



How often does one go “under a bridge”? As **Peter Benz** shows in this article, a bridge is more than a means to cross an obstacle; it can also present a whole new perspective.

text and photography by **peter benz**

*Oh, when the sun beats down and
burns the tar up on the roof
And your shoes get so hot you wish
your tired feet were fire-proof
Under the boardwalk, down by the sea, yeah
On a blanket with my baby is where I'll be*

*(Under the boardwalk) out of the sun
(Under the boardwalk)
we'll be havin'
some fun*

*(Under the boardwalk) people walking above
(Under the boardwalk) we'll be falling in love
Under the board-walk (board-walk!)*

Under the Boardwalk, The Drifters

On the back of the second-to-last seat of one of the mini-buses I take to work every day is a graffiti that grabs my attention each time I read it:

"Jamie f***s hairy men under a bridge."

As far as insults go, I find this one rather imaginative, even sophisticated: the matter-of-factual tone, the poignant description of a specific setting, the dry sense of humour.

In very short terms this graffiti opens a whole scenario with various parameters, each of which could significantly vary the interpretation of the offence: as Jamie is a unisex name, the subject of the insult is open in terms of sexual orientation. Jamie "f***s" in present tense, which gives the activity a notion of constancy, even timelessness. It may be noteworthy that Jamie is taking the active part in the intercourse, rather than being passively f***ed. "Hairy men" suggests a generic, stereotypical category, but also is simply a plural term, hinting promiscuity or even group sex.

However, most importantly the scribbling tickles my interest as it uses a spatial location as a climax to the insult's offensive potential. If Jamie were f***ing hairy men in – let's say – a bedroom at home, it would not be considered as bad as "under a bridge." Obviously the anonymous writer has a very definite – and not very positive – idea about the space under bridges and he assumes that we all share this view.

Bridges are many things: engineering feats, economic infrastructures, strategic items for the military, symbols of unification, and visual icons. However, very rarely are bridges considered as actual spaces.



The very idea of a bridge is about bridging something obstructive, potentially dangerous, a natural or man-made obstacle. Thus already conceptually being “on a bridge” automatically has to be considered preferable to being “under a bridge,” otherwise there wouldn’t be the need for the bridge in the first place.

Again by its nature a bridge is a very directional, and also a very restrictive space: one gets “on” at the one end and off at the other; there are no other options – except of course suicidal ones. The whole space “on a bridge” is dedicated to movement, drawing any passer-by across as quickly as possible. After all, “on” many bridges, time is money (= toll); they are not intended for lingering or resting, not even for stopping for the view. When you’re “on a bridge” you know where you (want to/ have to) go. This makes the spatial experience of bridges very dynamic, or – as some may say – rather restless, but to a certain point the experience is also fairly boring, mono-structured: straight. Full stop.

In a more spiritual way, “on a bridge” one is elevated above the troubles that lie below it. This is how the ancient Chinese may have felt when they defined the centre as their fifth capital direction: the individual exposed on an open plain, the world limited only by the skies arching high above, meeting the earth somewhere far away... “On a bridge” is a distinguished, privileged situation; it’s the sunny side of life.

In reverse one may easily assume that “under a bridge” is all the opposite: literally the “under-privileged” side of existence, shady in every sense of the word. Of course we all know images of homeless people camping out under bridges, and certainly this is usually not a desirable way of living, despite it sometimes being romanticized in movies and pulp-fiction.

A bridge is more than a means of crossing over troubled waters, it actually also provides a vast range of spatial opportunities below it that are often exploited by the homeless mentioned above. This space is also used for other purposes: bicycle parking, playgrounds, bus-stops, youth hang-outs, et cetera. After all, above anything else, the space “under a bridge” provides protection: protection against the weather, the sun, against onlookers, things falling from the skies...

If one is able to overcome the general prejudices about spaces “under a bridge,” it is even possible to liken the experience to a Gothic cathedral: the long, high-reaching nave, the rhythmic sequence of the support-structure, the heroic strength of the columns, the daringness of the spans, the raw power of the material, the light-reflections on various surfaces, and the (relative) calm.

However, maybe most importantly, the space “under a bridge” is more complex and has more spatial variations: a series of high, light-flooded halls, gradually, almost inconceivably varying in height; small, dingy annexes of seemingly random shapes; medium-sized, useful areas often functionalized by third parties; the main-directional force represented in the ceiling (= the actual bridge), while the obstacle – the reason for the bridge – establishes a powerful, usually perpendicular counter-direction; the various possibilities of entering and exiting the space.

As much as “on the bridge” is an uplifting experience, “under a bridge” certainly has the greater potential for interpretation and accordingly functions as a distinctly more emotional place. Thinking about it, sexual intercourse “under a bridge” may actually be quite a sublime and even spiritual experience. Thus, thumbs up for Jamie!

Personally, I’m not sure about the hairy men though... ■