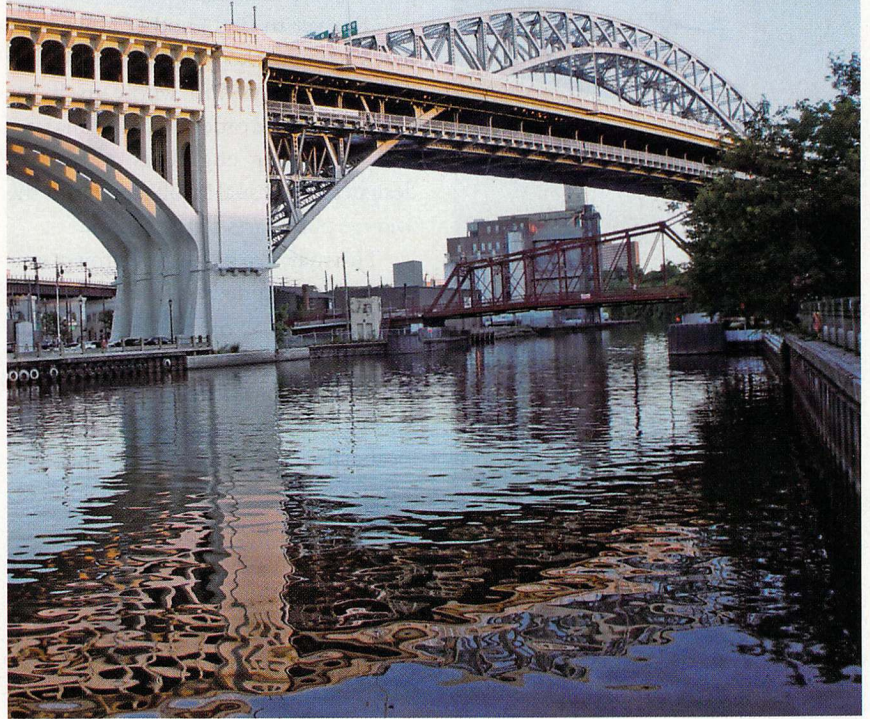


Spanning the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Veterans Memorial Bridge will soon feature a promenade for bikers and walkers.



Far From Pedestrian

Walkers—and artists—reclaim a bridge. || **BY ROBERT BITTNER**

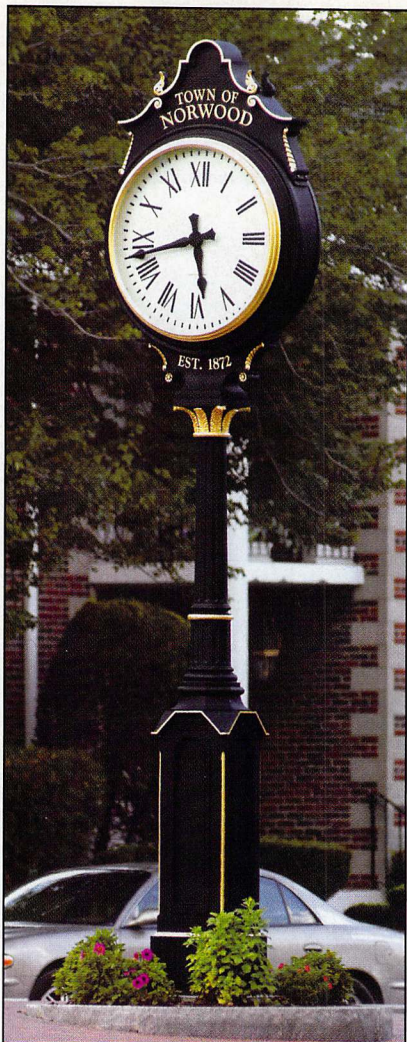
CLEVELAND—Veterans Memorial Bridge (also known as the Detroit-Superior Bridge) is the kind of structure that looks poetic on postcards but feels more like a penitentiary up close—a charmless stretch of concrete and steel spanning the Cuyahoga River, with six traffic lanes, view-blocking barriers, and narrow sidewalks anxiously shared by pedestrians and bikers alike. Built as a four-lane bridge from 1915 to 1918, it grew to six lanes (as its sidewalks shrunk) during a 1969 overhaul designed to ease traffic. In recent years, newer bridges built in the heart of the city have dramatically reduced congestion on Veterans Memorial, leaving it in a functional and aesthetic limbo.

Lillian Kuri, a 34-year-old Cleveland resident, frequently jogs across the bridge, which connects the Ohio City neighbor-

hood with downtown. In 2001, she became convinced that the bridge could be transformed into something better, something closer in spirit, perhaps, to the original structure. An architect with a master's degree in urban design from Harvard, Kuri proposed replacing two unneeded traffic lanes with a wide promenade for pedestrians and bikers, punctuated by canopied seating areas, landscaping, and pedestrian-scale lighting. Kuri is also the executive director of Cleveland Public Art, a nonprofit organization that, under her leadership, is enhancing the city's urban landscape in ways that go beyond sidewalk statues and dancing fountains.

Although the \$2.8 million project—with primary funding coming from federal transportation enhancement

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dollars—has been in the works for three years, the first concrete was poured in July, and the entire project should be completed in September.

“I’ve yet to find another city center that’s actually taken traffic lanes back for pedestrians,” says Kuri, whose group has been involved in ordering traffic analyses and overseeing engineers and urban designers—unusual involvements for the average public arts organization.

This may also be the first project ever in which an engineer has officially supervised a fine artist. “As engineers, it’s not every day that we work with an artist,” admits Cuyahoga County’s engineer, Bob Klaiber, speaking of his collaboration with local artist Don Harvey. “The trick was putting his details into our bid process and making it work legally.”

But don’t expect murals or life-size sculpture on the new promenade. The artistic aspects of the span, says Harvey—whose work hangs in art museums in Ohio and throughout the eastern United States, and whom Kuri calls “a closet urban planner”—are more integral than that. “My idea of public space,” Harvey explains, “is that the art is the whole design project. In this case, everything on the

bridge—the colors, the paving pattern, the seating—is part of the work of art.”

Harvey’s primary artistic contribution was the creation of seven devices, spaced along the promenade, that measure various environmental phenomena, such as the seismic motion on the bridge and the temperature and speed of the river below. Though not art in the conventional sense, the devices were created to enhance the connection that pedestrians will feel with the bridge and the Cuyahoga.

Observant pedestrians will also find themselves walking on an artistic puzzle of sorts. The promenade’s team of designers created colorful patterns in the concrete that represent numbers in a Fibonacci math sequence, a “rhythm of numbers that never repeat,” in Kuri’s words. “At both ends,” she says, “we’ll have brass plaques that tell you the formula. If you want to figure it out, you can.” And the point? Simply to enliven the experience of the people who will use the bridge every day.

“I think we’re making a really good public space for the city and for the people who live here,” Harvey says. In the case of an old urban bridge, that’s an art in itself.



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