

Icons Among Us: The BU Bridge

Busted up, bruised, and still beautiful



KALIMAN ZABARSKY

SHE'S MISSING A NAMEPLATE, showing rebar, her curbs are chewed up by time and the elements, but you just can't beat the view from the BU Bridge. You get the downtown skyline, the pulsating Citgo sign, Beacon Hill capped with the gleaming golden dome of the Statehouse, Esplanade greenery, sailboats and scullers on tea-colored water, all in one dizzy swatch. And at night? All diamonds and silk.

The eighty-two-year-old steel truss bridge is undergoing a \$28.2 million rehab that will replace the deck and sidewalks, among other repairs. The span (technically U.S. Route 2) connecting Cambridge and Boston carries an estimated 41,000 vehicles over the Charles each day. Its dominant feature, a central steel arch painted green, is losing a decadeslong war with rust. Ornate concrete columns punctuate both ends like fat exclamation points.

"The BU Bridge has a heroic character in the sense that you have to go through this truss work, through this tunneled armature, almost like an Erector Set or a

WEB EXTRA
Watch a slide show about the BU Bridge at bu.edu/bostonia.

Ferris wheel," says Arthur Krim, who teaches historic preservation at Boston Architectural College and consults for the Massachusetts Historical Commission. "You get the sense that you're moving through something, and you are — you're crossing from Suffolk County to Middlesex County, from Boston to Cambridge, crossing two different tones of culture."

Originally named the Cottage Farm Bridge (after a nearby Brookline neighborhood), the bridge was built in 1928. Designed by Andrew Cananelli, it replaced an 1850s drawbridge called the Brookline Bridge.

Before the Charles became a recreational playground, the waterway served industrial masters. Coal barges

plowed upstream to deliver fuel to the Blackstone Power Station at Western Avenue and Memorial Drive, one reason for the bridge's height.

In 1949, a group of Boston University students lobbied state lawmakers to rename the bridge, which at the time marked the western boundary of the Charles River Campus. The proposal passed without a dissenting vote.

Running diagonally below the BU Bridge is a steel-plate girder railroad bridge, built in 1927, and carrying the CSX Transportation Grand Junction Line. The rail hauls freight, not passengers, and has dropped from two working tracks to one.

The rail bridge is also a graffiti artist's playground. A dozen or more large steel square sections, double-sided, serve as urban canvases; Shepard Fairey's ubiquitous Andre the Giant adorns several. Most of the tags, however, are school logos, from BU to Tufts, crew squads in particular, some dating back to 1997. Although the "decorations" get painted over regularly, they always return, and the train trestle has become a part of the bridge's character, a tattooed appendage.

Now operated by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the BU Bridge has existed in a state of disrepair for many years. The feds have categorized the bridge as "structurally deficient" under National Bridge Inspection Standards, although the main structural elements are still considered sound. The current rehab project, designed to improve pedestrian and bicycle access as well as car flow, is expected to be completed by the end of 2011.

"It's still dramatic, particularly when you're in slow traffic," Krim says. "It's always been slow, and now of course, it's slower. People have accepted it." ■