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Michael Robinson Chavez / Los Angeles Times

The craftsmanship on the bridges can be seen in the railings of the Olympic Boulevard bridge.

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## Looking out for L.A. River's bridges



Michael Robinson Chavez / Los Angeles Times

The craftsmanship on the bridges can be seen in the railings of the Olympic Boulevard bridge.

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## **An effort to bestow monument status on 11 historical spans comes as six are slated for upgrades.**

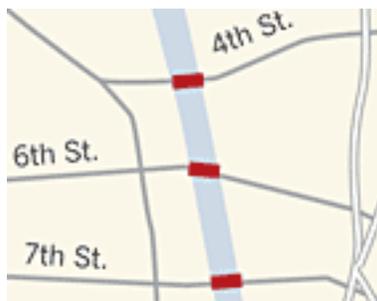
By Daniela Perdomo, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
January 28, 2008

Thousands of drivers pass over them every day as they cross the Los Angeles River -- 11 iconic bridges that link downtown to the neighborhoods and freeways lying east.

Unless traffic is bumper to bumper, it's hard to appreciate their ornate splendor, the graceful Greek columns on the Olympic Boulevard Bridge or the Classical towers along the span at 4th Street.



[Photo Gallery](#)  
[Bridges across the L.A. River](#)



Map

But this week, the Los Angeles City Council will be asked to declare the bridges historic-cultural monuments to the city's early-20th century architectural roots. The move comes as the city is undertaking a bridge-improvement program that will affect six of the river bridges. The impending upgrades have lent a sense of urgency to those who think that the structures deserve special status.

"Many of these bridges are proposed for sizable seismic upgrades and even possible reconstruction," said Ken Bernstein, manager of the Office of Historic Resources in the city's planning department. "We wanted to ensure that the city's own historic preservation commission was part of the conversation about the future treatment and alteration of these important historic bridges."

The bridges in question, most of which were constructed between 1910 and 1930, were part of a campaign to deal with a river that was prone to flooding and had destroyed many of the metal truss bridges built in the 1840s.

Beautification was also a goal: In 1903, the L.A. Municipal Art Commission wrote that the city had to "work for the gradual elimination of ugliness from the conspicuous parts of our city."

The result was a recommendation to begin construction of the Art Deco and *beaux-arts* bridges that today extend from downtown to Boyle Heights, Cypress Park and Lincoln Heights. Sculpted into the Washington Boulevard Bridge are scenes that depict the men who built it. In muted colors, the figures are shown drilling, pushing wheelbarrows and carrying beams.

The bridges have also made many a theatrical cameo over the years: The 6th Street Bridge played a role in the first two "Terminator" movies, "Grease" and "Transformers," and co-starred with the 4th Street Bridge in the first three seasons of the television series "24," according to location managers who have left comments on Film L.A.'s message board.

But there is still "a lack of public awareness of the significance of these bridges as a group," said Michael Buhler, director of advocacy at the Los Angeles Conservancy. "There's not an understanding of the history behind them."

Bernstein believes that lack of appreciation extends to City Hall.

"We support these designations in part because we felt that it was long overdue for the city to recognize locally that we have one of the finest ensembles of historic bridges of any city in the country," he said.

The installation of Metro Gold Line tracks down the middle of the 1st Street Bridge already has contractors taking care to preserve it. Historically significant concrete structures had to be removed so they could be refurbished and relocated once the bridge is widened, said Phil Richardson, manager of the Bureau of Engineering's bridge, street and storm water programs.

There is also a program in the works to make six of the 11 bridges safer. The city has received \$390 million in federal money to bring them up to 21st century standards.

Though still safe to drive on, Richardson said, the reinforced concrete that composes the 6th Street Bridge, for example, is deteriorating because of age.

"We've proposed it to be entirely rebuilt in some fashion," Richardson said. "And we're looking forward to working with the local experts on the historical elements to the replacement bridge."

Because the 11 bridges had already been listed as eligible for landmark status on the National Register of Historic Places, the city's engineers went through the same kind of historical evaluation process required for local landmark designations. But City Hall preservationists had little to do with the review of the 1st Street Bridge project.

Officially making these bridges local landmarks "will provide for a local forum for discussion of impacts to the historic character of our bridges," Bernstein said. "And it will allow for a series of mitigation measures that would attempt to offset any negative impacts of a project."

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