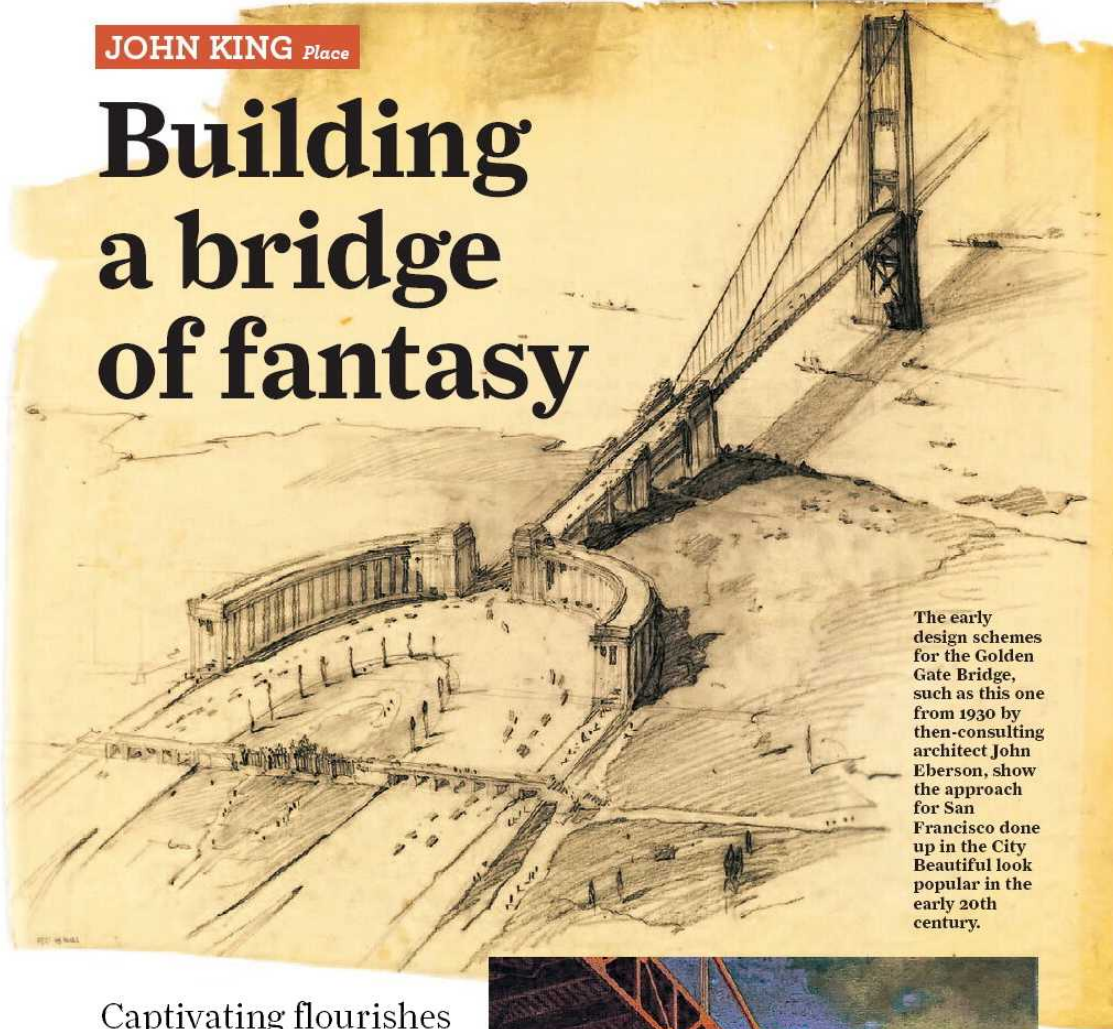


JOHN KING *Place*

# Building a bridge of fantasy



The early design schemes for the Golden Gate Bridge, such as this one from 1930 by then-consulting architect John Eberson, show the approach for San Francisco done up in the City Beautiful look popular in the early 20th century.

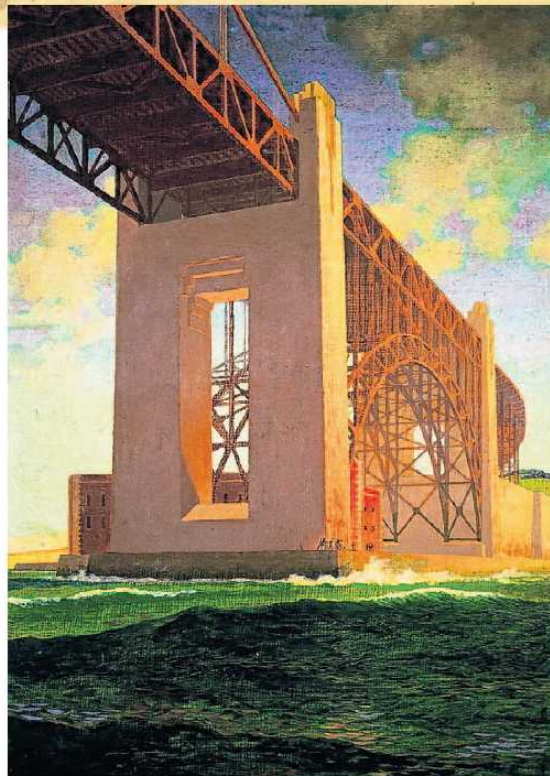
## Captivating flourishes in exhibition of early Golden Gate sketches

Restraint is not a word we associate with the Golden Gate Bridge — truly one of the nation's heroic works of engineering — but after seeing a new exhibition on how the span came to be, I am struck by the creators' you-know-what.

The gallery walls at the California Historical Society show us what *could* have been: colonnades suited to the glory that was Rome, an administration building shaped like a movie palace, a southern entrance hemmed in by triumphant walls. The images are fun cultural artifacts that in real life would have been deadly, and they illustrate a truth that is never out of style: The best architecture knows when to leave well enough alone.

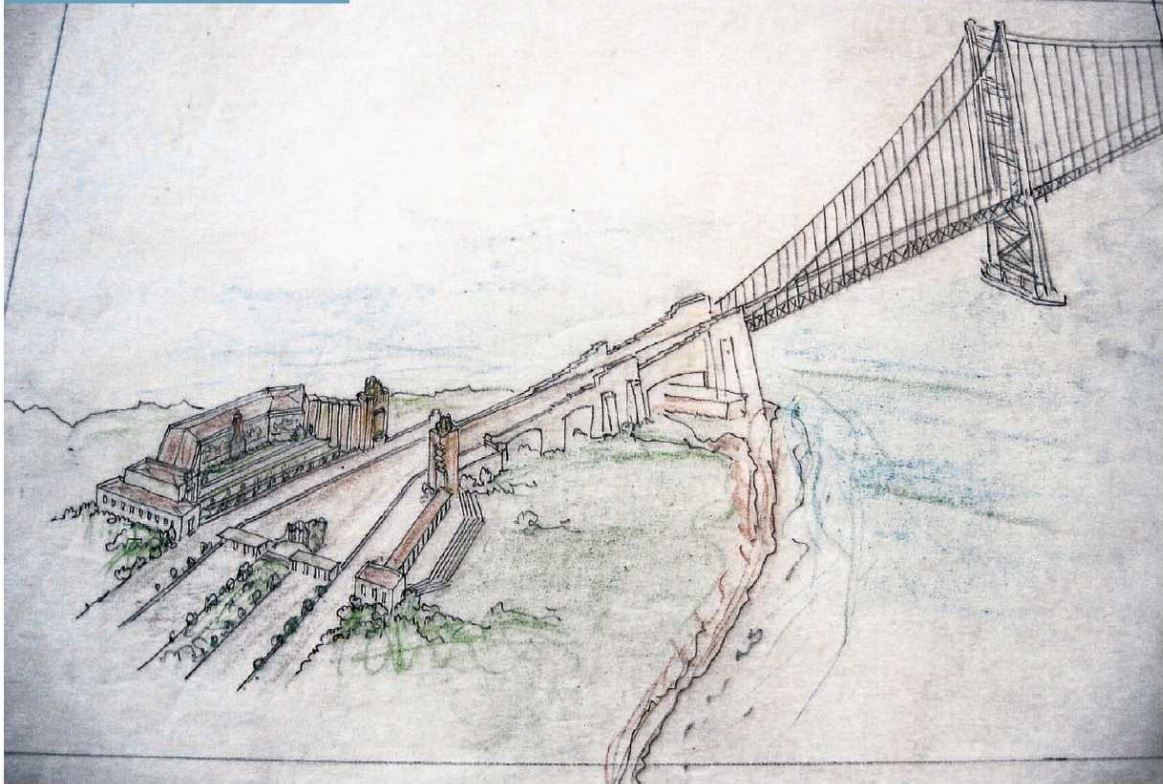
Restraint is a minor riff in "A Wild Flight of the Imagination: The Story of the Golden Gate Bridge," an exhibition that opened last week and runs through Oct. 14. It starts with artifacts of pre-bridge life and features such goodies as the gear worn by divers who worked on the span's un-

*King continues on E5*



California Historical Society Images

Chesley Bonestell's painting of the base of the Golden Gate Bridge at Fort Point is on display at the California Historical Society.



California Historical Society

Irving Morrow sketched a much more complex approach to the Golden Gate Bridge than was built. The drawing is part of a California Historical Society display.

## Early versions of Golden Gate Bridge

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derwater piers before culminating, fittingly, in souvenirs from opening day on May 28, 1937.

The hook for design buffs, though, is the large and lovingly rendered architectural sketches of the bridge when it was taking shape *as an idea*, a concept to be sold to voters and then translated to blueprints.

Several drawings are from 1930 and the original consulting architect, John Ebersson. Others are by Irving Morrow, who was elevated into the post by chief engineer Joseph B. Strauss because his fees were lower than Ebersson's. An ethereal 1930 painting by Maynard Dixon shows a bridge very much like the one that came to be.

Except in one respect. Dixon's work has traffic approaching the bridge through a huge plaza with portals on the north and south and towers on the east and west.

This could be dis-

missed as artistic license, yet Ebersson and Morrow also show ceremonial entries that engulf the tollbooths and extend north to where the cables appear above the span's roadway.

Morrow's schemes are the most detailed, because he was crafting specific design proposals. His approach — in

**“One scheme is pure City Beautiful. Another goes Bauhaus on us. They were exploring every direction.”**

Anthea Hartig, executive director, California Historical Society

both senses of the word — sent bridge-bound drivers past imperially scaled stone walls, part windbreak and part showcase for murals.

### Design flourishes

Once beyond the grandiose portal, which looks to be 50 feet high, the architectural impositions did not stop. The entry to the bridge was a stepped stone chute, walls ascending on ei-

ther side until you burst into the open beneath the towers, above the blue.

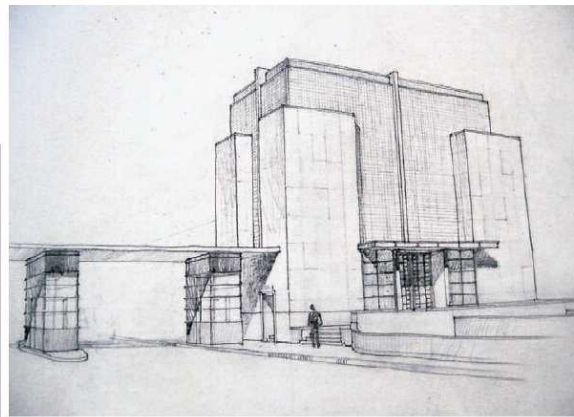
The astounding thing is that such flourishes were thought necessary and were part of the overall design almost until the end. Also sacrificed was an administration building intended to turn heads; Morrow went through pose after pose, Mayan here and souped-up Moderne there.

“One scheme is pure City Beautiful. Another goes Bauhaus on us,” says historical society Executive Director Anthea Hartig.

“They were exploring every direction against the backdrop of international conversations on the future of architectural design.”

In their affably informative book “Golden Gate Bridge: History and Design of an Icon,” Donald MacDonald and Ira Nadel report how on the eve of the span's completion, Morrow fretted in a letter to Strauss that “the Plaza is assuredly going to appear bare.”

Morrow's loss is the



Collection of Environmental Design Archives at the University of California, Berkeley

This is not a mausoleum; it's one of the many design styles tried out by Morrow for the toll plaza administration building at the Golden Gate Bridge.

region's gain.

One of the many glories of our icon is the balance it strikes between structure and setting. The bay's portal was enhanced, not defiled, by the addition of a 4,200-foot-long roadway held by cables slung from 746-foot-high towers. Those towers' Art Deco stylings add a suave grandeur to an experience that could have been merely powerful.

But for all its power and grandeur, the structure never tries to distract us from the setting. That's what those elaborate portals would have done. They would have

brought theatrical trappings to an experience where theater is the last thing that we need.

### Similar issues now

On a smaller scale, with lesser stakes, the same issue plays out today.

It's the oversize hillside house that pretends to be a French chateau, or the glassy tower so eager to look of-the-moment that backers ignore how dated the show will be in 10 years. On a lower budget, it's the suburban “town center” where the mock-historic cornices are molded Styrofoam glued to plywood walls and

then sprayed with stucco.

At the Golden Gate Bridge, perhaps restraint was a matter of budget, saving money for where it was needed. Perhaps it was decision makers who realized that even wild flights of imagination can go too far.

The result is timeless whatever the motivation — and the current exhibition will make you appreciate its distinctive wonder all the more.

John King is *The San Francisco Chronicle's* urban design critic. Place runs Wednesdays. Twitter: @johnkingsfchron. jking@sfchronicle.com