

Jeannene Przyblyski: Here and There, Now and Then at the Golden Gate -Excerpts from the Case Files of the Bureau of Urban Secrets

By Jeannene Przyblyski
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In celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge, Open Space has commissioned a number of special posts from artists and writers. Please welcome artist, historian, and urbanist Jeannene Przyblyski.

... but whereas description of the miniature approaches an infinity of relevant detail, description of the gigantic frequently focuses on movement and its attendant consequences ...
—Susan Stewart, *On Longing* [1993]

Trying to put my finger on what makes the Golden Gate Bridge so special, I looked down.



Pedestrian Zone Logo on the Golden Gate Bridge, c. 1937 (photograph by Jeannene Przyblyski for the San Francisco Bureau of Urban Secrets, 2012)

where people are supposed to be walking, it also seems like the beginning of a story. In the end, this is what came to interest me most about the Golden Gate Bridge: the nearly endless back-and-forth between its monumentally iconic and excessively anecdotal characters — its majestic scale and cinematic sweep between land and sea *and* its art deco decorativeness, its asymmetrical arch over Fort Point, that orange color!

It is as if the bridge is constantly asking us to move between the panoramic view and the close-up, the historically dated and the particularly present (which can sometimes, like the man and child, turn out to be one and the same),

I was walking on the bridge for the first time in many years, in conjunction with a project I was working on, commissioned by the FOR-SITE Foundation in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the bridge, as part of *International Orange*. The nearly impossible task: to provide a fresh experience of a landmark so familiar, so incessantly photographed and memorialized in song, so driven over, biked over, walked over, and run over as to seem a thing that goes without saying, an enduring presence. And yet for all that the bridge almost instantly attained iconic status, it's rarely seen as a cliché.

Instead, it exerts such a powerfully imaginary pull that nearly 300,000 people converged on it for the 50th anniversary in May 1987 and nearly flattened it (I was one of them). Why, I wondered?

The circle on the pavement contained the image of a man and child, walking. Another sort of icon: the ostensibly universal picture languages that tell the world to stop and yield, where there's danger and where there's shelter, or food. And yet this icon was anything but universal. Instead it was a very particularly described pedestrian pairing, a man and a

child (father and daughter?), the man in a sort of *Mad Man*-esque suit, from a time when people dressed up to go out for a weekend walk, with the pony-tailed little girl held securely in hand. An image-sign to indicate

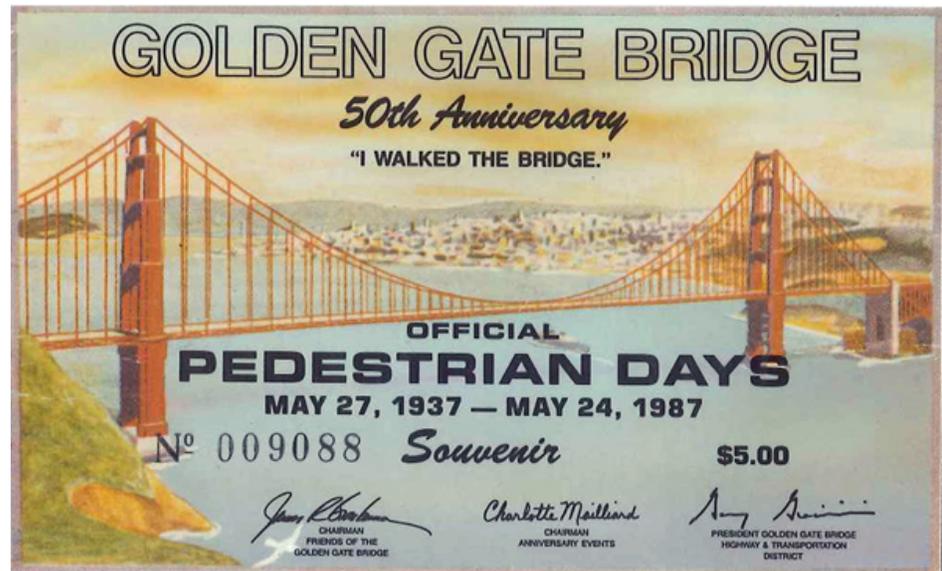
the spectacular sensation of a screen-image (as seen from a car or plane) and the phenomenologically grounded, multisensory experience of walking the span. This vascillating movement, it seems to me, is a less engineered kind of “give” in the bridge’s make-up than the up- and downward and transverse deflections that help to keep it safe in storms and earthquakes, but is no less integral to the bridge’s identity. It opens up the kind of space where the best souvenirs make their magic, allowing the iconic to come to stand for particular memories, memories that you have to be invited to share.

Because, on the other hand, at its most oppressively monumental, the iconic can produce not memories but a sort of speechlessness.

The Golden Gate Bridge does risk this effect. When I was doing the interviews for K-BRIDGE, the fictitious, ludicrously low-fi, and really DIY radio station that was my contribution to *International Orange*, initially it was very hard to get anybody but the most practiced to move beyond a simple

declarative of stunned amazement when trying to express their fascination with the bridge. Those who already had their stories well in place could elaborate them with real eloquence and little prompting. Those who have been put on the spot only occasionally to excavate their memories more often than not resorted, at least at first, to the nearly monosyllabic exclamation: “Oooh’s” and “Aaah’s.”

But behind those simple declaratives there are stories indeed, waiting to be teased out — stories about first experiences on the bridge, about long-term love affairs with the bridge, about working on the bridge during “graveyard shift,” even about how other than human eyes might see the bridge (give a listen to the attached audio clips that sample these stories). These stories are, I think, as precious as the bridge itself, and deserving of celebration. And so the bridge and the Bureau of Urban Secrets seem like a pretty good match: even as the bridge provides the day-to-day commuter connection between where we are and where we want to be, the Bureau of Urban Secrets continues to traffic in the stories about how we came to be here.



Golden Gate Bridge Official Pedestrian Days Souvenir, 1987.