

## Public Duty of Infrastructure

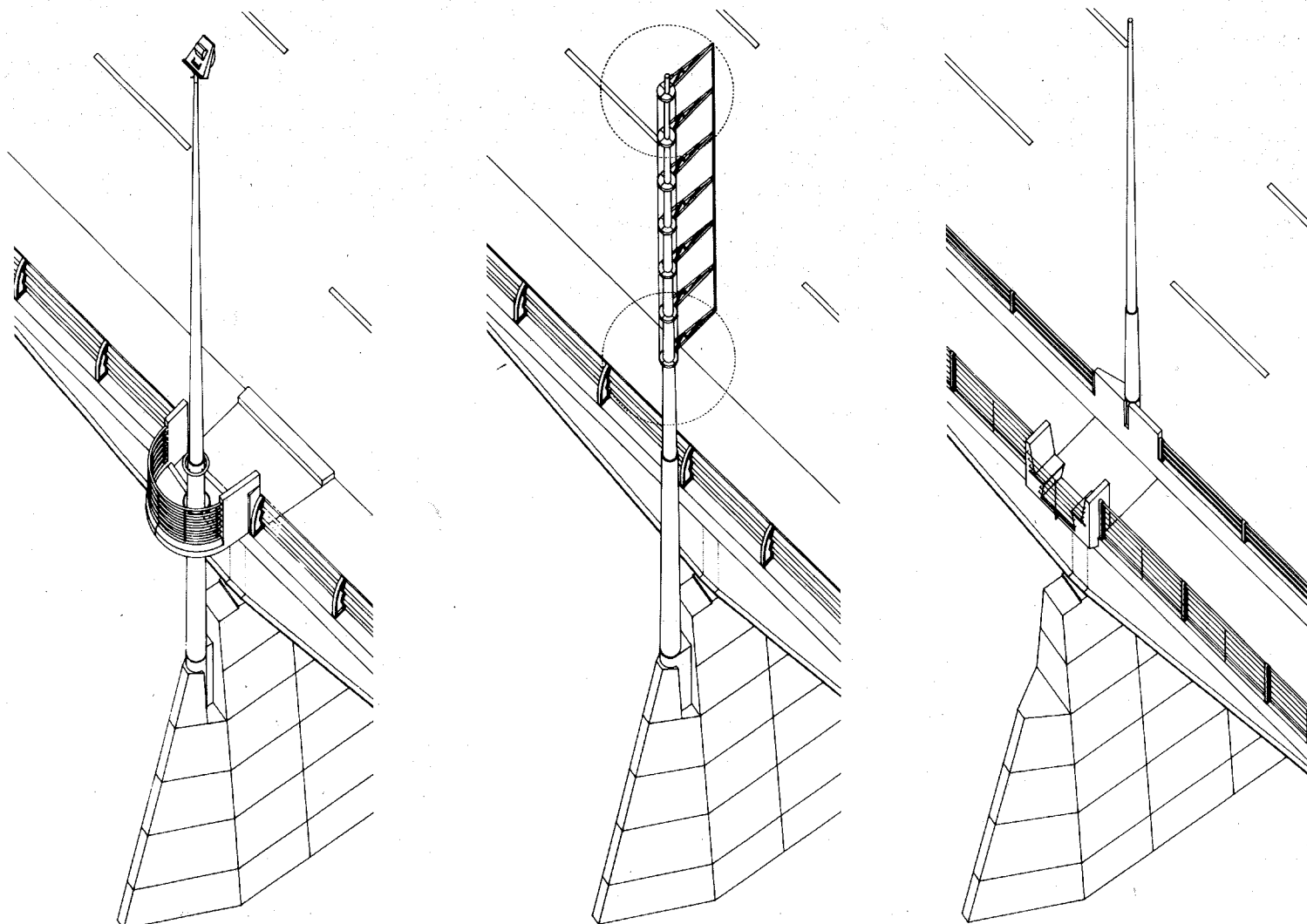
*A letter to a mayor of a large American city stresses the civic potential of urban services.*

**D**ear Mayor: I am writing to urge you to enhance our city through better designed, better integrated, and better used infrastructure. As the manifestation of public services, infrastructure not only supports and defines cities, but it also has the ability to establish a sense of place. Historically, its symbolic role has been celebrated through monumental walls, gates, bridges, and parks. Paris's sewer system and New York's Brooklyn Bridge, for example, have inspired artists, attracted tourists, and fostered civic pride, in addition to serving functional roles. By integrating multiple uses and providing well-designed public spaces and monuments, infrastructure can help build a high quality of life, attract new residents, and support businesses. Given today's challenges to the collective life of the city, can you afford to demand less of infrastructure?

Sadly, contemporary infrastructure is rarely elevated to the level of cultural icon. As we have come to take city services for

granted, infrastructure has become mundane, as ubiquitous and banal as the concrete barriers that border our highways. We expect state-commissioned designs to be undistinguished, formulaic solutions. We accept them for their presumed rational efficiency, yet we have all seen the devastating social consequences of reducing urban infrastructure to purely functional criteria: the bypassed neighborhoods and inaccessible waterfronts, whose blight, though contained, is exacerbated by their ghettoized isolation.

Federal regulations for construction materials, methods, and performance further promote an uncritical approach to infrastructure design. For example, designs for bridge railings are limited to solutions that have been crash tested. To date, however, only the New Jersey barrier has been tested—hence its maddening ubiquity. State agencies are nonetheless sensitive to public opinion and, in my experience, are willing to deviate from these formulas when adequately pressured.



**CHARLOTTESVILLE BRIDGE:** Studies of piers by Dunham-Jones and LeBlanc Architects for Free Bridge in Virginia.