ASPIRE® Begins Its 20th Year

by Dr. Richard Miller

The first issue of *ASPIRE*®, the Concrete Bridge Magazine, was published in the winter of 2007. As we begin the 20th year of publication with this Winter 2026 issue, it is an appropriate time to look back at some milestones in the magazine's history, reflect on the impact the publication has made on the industry, and plan for its continued success. We are grateful for the input of three significant people—John Dick, *ASPIRE*'s first executive editor; Henry Russell, the first managing technical editor; and Reid Castrodale, managing technical editor emeritus—whose reflections over the last 20 years inform this article.

Origin Story

The first challenge *ASPIRE* faced was uniting designers, fabricators, and contractors in the concrete bridge area. As John Dick has noted, until the 1980s, there was no organization dedicated specifically to concrete bridges. Instead, each segment of the concrete bridge industry—for example, precast or cast-in-place concrete; reinforced, pretensioned, or post-tensioned systems; and slab, beam, or segmental construction—was focused on promoting their share of the market. But in 1987, John, who was working for the Precast/Prestressed Concrete Institute (PCI), and Dr. Basile Rabbat, who was employed by the Portland Cement Association, collaborated with representatives of two additional organizations—the Concrete Reinforcing Steel Institute and the National Ready Mixed Concrete Association—and founded the National Concrete Bridge Council (NCBC). From the beginning, NCBC has worked closely with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) (see the Perspective article in the Fall 2022 issue of *ASPIRE*).

There were challenges to overcome before the first issue of *ASPIRE* was published. Members of the concrete bridge industry were skeptical that a publication could promote concrete bridges, in general, rather than the specific types they designed, produced, and/or constructed. However, they were persuaded that a magazine promoting concrete bridges would increase the overall market share for such bridges, and as a result would increase the market share for each sector. PCI agreed to publish *ASPIRE* with financial support from various trade groups within the concrete industry and from advertising.

John was named as executive editor and asked Dr. Henry Russell to become *ASPIRE*'s first managing technical editor with Craig Shutt as the first managing editor. Mark Leader of Leader Graphic Design Inc. was hired to design *ASPIRE*, and he established the overall layout style and colors, some of which are still used today.

ASPIRE Launches and Evolves

In the inaugural Winter 2007 issue, John wrote in his editorial: "*ASPIRE* magazine will showcase how you and your peers are meeting challenges and expanding design boundaries with concrete bridge technology." Since then, the editorial staff of *ASPIRE* have continually worked to meet this challenge.

Henry Russell noted that in the early issues, it was difficult to persuade people to write articles for a completely unknown publication, and so the early issues relied on the editorial staff to produce much of the content. He shared that as *ASPIRE*'s visibility increased, external authors were willing to provide articles for the publication, and this remains true today. *ASPIRE* is indebted to the many engineers, designers, fabricators, contactors, suppliers, and academics who contribute the majority of the content for each issue.

The table of contents for the first issue reveals many article types that continue to be published today. For example, *ASPIRE* has always featured a broad range of project articles, spanning different concrete construction types, in each issue. These projects showcase how designers, fabricators, and constructors rise to the challenge of providing high-quality concrete bridges that meet the owners' need for economy, function, and speed of construction. The project articles frequently highlight why a concrete bridge was a preferred choice over other options. Over the years, highway bridges have made up the bulk of the featured projects; however, pedestrian, light rail, heavy rail, and airport bridges are also highlighted.

To complement featured projects from across the country, *ASPIRE* has included aesthetics commentary since the first issue. Frederick Gottemoeller focuses on one selected project in each issue, drawing attention to the beauty and elegance of concrete bridge structures.

ASPIRE has regularly published articles on the consultants and construction companies that design, build, inspect, and repair concrete bridges. These articles show how these companies make significant contributions to the concrete bridge industry and emphasize the innovative practices they employ.

Another precedent for future issues was an article featuring a state department of transportation (Minnesota). As often as possible, *ASPIRE* publishes articles profiling a state, local, or regional government agency and the important work they do in maintaining our infrastructure.

The first issue contained an article by Dr. Dennis R. Mertz on the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' *AASHTO LRFD Bridge Design Specifications*. When asked if there were an *ASPIRE* article or series of articles that was especially memorable, John, Henry, and Reid all

The first meeting of the *ASPIRE* team, April 17, 2006. Front row: Mark Leader (left) and Craig Shutt; back row, from left: Henry Russell, Jim Ahtes, John Dick, and Roy Diez. Photo: John Dick.

noted the LRFD articles. In 2007, the AASHTO LRFD specifications were in their fourth edition, and states had only been required to use those specifications since 2000. Thus, many aspects of the AASHTO LRFD specifications were new and unfamiliar. Dr. Mertz's early involvement with the development of the AASHTO LRFD specifications made him the ideal person to explain the origin, meaning, and application of various provisions. As the AASHTO LRFD specifications were updated and improved, Dr. Mertz was there to provide insight and guidance to the design community. Unfortunately, Dr. Mertz passed away in 2016. Since then, the column has been written by another expert on the AASHTO LRFD specifications, Dr. Oguzhan Bayrak.

The first change in the *ASPIRE* leadership occurred in the summer of 2012, as John retired and William Nickas assumed the role of editor-in-chief. In the Winter 2015 issue, Dr. Reid Castrodale was welcomed as the new managing technical editor.

While *ASPIRE* continues to publish many of the types of features found in the first issue, the scope of *ASPIRE*'s content has also expanded over the past two decades. Concrete Bridge Technology articles were added just before Reid's tenure as managing technical editor began. In some cases, these articles expand on the technologies used in the featured projects. In other cases, the articles describe innovative or unusual analysis techniques, design processes, or construction methodologies.

ASPIRE also has perspectives, articles where members of the concrete bridge industry can provide information and share their experiences. These perspectives are written by a broad range of contributors who offer insight into areas such as new products, sustainability, research, policies, and ethics. Educators and other individuals with academic backgrounds are frequent contributors, describing how colleges and universities are contributing to the concrete bridge industry and the challenges of educating future bridge engineers.

With the Winter 2023 issue, Reid became managing technical editor emeritus, and Dr. Krista Brown assumed the role of managing technical editor until I came on board with the Winter 2025 issue.

ASPIRE's Impact

What is the impact of *ASPIRE*? Currently, we mail *ASPIRE* to approximately 14,000 hard-copy subscribers and the magazine has approximately 3,500 digital subscribers. We estimate that 25,000 individuals come into contact with each issue and that an average of 1.5 unique persons sees each paper copy. Some paper copies even reach 3 to 5 people. Anecdotally, members of the editorial advisory board often encounter readers who comment on the excellence of publication. The fact that so many professionals are willing to commit their valuable time to contributing articles indicates that they benefit from increasing the industry exposure of their companies and projects, and from what they learn by reading *ASPIRE*. from addition to the support of our readers, we are also incredibly thankful for our paid advertisers for their support of this knowledge transfer tool.

In 2023, a readers' survey was conducted. Of the 455 readers who responded, 76% rated the value of *ASPIRE* 7 out of 10 or higher. About two-thirds of the respondents said that *ASPIRE* helps them understand the latest advances in the concrete bridge industry and that the publication provides ideas for their own projects. The project case studies, Concrete Bridge Technology, and the perspective articles were the most highly rated features. (For more information on the survey, see the Perspective in the Summer 2023 issue of *ASPIRE*.)

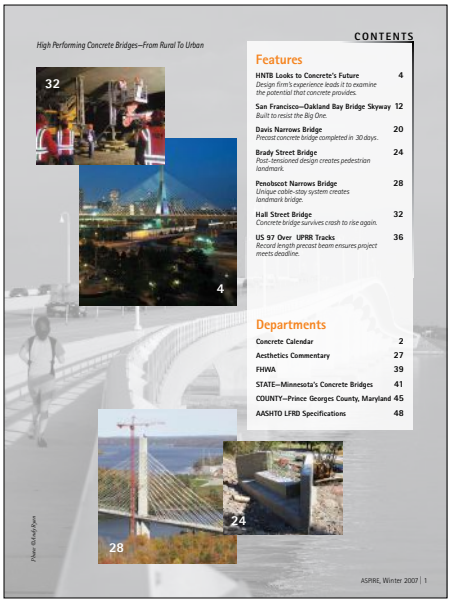
Moving Forward—With Your Help

As *ASPIRE* moves into its 20th year, we are committed to delivering articles that help you in the conception, design, fabrication, construction, preservation, sustainability, and rehabilitation of concrete bridge structures of all types. We also want to expand *ASPIRE* to include more about workforce development, consistent with AASHTO efforts in that area, and address the ethical obligations of our profession.

But we can't do this without you. Do you have a concrete bridge project that would be of interest? While major projects are always welcome, *ASPIRE* is also looking for articles on "bread and butter" projects. Sometimes, seemingly simple projects involve innovative design or construction techniques or conquer constraints through cutting-edge solutions where the properties of concrete bridges shine.

Have you applied innovative design, analysis, or construction techniques that could be covered in a Concrete Bridge Technology, Creative Concrete Construction, Concrete Bridge Preservation, or Safety and Serviceability article? We are eager to share what you have learned with others, as that is how our industry grows.

So, if you have an idea you would like to share, please reach out. You can find contact information for the *ASPIRE* team in the masthead on page 2 of this issue, or you can contact us through the *ASPIRE* website: www.aspirebridge.com.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