

POETRY IN *MOTION*

THE MERRITT IS THAT RARE PARKWAY
THAT MAKES MOTORING A JOY

by Herbert S. Newman FAIA

The 38-mile Merritt Parkway, conceived in utility but constructed with beauty in mind, is Connecticut's longest and perhaps its most wonderful work of architecture. Inspired by the carriageways through Central Park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, the Merritt extended the principles of the City Beautiful movement into the nascent suburbs extending north from Manhattan. It is a rare species of road—and an endangered one.

As a child, I would travel the Merritt with my brother and our parents on trips to New York City. Our backseat squabbles would be suddenly distracted by discovering

we were driving on a beautifully landscaped roadway. We traveled on a gently enchanted rolling ribbon of hills and valleys, with vistas of farmlands and woods. The wonder of the road was that it was conceived as a place to experience the landscape of Connecticut, not just get from here to there. As I drive the Merritt today, the joy of that experience compared with other car travels still resonates.

It was the joy of *motoring*. Traveling at a top speed of 40 to 50 miles per hour on a journey with constantly changing short- and long-range views of rock outcropping and scenery of distant clouds and farmland—like something out of a John Constable painting—kept us alert and curious about what might come next.

And the bridges! Designed by the state’s highway architect, George L. Dunkelberger, each of the 69 bridges was unique. Using many styles from Art Deco to Modern Classicism, “The Bridges of Fairfield County” are beguiling and witty. Some wink at you as you pass under them in the instant darkness of a blink. Particularly striking is the whimsy of the wings of Nike, goddess of victory, on the James Farm Road bridge in Stratford. (Was Dunkelberger symbolizing the success of his design battles?) Importantly, all the bridges were designed and built with height clearances that do not allow high vehicles, thereby preserving the Merritt for passenger cars.

Because the Merritt Parkway has no lights, advocates for the road suggested the bridges be lit for both safety and delight. With the cooperation of the Connecticut Department of

Transportation (DOT), the Merritt Parkway Conservancy (on whose board I sit) lit two bridges—at Ponus Ridge in New Canaan and Newtown Turnpike in Westport—to celebrate the winter holiday season in 2004. The diverse and disparate designs of these bridges, created with love and care, evoke a sense of a unity and cohesion in a celebration of motoring.

The Merritt was built in the Great Depression, from 1934 to 1940. The team responsible for this civic gem was large, but it mainly included the landscape architect Weld Thayer Chase and his supervisor, highway engineer Earl Wood. Named for then-Congressman Schuyler Merritt, it was designed as a “road in the park.” Here was a parkway consciously designed to take advantage of the winding nature of the landscape, not just blast through the creeks and outcroppings and other classic features of New England’s natural world. In Dunkelberger’s own words, (excerpted from Bruce Radde’s 1993 history of the Merritt): “In low, flat country, the design should typify the character of the landscape, perhaps by



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The Merritt Parkway at the Guinea Road overpass in Stamford, Connecticut. Photo: Kerry Sherck

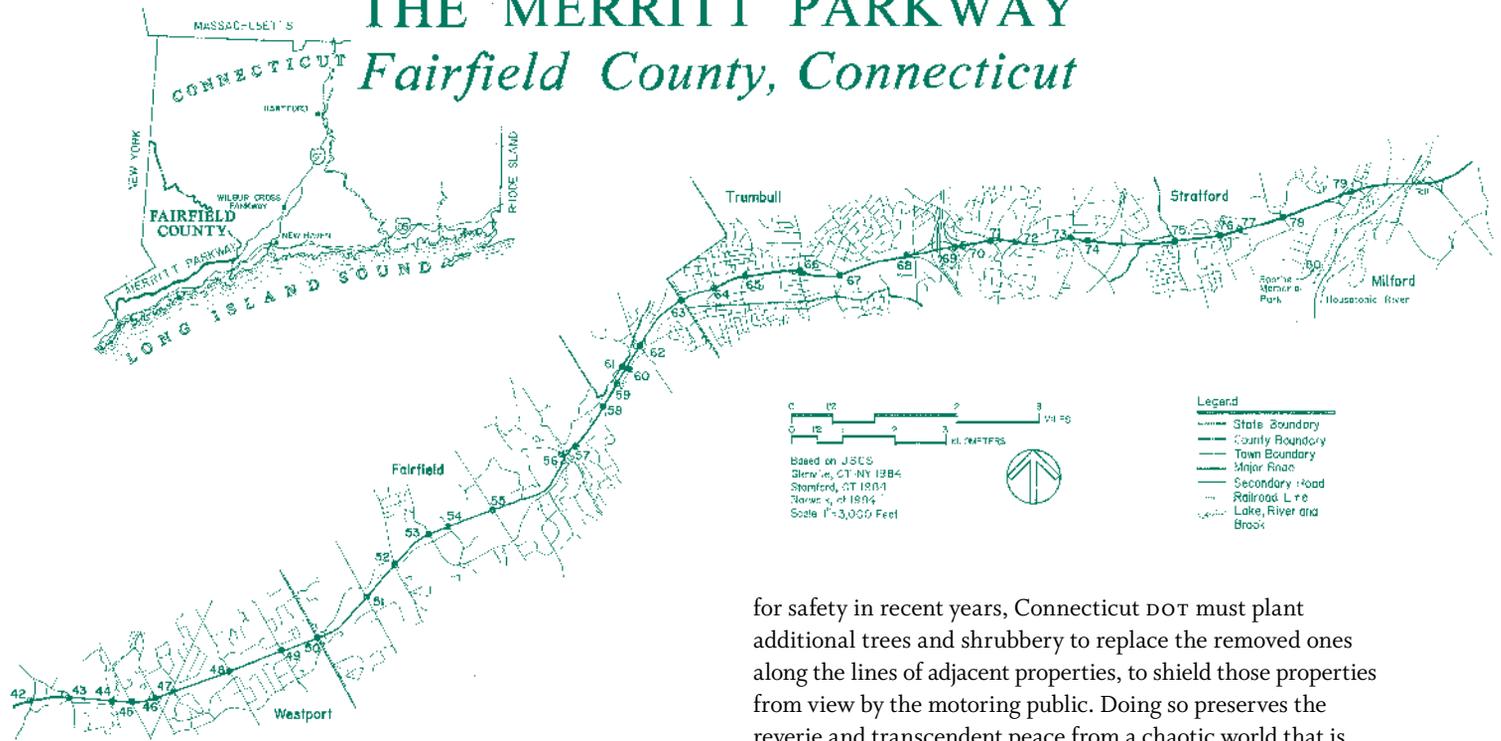
ABOVE
From the Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service. Delineated by Mary Elizabeth Clark, Sanford E. Garner, 1992.

RIGHT
View of the Merritt Parkway from the James Farm Road overpass in Stratford, Connecticut. Photo: Ned Gerard



THE MERRITT PARKWAY

Fairfield County, Connecticut



horizontal lines; in rolling country by the addition of a few verticals; and on rough terrain, a combination of the two with neither predominating.”

Of course, one of the past and present delights of the Merritt is the mandated prohibition of trucks and trailers. That rule, combined with regulations against commercial billboards on the road, adds a sense of safety and human scale to the motoring experience.

Over the 75 years of the life of the Merritt, the original concept of open and closed vistas has changed radically. The increasing density and suburbanization of Fairfield County brought development right to the edge of the road. Over the years, serendipitously and fortuitously, volunteer trees grew to block out the developments. Now the Merritt is a roadway with swaths of natural dense growth, which mostly blocks the view of the adjacent office buildings and suburban residences. It offers a new and yet still lovely motoring experience in which occupants of a car, now traveling at speeds of more than 60 miles per hour, can still feel that Connecticut is a forest with a winding, rolling ribbon of pavement, sheltered from the outside world of development. It is as romantic in a way as the original vision and experience of the parkway but designed by nature, not by us. What great luck to be in this corridor of green!

Sadly, such an experience may be compromised by proposed new traffic interchanges along the Merritt, which threaten to destroy the nature of this secluded parkway by exposing the chaotic development outside its boundaries. Although many trees close to the roadbed had to be removed

for safety in recent years, Connecticut DOT must plant additional trees and shrubbery to replace the removed ones along the lines of adjacent properties, to shield those properties from view by the motoring public. Doing so preserves the reverie and transcendent peace from a chaotic world that is the new promise of the parkway.

Although the Merritt has been recognized in the National Register of Historic Places, there are grave dangers. The erosion of its beauty by well-intentioned plans for bike trails, tree removal without appropriate replacement, and out-of-scale “improved” interchanges are among the most pressing. At present, there are too many places, particularly in winter, where we see the backs of too many buildings, just beyond the right-of-way, never meant to be glimpsed by the motorist. It will be by “small cuts” that the Merritt may die.

The Merritt Parkway Conservancy, formed in 2002 to protect and preserve the character and integrity of this natural treasure, is working to prevent any further deterioration. Its projects include replanting the roadway with spring flowering dogwoods and mountain laurels originally designed for the road, and cleaning and restoring the bridges. The Conservancy has worked closely with the State of Connecticut to restore the historic service stations of the parkway and to ensure that required changes are being executed accurately.

Today, so much of one’s time is spent in cars—whether in stop-and-go traffic or on thruways at high speed—that we tend to think of the car as a necessary inconvenience. Many young people eligible for drivers’ licenses are not eager to drive, preferring to move to more walkable cities and towns. The face-to-face opportunities of a human-scaled pedestrian environment are welcome signs of the renewal of a civil urban society. But the Merritt Parkway is the rare place where driving can still be fun.

The 38-mile ribbon of road is one of New England’s greatest treasures, a thrilling blend of architecture, sculpture, and landscape design. Great works of art renew us and touch our common humanity. We must pay attention. ■