



Bridging the gash (Hicks St. nr. Summit St.)



Over and under (Hamilton Ave. near Henry St.)

## Ode to the Humble Footbridge

by Adam Eisenstat

*The highway stops for no one  
over streams of traffic  
the car-less trudge.*

**T**he footbridge across the highway is a pedestrian refuge in the midst of the atmosphere. In Red Hook there are two: one at Hicks Street and Summit Street that spans the sunken BQE down below (the "Ditch"); and another one off Hamilton Avenue, near Henry Street, that cuts through one of Brooklyn's most frantic junctures—a 10- or 12-lane stretch where the Gowanus Expressway, the Battery Tunnel, and the BQE converge. The Hicks Street bridge is a simple span, but the other one is a complex affair that goes over multiple roadbeds and under two others.

On the Summit Street pedestrian bridge, you're above the traffic, above the noise from the ditch below—that surf-like roar, with the blaring horns and screeching brakes. It drifts up to where you are, filtered by distance and tamed into a calming drone . . . Rush hour seen through the chain link fence is a panoramic glimpse of the city full on. Sunbeams reflect off glass and chrome, darting across windshields and spinning hubcaps—that mad kinetic frenzy! Looking over the Ditch, you feel like you're commanding a perch all your own, above it all—ruthless velocity, concrete and steel.

The Hamilton Avenue bridge offers a different experience. It's a jerry-built structure, lodged between off-ramps and overpasses, intersecting roadbeds and the place where the highway meets the street. Usually it's bereft of pedestrians, except during certain parts of the day. When it's empty, it's bleak, a slab of concrete strewn with empty beer cans and who knows what—maybe a filthy pile of clothes or the odd used condom, everything coated with a dusting of exhaust fumes. It's a blighted place, like a tunnel to purgatory. At one point, though, you pass under a road just a few feet above. You can feel that swarming velocity, that mechanical flow of traffic. The vibrations engulf you, allowing you to become intimate with the highway, perhaps more than a (living) pedestrian ever could be.

Any feelings of intimacy or omnipotence that may strike on the bridge tend to expire upon exiting. Resuming your place, as a ground level pedestrian, offers a vantage for context and clarity.



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The footbridges of Red Hook symbolize the dominant place of highways in the neighborhood. More piquantly, they are constant reminders of the violence done by Robert Moses to expand his auto-centric vision into Red Hook and all over Brooklyn. Moses was the controversial “master builder” who built the BQE, and so much more. The Ditch, like many of his projects, involved massive displacement—about 500 houses were demolished in the early 1950s. More enduringly, it cut Red Hook off from the rest of south Brooklyn, and left us the Mosaic landscape—a legacy of truncated avenues and bisected streets, more foe than friend to the walker trying gamely to navigate the broken topography.

*All photos by Adam Eisenstat*