

Handout Mentality – Building Bridges The Anita Quigley Way

Had it not been for the Grand Prix, the third week end in March might have been designated National Bridge Day. There was much ado about the 75th anniversary of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and a good deal of waffling on the meaning of bridges in bringing people together. On the same week-end, the long overdue Wembley Stadium, Britain's premier soccer venue, which is a stadium built under a bridge made by bridge makers, even though it's owners prefer to call it an arch, was pronounced finished and a demonstration game of soccer was played there. Wembley is on the other side of the world, but since it has been built, very much past due date and very much over budget by the Australian company Multiplex, has gained a sort of reverse icon status in this country.

Unlike the MCG, which is close to the center of Melbourne, Wembley is technically not even within the boundaries of London. Perhaps to make up for this geographical oversight, the designers have ensured that this huge bridge, or arch, not only holds up the roof but can now be seen from much of England's capital city. Just like the old coat hanger in Sydney, or the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Wembley is now a landmark and an icon. All very wonderful according to it's website, which barely mentions the name Multiplex at all, and in my perhaps too brief review, seemed to avoid mentioning the cost, rumored to be around two billion dollars.

Since you can feed a lot of hungry people, or cure a lot of sick people, (or if you don't like those ideas, lock up a lot of crooked people) for 2 bill, you could ask what is it all for? Just like the money lavished on other soccer stadiums (should that be stadia?) in Japan for the 2002 World Cup, redundant and useless as soon as the event was over, or closer to home, the vast amounts of your money lavished on the recent Melbourne Commonwealth Games, is there any real public benefit in multi-million dollar infrastructure projects?

In the case of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, it's pretty obvious if you want to live around waterways, bridges are a necessity. In the case of major sporting infrastructures, the people who are spending your money contend that projects such as Wembley Stadium are also bridges which bring people together. In the event of a sell-out crowd at Wembley, 90,000 people will be brought together so that is literally true. The downside of this is that the coming and going of large numbers of people is a problem that the infrastructure planners never quite seem to keep up with. Which brings me back to that overpriced ant heap called Sydney.

Sydney commuters are by necessity long suffering. The road system has never kept pace with the development of the city and the rail system seems to be in a perpetual state of crisis. There has been further strain recently by the sudden closure of some roads to ensure that visiting US President Cheney (and no, I don't think I have just made a mistake) could travel around the city with maximum security. So when a group of cyclists-activists calling themselves Critical Mass held a large group ride deliberately planned to disrupt peak hour traffic, (6.00pm on a Friday over the iconic Harbour Bridge – complete with police escort) it was inevitable that some tempers would be seriously frayed.

I have to say that while I see where these cyclists are coming from – claiming not only a right to share the roads but demonstrating a belief that there is a better alternative to the infernal combustion engine – there is a very thin line between confrontational tactics and self-defeating stupidity. But I'm not so much concerned with them as with the reaction of one Anita Quigley, an opinion columnist for Rupert's Daily Telegraph. In her column, (which typically of modern newspapers has more headline and portrait than serious print), following up on public reaction to this ride, she says "all cyclists in the city are irritating and I find bring on an overwhelming desire to swerve towards." So road rage is now legitimate? Ms. Quigley also notes that "a scientist recently discovered that motorists pass, on average, 7.5cm closer to cyclists in helmets than they do to some-one riding along bare-headed" which confirms my suspicions that compulsory helmets for cyclists are not so much about reducing injuries in the event of a crash but making motorists feel less guilty about hitting bike riders

There is an organization from Ballarat called the Amy Gillett Foundation which aims to build a bridge between motorists and cyclists so that both can share the roads with respect for one another and, most importantly, create safety for the much more vulnerable cyclist. The Foundation commemorates Amy Gillett who died as a result of a motorist's mistake. I'd like to think that the death of a woman in the prime of her life due to an avoidable accident would have some meaning for the likes of Anita Quigley but perhaps that is too much to ask. Getting home after a hard day at the workplace chipping a few dollars off one's astronomical personal debt has somehow assumed the sanctification of a pilgrimage to Mecca and heaven help the lycra loonies who get in your way.

It seems easier to create mechanical marvels like the Harbour Bridge or Wembley Stadium than to work out how to share a bit of bitumen or have a bit of regard for the safety of fellow humans. I'd like to wish the Amy Gillett Foundation well. According to Anita Quigley, that might just be a bridge too far.