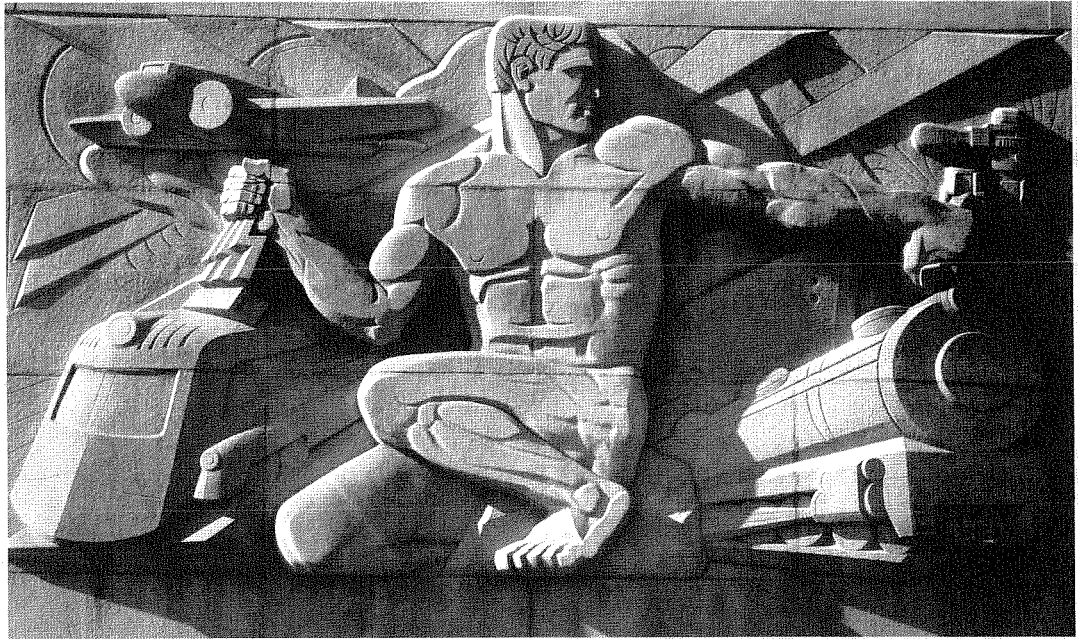
The Wall Bridge has its share of sprayed paint, both on the superstructure and on the concrete abutments below. Some of the spraying seems deliberately destructive in that it covers over what had existed previously. Explicit indications of hostility and anger appear: "Jimi Hendrix" is sprayed in white, but the late black rock singer has to contend with a red-sprayed "KKK." A blunt "drugs" is on one of the steel plates, while a large, bone-white death's head has been spray painted on the bridge's north abutment. The older graffiti are chaste in their sexuality; thirty or forty years ago the bridge was perhaps too public a forum to talk dirty. There is an old-fashioned ring to the recent "RAY + KAREN," but that is counterbalanced by a black-

sprayed "FAG." The open sexuality of some graffiti is now more typical of both the valley and the larger society.

The cacophony produced by the spray cans seems threatening when compared to the consensus-oriented, black-and-white impressions of the older graffiti. Recent graffiti are an indicator that the local industrial village aspect has been weakened by national cultural trends and such regional changes as shuttered factories, high unemployment, and declining population.

The Wall Bridge and the Westinghouse Bridge, then, are more than merely locations on the landscape. The imposing Westinghouse Bridge leads us to an elitist view as we look down on the valley, its communities and its people. The bridge's bas-reliefs present an idealized, mythic view of technology, a view in which nameless, nameless workers toil for the greater benefit of industrial civilization. The view from a high bridge, or for that matter from an interstate highway, distances us physically and intel-

Background: Detail of graffiti, Wall Bridge.
Inset: Southwest pylon, Westinghouse Bridge, "Transportation."



lctually from many of the elements of working class life that were, and in many ways still are, an integral part of the industrial landscape.

In comparison, the low bridge, the architecturally mundane, graffiti-scarred Wall Bridge, carries a populist message as it brings the landscape to eye level. The old industrial environment still appears in gritty detail: the mostly abandoned railyard close at hand, the old but well-kept housing a few yards up the hillside. And the bridge's graffiti, blunt in their specificity and spanning much of the twentieth century, sensitize us to some of the social changes that have occurred in the surrounding communities.

Twentieth century trends — the need to get places in a hurry, the commitment to a media-fed culture, the malling of America — have made it difficult to view either the past or the present from a low bridge vantage point. We might or might not like what we see, but there will be a gap in our awareness if we do not look.

Unfortunately, it's difficult to preserve a low bridge view of the past. What is old and ordinary is little valued in American culture. After all, the state rehabilitated the Westinghouse Bridge, preserving its elite view of industrialism. Probably the best we can hope for with the Wall Bridge is continued benign neglect. The more likely scenario, however, is that the bridge eventually will encounter a wrecking ball and cutting torches, and be replaced with a new, graffiti-free structure.

Notes

1. "Building America's Longest Concrete Arch Bridge," *Engineering News-Record*, 109 (21 July 1932), 67.
2. "Remarks by Mr. A. W. Robertson" on the dedication of the George Westinghouse Bridge, 10 September 1932, transcript in the George Westinghouse Museum, Wilmerding, PA.
3. "Address by John S. Fisher," 10 September 1932, transcript in the George Westinghouse Museum.

4. For the differences between traditional graffiti and the graffiti of the last few decades see Lisa N. Howorth, "Graffiti," in M. Thomas Inge (ed.), *Handbook of American Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 1:549-565.

5. Steve Cavalancia interview with author, 22 May 1986.

6. This interpretation is based on the following interviews: Doris Litman, 2 May 1988; Joe Sauter, 14 August 1986; Ray Adams, 13 May 1986.

7. There is a substantial literature on contemporary graffiti. See, for example, David Ley and Roman Cybriwsky, "Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 64 (December 1974), 491-505; Joel Feiner and Stephan Klein, "Graffiti Talks," *Social Policy*, 12 (Winter 1982), 47-53; Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982).