

## Notes from the Archive

Seaver Center for Western History Research  
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County  
Winter 2021

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### THE 6TH STREET BRIDGE SERIES

by Betty Uyeda and Brent Riggs

The 6<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, officially called the Sixth Street Viaduct, requires a few accolades in past tense. Completed in 1932, it was the longest bridge spanning across the Los Angeles River at more than 3,500 feet, as well as in southern California before being surpassed by the San Diego-Coronado Bridge in 1969. By comparison, the Bay Area's Golden Gate Bridge is 4,200 feet.

The Viaduct's arches were constructed steel-through, one of only two pre-1960 bridges with the type of arch, the other being in Plumas County. Unfortunately the rest of the bridge consisted of concrete and asphalt without sealant, contributing to an unusual chemical reaction known as alkali-silica that over time broke down the concrete supports and seismic stability.

In November, 2014, the Sixth Street Viaduct Replacement Project began. Groundbreaking was held in February of 2015, and the City threw a big farewell party on October 24th attended by thousands replete with fireworks, food, concerts, and a car show. Demolition started the following year, and one individual was granted rare access to embark on his personal project to document the downfall of the iconic landmark and the rise of a modern one fitted with the latest earthquake protections and a 12-acre park underneath.

### The Donor

Gary Leonard has been a friend to the Seaver Center for several years, and he has donated numerous photo prints to the museum. A recent purchase of 1,085 digital photographs of the Sixth Street Bridge series was acquired in August of last year. He pared down and selected from over 50,000 shots he has taken since 2016.



Gary originated the idea to invite a wide swath of Angelenos to get their pictures taken by him in front of a set of angel wings on Main Street.

(Image courtesy of B. Uyeda)

In the early 1980s, Gary focused on the L.A. punk rock scene before joining several local newspapers which regularly featured the Take My Picture Gary Leonard photo-essay. In recent years he has built a niche in the building construction industry as the go-to photographer on major construction projects, regularly taking to the skies from Van Nuys Airport. Read some of his thoughts from an email exchange:

**Q:** How did you first get involved with the Sixth Street Viaduct Replacement Project?

**A:** The first time I came to the 6th Street Bridge was in the spring of 1972. I was the still photographer on a B movie called *It's Alive*. The climax of the movie took place in the river. Access to the river for the crew was under the 6th Street Bridge at Santa Fe. As for the Replacement Project, I got involved through my work as chief photographer at the Downtown News. I've been documenting the project for maybe ten years and prior to that I've been documenting changes Downtown consistently since the late 1970s.

**Q:** Can you describe a typical morning when you go to the construction site?

**A:** I try to get to the bridge early because I prefer the morning light. By getting there at the beginning of a shift I catch the safety meetings. There I pick up the activities for that day. To enter the site, I'm required to wear steel-toed shoes, safety goggles, a safety vest, gloves and a hard-hat, all of which I keep in my car. The activities change daily and I get to know the crews who keep me informed. Over time I've gotten good relationships with the teams so they are comfortable with me being around.

**Q:** Have your ideas on photographing the project evolved since you began?

**A:** No because I don't have pre-conceived ideas. I'm curious like anybody else.

**Q:** What surprising experiences of the project have you encountered?

**A:** Last fall after missing a few days, I was surprised how when the falsework and forms for the arches went up, the construction transformed into looking like a real bridge.

**Q:** You have been involved with many Los Angeles construction projects. Can you describe some of them?

**A:** I've been working on many. A handful of buildings that I've documented stand out for their history making presence. Disney Hall took twelve years from groundbreaking to ribbon cutting. Aside from its unique design, it's a great place to hear a concert. The

Wilshire Grand (now the tallest building west of the Mississippi) is the first modern building in Los Angeles that doesn't have a flat helicopter pad. The fire department updated regulations, allowing for the building's sail and spire. At 4th & Spring, CitizenM (the first modular high-rise build in downtown LA) is just being completed. It took 7 months to build 11 floors. What makes CitizenM interesting is how it's juxtaposed with the Continental Building (the tallest building of its time) and the Herman Hellman Building (the largest office building of its time). Today 117 years later, CitizenM has its own distinction of being modular. I'm currently doing progress shots for the addition to the Wilshire Blvd Temple. The new Irmas Pavilion and Event Space, designed by Rem Koolhaas, has incredible angles that defy gravity. The octagon design of the exterior panels tie the pavilion in and complement it with the contours of the contiguous 1928 Synagogue. I've just finished documenting the demolition of five LACMA buildings and I'm beginning to photograph the new David Geffen Gallery, designed by Peter Zumthor. The new addition to LACMA will span Wilshire Blvd and is slated for completion in 2024.

**Q:** What first drew you to document the changing face of Los Angeles, the demolition of buildings --or entire blocks-- and the construction of new buildings or public projects?

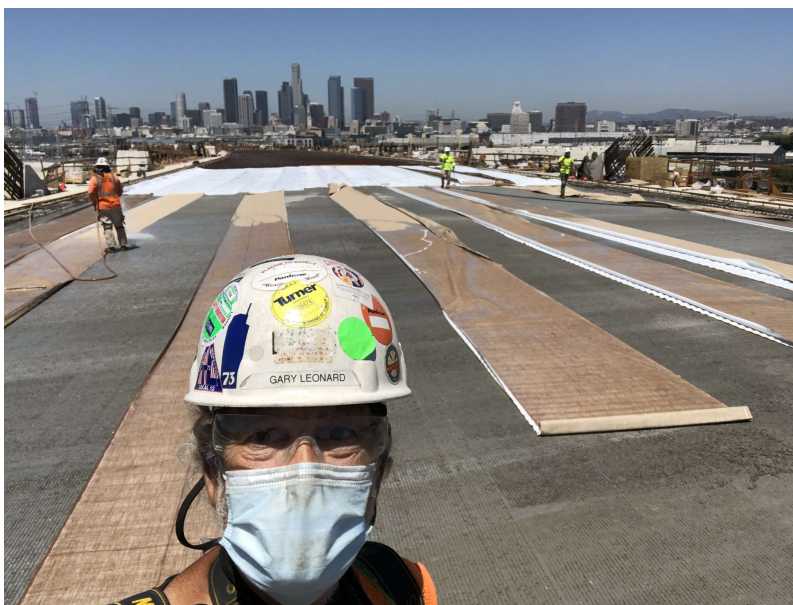
**A:** At some point I came to the realization that construction is history at its most fleeting. Everyday there's something new to see that is different from the day before. You can't go back because what's been shot has already changed and so the only record is in the photograph. These projects go up quickly and then they're no longer in transition. Every project I shoot has context. A good example is the 6th Street Bridge. The downtown skyline is there throughout the construction to give the context of time and place.

**Q:** At this stage in your career, your cameras seem to be part of your body, your entire physical and mental being. Would you like to share any other thoughts on the importance of documentary photography in contemporary society, or on the value of knowing our history?

**A:** Wherever I am, I'm driven by a desire to know what was here before. I've always studied old photographs, looking into the images to understand what the times were like before me. With the photography that I do, I'm consciously leaving behind a record for the person who comes after me.

**Q:** We would love to hear any additional comments on anything else related to the 6th Street Bridge and other city construction projects.

**A:** As the 6th Street Bridge is constructed for the 21st Century, two friends in the form of a coyote and a pit bull scour the construction site for food scraps left by the workers.



"Saturday morning we were the first people to stand on the new 6th Street Bridge"

8.1.2020 @ 11:54 a.m.

(Image courtesy of personal collection of G. Leonard)

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## The Collection



Groundbreaking ceremony, February, 2015



Historic Sixth Street Viaduct, January, 2016



Demolition of the old bridge, February, 2016



Demolition progress, August, 2016





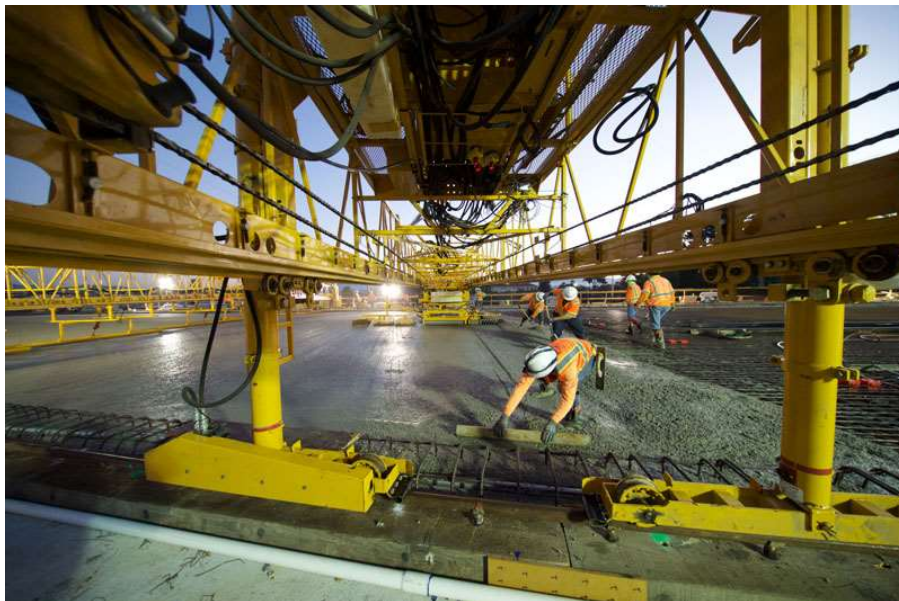
Drilling a footing for a bridge support, December, 2016



Steelwork for a Y brace, February, 2020



The bridge forms taking shape, March, 2020



Spreading concrete for the roadbed, August, 2020

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The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.  
The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.

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