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4.1 Introduction

Transportation structures, such as bridges and retaining walls, have a strong influence on the appearance of transportation projects, as well as the overall appearance of the general vicinity of the project. In locations where there is an opportunity to appreciate such structures, it is often desirable to add aesthetic enhancements to fit the project site.

Desirable bridge aesthetics do not necessarily need to cost much, if any, additional money. Aesthetic enhancements can be made in a number of ways. Primary features such as structure type and shape have the most influence on appearance, with color and texture playing secondary roles. Formliners, especially when used in conjunction with a multi-colored stain, are more expensive than one or two single color stains on smooth concrete, and have on a number of occasions not fit the context of the project. It is the responsibility of the design team to identify aesthetic treatments that are consistent with the environment and goals of the project, are maintainable over the life of the structures, and are cost effective. See [4.5](#) for current policy regarding structure aesthetics.

While initial cost for aesthetic enhancements is a concern, it has become apparent that maintenance costs can be considerably more than initial costs. Stain, which acts more like paint, must be periodically redone. Such reapplication oftentimes requires lane closures which are both an undesirable inconvenience to users and come with a significant cost associated with maintenance-of-traffic.



4.2 General Aesthetic Guidelines

Primary features – in relative order of importance:

- Superstructure type and shape, with parapets/railings/fencing being fairly prominent, as well. See Chapter 30 – Railings for further guidance.
- Abutment type and shape, with the wings being most prominent.
- Pier type and shape, with the end elevation being the most notable, especially for a bridge over a highway.
- Grade and/or skews.

Secondary features – in relative order of importance:

- Color
- Pattern and texture
- Ornamentation

Consider the following key points, in relative order of importance, when designing structures:

1. Simplicity
2. Good proportions with an emphasis on thinner members, or members that appear thinner
3. Clear demonstration of how the structure works with recognizable flow of forces
4. Fitting its context/surroundings
5. Good proportions in 3 dimensions
6. Choice of materials
7. Coloring – neutral colors, preferably no more than two. (Chapter 9 – Materials lists *AMS Standard Color Numbers* used most commonly for girders)
8. Pattern and texture
9. Lighting

Consider the bridge shape, relative to the form and function at the location. Use a structural shape that blends with its surroundings. The aesthetic impact is the effect made on the viewer by every aspect of a bridge in its totality and in its individual parts. The designer makes an aesthetic decision as well as a structural decision when sizing a girder or locating a pier.



The structure lines should flow smoothly with as few interruptions as possible. Do not clutter up the structure with distractive elements. If light standards are required, place them in line with the piers and abutments, so the vertical lines blend. Light spacing, however, needs to be coordinated with the Regional electrical engineer. Steel girder bearing stiffeners should be the only vertical stiffeners on the outside face of the exterior girders, although longitudinal stiffeners on the outside face can have an appealing look.

Refer to the WisDOT *Traffic Engineering, Operations and Safety Manual* section 2-1-60 for guidance on community sensitive design signing.



4.3 Primary Features

Superstructure Type and Shape

At highway speeds, highway structures are viewed from 300-500 feet away. The general shape of the bridge, with an emphasis on thinness, produces the most appealing structure. Given that there are realistic physical limitations on thinness (without resorting to anchored end spans or other costly measures), the designer has other options available to achieve the appearance of thinness such as:

- Larger overhangs to create better shadow lines.
- Horizontal recess on the backside of the parapet, which could be stained or left as plain concrete. Any parapet that is non-standard (either side) is considered CSS.
- Eliminate or minimize pedestals along the parapet. Such pedestals tend to break up the horizontal flow and make the superstructure appear top heavy. Pedestals, if desired, are better left on the wings to delineate the beginning or end of the bridge or to frame the bridge when viewed from below. If used on the superstructure, keep the pedestal size smaller and space apart far enough to avoid a top heavy appearance. See Chapter 30 – Railings for further guidance.
- Minimize vertical or patterned elements on the backside of the parapet as such elements tend to break up the horizontal flow. Rock formliner has become an overused aesthetic enhancement for the backside of parapets, as its use oftentimes does not fit the surroundings. Any parapet that is non-standard (either side) is considered CSS. See Chapter 30 – Railings for further guidance.
- Structure type should be based on economics, not aesthetics. Additional costs associated with a preferred structure type are considered CSS. Add-ons, such as false arches, etc. are considered CSS.

Abutment Type and Shape

Wing walls are the most visible portion of the abutment. Unless pedestrians are beneath a bridge, formliners or other aesthetic enhancements are not very visible and should be left off of the abutment front face, as these treatments provide no additional aesthetic value.

Pier Type and Shape

Pier shapes should be kept relatively simple and uncluttered. For highway grade separations, the end elevation of the pier is the view most often seen by the traveling public. For slower speed roads or where pedestrians travel beneath a bridge, the front pier elevation is also seen. For taller piers, such as those used for multi-level interchanges or water crossings, the entire 3D-view of the pier is readily seen and the pier shape is very important. For such piers, a clean, smooth flowing slender shape that clearly demonstrates the flow of forces from the superstructure to the ground is essential. External and internal (reentrant) corners on the pier/column shaft should be kept to a reasonable number. (Approximately 8 external, 4 internal maximum).



Grade and/or Skew

While grade and skew cannot be controlled by the bridge design engineer, these geometric features do affect bridge appearance. For example, a steep grade or pronounced vertical curve makes the use of a block type rustication an awkward choice. Horizontal blocks are typically associated with buildings and block buildings tend to have level roof lines. Cut stone form liners used on steep grades or pronounced vertical curves require excessive cutting of forms, which drives up price. Consideration of abutment height warrants more consideration when bridges are on steep grades, with a more exposed abutment face on the high end of the bridge producing a more balanced look.

Large skews tend to make piers longer as well as making the front elevation of the pier more visible to properties adjacent to the bridge. With larger skews, having more than one multi-columned pier can create a ‘forest’ of pier columns if the columns are too numerous. Try to maximize column spacing or use multiple hammerhead piers to help alleviate this effect. Abutment wings tend to be longer on the acute corners of bridges. Whatever aesthetic treatment is used needs to be appropriate for both the longer and shorter wings.

The design engineer should keep in mind that a bridge is never entirely seen at a 90-degree angle as depicted in a side elevation view. As the person viewing the bridge moves closer to the bridge the pier directly in front of them will be seen nearly as an end elevation of the pier, while adjacent piers will start to be viewed more as a pier side elevation. The ‘forest’ of columns starts to take effect, again, especially for wider bridges.



4.4 Secondary Features

Color

Color can have a strong visual effect, either positive or negative. Using earth toned colors versus vivid colors is preferred. More neutral colors tend to blend in more with the surroundings. Also, over time earth tones will weather less and not appear as dingy or faded. A bright yellow, for example, will begin to appear dull and dirty soon after application. Avoid red as this color is not UV tolerant and will fade. Concrete stain behaves more like paint and is susceptible to fading and peeling, requiring re-application to avoid an unsightly structure. Stained concrete in need of maintenance looks worse than concrete that was originally left unstained.

Using a maximum of two colors will lend itself to the desired outcome of a clean appearance. On larger structures it may be desirable to use two colors for everything other than the girders, which may be a third color. Remember that plain concrete is a color, too. It should be utilized as much as possible (especially on smaller surfaces) to reduce initial cost and, especially, future maintenance costs.

Utilizing a ribbed, or broken ribbed pattern on a large expanse of plain concrete can give the appearance of color as the patterned section will appear darker than the adjacent plain concrete. This is a good way to add 'color' without the future maintenance costs associated with actual stain reapplication.

As much as possible, *AMS Standard Color Numbers* should be used for color selection. A few colors are given in Chapter 9 – Materials, but others may be used. STSP's should be used as is for staining and multi-colored staining. Specific colors, areas to be applied, etc. should be referenced on the plan sheets.

Pattern and Texture

See 4.5 for current policy regarding structure aesthetics, including patterns and texture.

Large expanses of flat concrete, even if colored, are usually not desirable.

Most bridges are seen from below by people traveling at higher rates of speed. Detail smaller than 4-inches is difficult to discern. The general shape, and perhaps color, will have a greater visual effect than the pattern and/or texture. Sometimes texture is used to represent a building material that wasn't used for the construction of the structure, as would be the case of rock form liner. While a rock appearance might be appropriate for a smaller bridge over a stream in a small town, it seldom fits the context of a grade separation over a highway or busy urban interchange. Modern bridges should, for the most part, look like they are built out of modern materials appropriate to the current time. Texture consisting of random or ordered geometric forms is generally more preferred over simulating other materials.

On MSE retaining walls it is desirable to keep logos or depictions within a given panel. Matching lines across panels, especially horizontal lines susceptible to differential panel settlement, is difficult. Rock texturing is unconvincing as real stone due to panel joints. A random geometric pattern is a good way to give relief to a wall.



Repetition in pattern rather than an assembly of various patterns or details is more cost effective. For effects that are meant to appear random (e.g. rock), care must be taken in order for the pattern repetition to not appear noticeable.

At all locations on a structure (abutment wings and piers, MSE walls, etc.), form details should be terminated 1'-0" below low water or ground elevations where they will not be visible. See the Standard for Formliner Details.

Designers are cautioned about introducing textures and relief on the inside faces of vehicle barriers. The degree of relief and texture can influence the vehicle response during a crash. See Chapter 30 – Railings for further guidance.

Ornamentation

If signs or medallions are necessary, refer to section 2-1-60 of the *Traffic Engineering, Operations and Safety Manual*.

Regarding ornamentation in general, more is seldom better.

“In bridge building... to overload a structure or any part thereof with ornaments... would be to suppress or disguise the main members and to exhibit an unbecoming wastefulness. The plain or elaborate character of an entire structure must not be contradicted by any of its parts.”

- J.B. Johnson, 1912



4.5 Aesthetics Process

The structural design engineer needs to be involved early in the aesthetic decision making process. BOS should have early representation on projects with considerable aesthetic concerns. Throughout this process it is important to remember that aesthetics is a concept, not a commodity – it is about a look, not about what can be added to a structure.

WisDOT policy item:

For current statewide policy on aesthetic and/or decorative features (CSS), please see the *Program Management Manual* (PMM). See 4.3 for discussion on primary features such as shape and 4.9 for simple aesthetic concepts. The information below is current WisDOT policy. **Note: Any deviation from the standard details found in the WisDOT Bridge Manual regarding aesthetic features requires prior approval from BOS.**

Aesthetic and/or Decorative Items (non-Participating, or CSS Items)

- All formliner is considered CSS. This includes geometric patterns, vertical ribs, rock patterns, custom patterns/designs, etc.
- Stain
- Ornamentation, including city symbols, city names, etc. (City symbols, city names, memorial names, etc. are not allowed on the structures).
- Fencing, railing, or parapets not described below.
- Structure shapes not defined in 4.3 and 4.9 or the standard details.

Note: Future maintenance costs can be substantial when factoring in not only surface preparation and stain/paint, but planning, mobilization and maintenance of traffic required that is entirely attributable to the maintenance project. For example, re-staining of concrete, when all project costs are accounted for, often exceeds \$20/SF.

Participating (non-CSS) Items

- **Street Names:** Street names recessed in the bridge parapet, and stained for visibility, are considered a participating item. The street name is considered an assistance to drivers. Having the name in the parapet removes the sign from the side of the road, which is considered a maintenance problem and safety hazard.
- **Protective Fence:** Any standard fencing from the Wisconsin Bridge Manual is considered a participating item. Additional costs for decorative fencing requested by the municipality will be included as a non-participating item. Fencing can be either galvanized or a duplex system of galvanized with a colored polymer-coating and/or paint. The polymer coating and/or paint is a nominal cost that provides a longer service life for the fence.
- **Bridge Rail:** Any standard railing from the Wisconsin Bridge Manual is considered a participating item as long as the railing is required for pedestrian and/or bicyclist



protection. There is no discernable difference in cost between any of the standard railings. Paint is a nominal cost that provides longer service life for the railing.

- Bridge Parapet: Any standard parapet from the Wisconsin Bridge Manual is considered a participating item. The Vertical Face Parapet 'TX' may be used as a participating item as long as the parapet is required for pedestrian and/or bicyclist protection. There is no discernable difference in cost between the Type 'TX' and a shorter, plain concrete parapet with railing that is often used for pedestrian and/or bicyclist protection.



4.6 Level of Aesthetics

The Regional Office should establish one of the following levels of aesthetics and indicate it on the Structure Survey Report. This will help the structural designer decide what level of effort and possible types of aesthetics treatments to consider. If Level 2 or greater is indicated, the Regional Office personnel or consultant must suggest particular requirements such as railing type, pier shape, special form liners, color, etc. in the comments area of the Structure Survey Report. Most Regions/municipalities prefer to leave anti-graffiti coating off of structures and would rather re-stain, as this is easier than trying to clean the graffiti.

Aesthetic treatments should be agreed upon prior to completion of preliminary plans in order for the final design to proceed efficiently. These details would be developed through the aesthetic process.

1. Level One: A general structure designed with standard structure details. This would apply in rural areas and urban areas with industrial development.
2. Level Two: Consists of cosmetic improvements to conventional Department structure types, such as the use of color stains/paints, texturing surfaces, modifications to fascia walls and beams or more pleasing shapes for columns. This would apply where there needs to be less visual impact from roadway structures.
3. Level Three: Emphasize full integration of efficiency, economy and elegance in structure components and the structure as a whole. Consider structure systems that are pleasing such as shaped piers and smooth superstructure lines. These structures would need to be in harmony with the surrounding buildings and/or the existing landscape.
4. Level Four: Provide overall aesthetics at the site with the structure incorporating level three requirements. The structure would need to blend with the surrounding terrain and landscaping treatment would be required to complete the appearance.

Note: The above text was left in this chapter, but will likely be modified or removed in future editions of this Manual. See 4.5 for current policy regarding CSS and levels of aesthetics.



4.7 Accent Lighting for Significant Bridges

The Wisconsin DOT will consider as part of an improvement project accent lighting for significant urban bridges with a clear span length of 450 feet and greater. The lighting would accent significant components above the driving surface such as an arch, truss, or a cable stayed superstructure. This lighting would enhance the noteworthy structure components of these significant bridges. The Traffic Engineering, Operations and Safety Manual (TEOpS) and the Program Management Manual (PMM) have respective guidance of maintenance and cost share policy.

The following structures would fall into this definition of significant urban bridges:

Table with 7 columns: Name, Region, County, Feature On, Feature Under, Year Built, Border. Rows include Tower Drive, Prairie du Chien, Blatnik, Bong, Cass Arch, Cass Truss, Hoan Bridge, Dubuque (Iowa), and Stillwater.

Table 4.4-1 Accent Lighting for Significant Bridges



4.8 Resources on Aesthetics

The *Bridge Aesthetic Sourcebook* from AASHTO is a very good source of practical ideas for short and medium span bridges. The Transportation Research Board (TRB) Subcommittee on Bridge Aesthetics authored this document and it can be found on the following [website](#): The final printing of this guide (noted in the References) is available through the AASHTO publication [website](#):



4.9 Non-CSS Aesthetic Concepts

Standards 4.02-4.05 provide details for acceptable non-CSS funded aesthetic concepts. The three types (Type I, Type II and Type III) show a plain wing, a wing with a rustication trim line and a wing with a recessed panel, respectively. For each given wing type, one or two acceptable parapet and/or pier details are shown.

- Type I: Simple features utilizing a plain wing, standard parapet and minimal pier rustications. Type I is ideal for most rural and some urban applications.
- Type II: The wings utilize the same rustication trim line as the columns. The columns can have single or paired rustication trim lines. Single rustication lines can be used for 32-inch parapets and double rustication lines can be used for 42-inch parapets. Type II can be used in urban applications and other limited areas.
- Type III: Recessed panel wings and recessed panel columns, along with standard parapets, are to be used in urban settings, only.

Within a given corridor, only one Type should be chosen so as not to create a disharmonious experience for those driving the corridor.

The following pages show renderings of the various non-CSS aesthetic concepts.



Figure 4.9-1
Aesthetic Concept Type I

- Plain abutment wings
- Single banded pier rustications
- Standard parapets
- Most rural and some urban applications



Figure 4.9-3
Aesthetic Concept Type II

- Rustication trim line on abutment wing
- Single or double banded pier rustications
- Rustication trim line(s) on parapets (one on 32" parapet and two on 42" parapet)
- Urban and other select applications



Figure 4.9-2
Aesthetic Concept Type III

- Recessed panel abutment wings
- Recessed panel columns
- Standard parapet
- Urban applications



4.10 References

1. AASHTO, *Bridge Aesthetics Sourcebook*, 2010.
2. Gottemoeller, Frederick, *Bridgescape: The Art of Designing Bridges*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004.