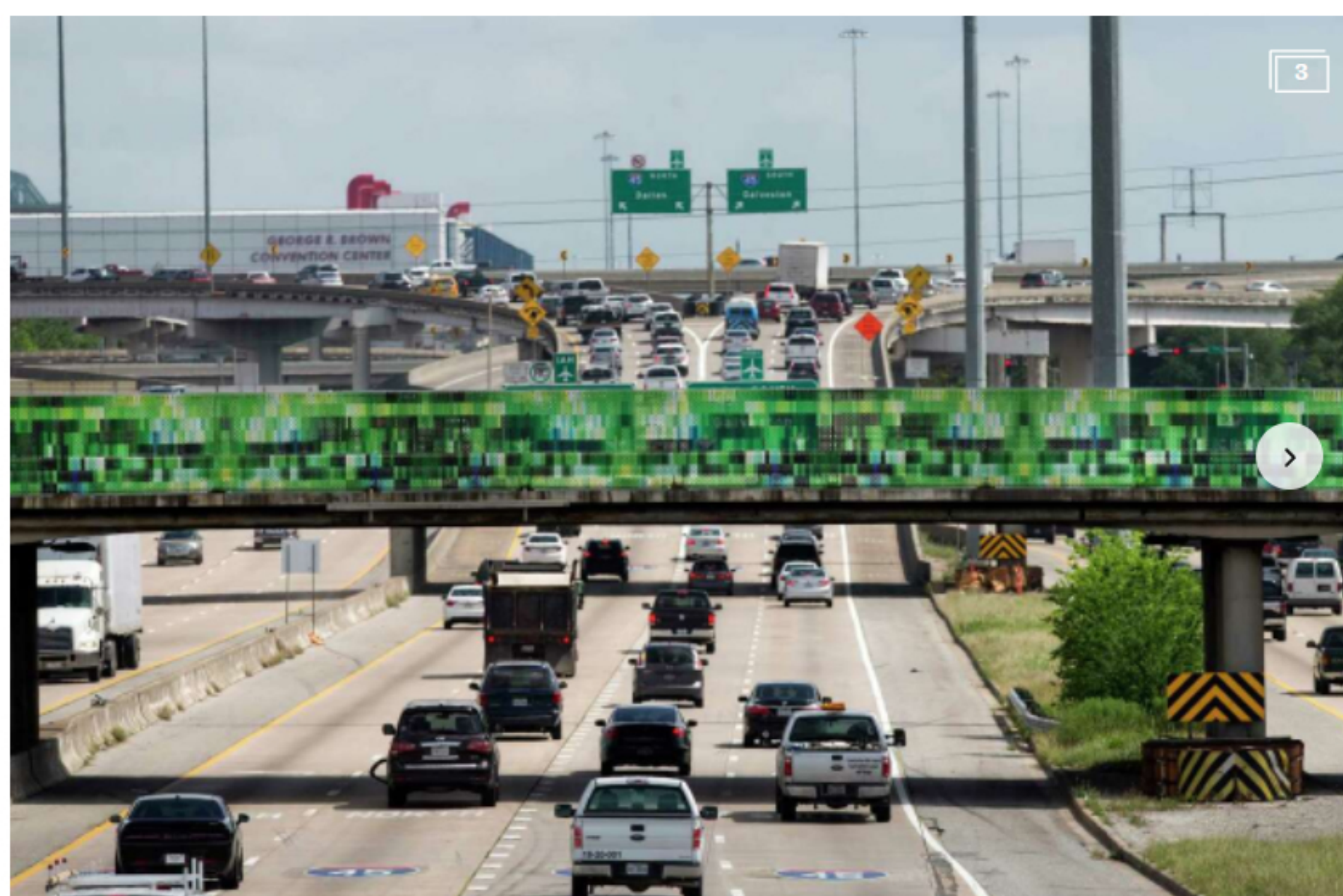


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Making Houston freeways a little less ugly

Allyn West

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"Houston Bridges," designed by SWA Group, is temporary installation meant to help beautify what landscape architect and designer Natalia Beard calls "the gateway to downtown."

Godofredo A. Vasquez/Houston Chronicle

Billboards notwithstanding, nothing installed along the freeway can be too distracting, the Texas Department of Transportation mandates. It's a safety issue.

That created an interesting problem for Natalia Beard of SWA Group.

The Houston office of the landscape architecture firm, which designed the improvements to Buffalo Bayou Park and the [reimagined pedestrian plaza](#) in front of the George R. Brown Convention Center, won a competition held by Houston First Corporation earlier this year. The challenge, Houston First's Roksan Okan-Vick explained, was to come up with a relatively inexpensive and temporary way to add some panache - her word was "beautification" - to Houston's notoriously unbeautiful freeways, littered as they can be with shreds of tire and mattress and streaked with grime.

Whatever it was, though, it had to be figurative. No faces. No text. Nothing too distracting, or TxDOT wouldn't allow it.

First, Beard and her team studied the site that Houston First had identified: Eight bridges, from Tuam to Leeland and Bell, spanning 69/288.

"It's the gateway to downtown," Beard says. "But it's so bad. The freeway aesthetic is so bad, you learn to tune it out."

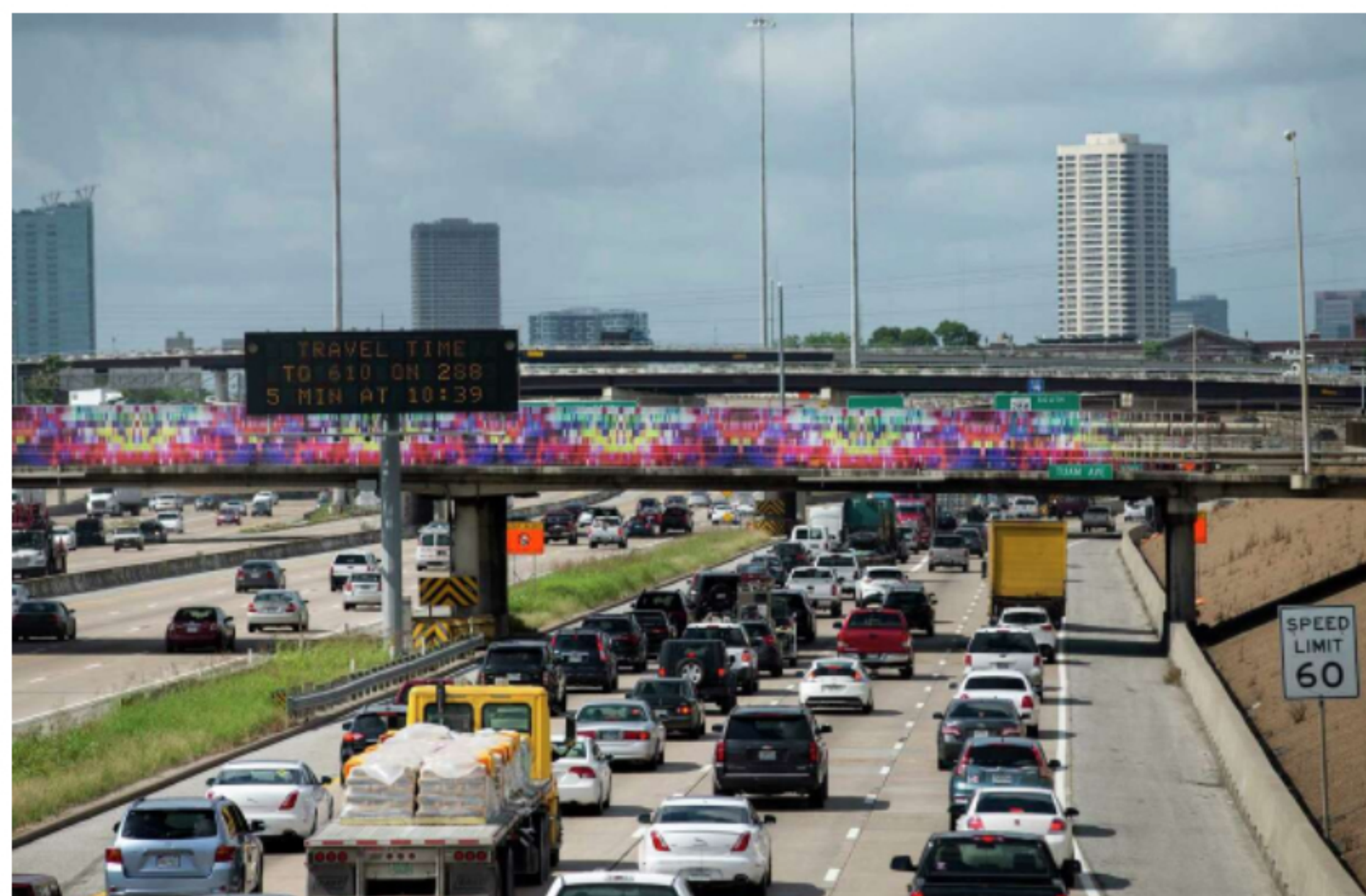
"But you start thinking. What is critical to make visible? What is critical to make invisible?"

She's a kind of poet of infrastructure, as it turns out. "There are physical qualities that have great potential, architecturally. It creates a nice cathedral space. It gives you some ceiling, gives you some swoopy lines."

She goes on: "But what's interesting about the cathedral space is that it's kind of chaotic. But what's structurally nice is the rhythm of the street grid that intersects at a 90-degree angle. Every six seconds you see a straight line. It almost creates a 'score' that overlays the cathedral space with structure. If you drew attention to that structure, away from the abutment walls, the unsightliness of the grime that's accumulated on the concrete, you take advantage of what's there and what's good about it, in terms of scale, drama and rhythm."

Even the chain-link fence that frames the bridges struck her as interesting. "It's a fabric material. It's a canvas, right? People use it to express their love to their girlfriends or hang signs. They use it as a public space or to make a public announcement."

What that translates to: horizontal bands of color that seem to float above the freeway. They called it "Houston Bridges."



The bands imply a connection across infrastructure that has divided the city.

Godofredo A. Vasquez/Houston Chronicle

It's a kind of DIY version of the much more expensive [LED lighting](#) installed on the [bridges](#) just around the curve that connect Montrose to the Rice University neighborhoods. And it's certainly not the only attempt to beautify our infrastructure, whether that's led by TxDOT, which can get [creative with concrete](#), or someone anonymous - the ["BE SOMEONE"](#) trestle has become part of the city's local iconography.

Houston Bridges, in fact, uses the city's iconography. The bands of color are pixelated versions of photographs of the city. Working with photographer Geoff Winningham, Beard and her team went through about a thousand photos that Houston elementary students had shot. They selected the ones they liked, ran them through Photoshop and printed them on one-inch-wide slats of Coroplast (the same material that politicians' signs are made out of) threaded through that chain-link fence and secured with an aluminum channel.

To protect against UV exposure and degradation, the north-facing bands are red and violet, and the south-facing ones green and yellow.

Eventually, Okan-Vick says, "We will put up a plaque on the bridge and have the real photograph there to see what inspired the pattern."

Beyond the appeal of the color, though, the bands imply a connection across infrastructure that has divided the city. This is something the Downtown District has been stressing of late, as it undertakes an [ambitious planning process](#) that, among other things, wants to emphasize the relationships other close-in neighborhoods have with downtown. And it becomes pressing, as Beard points out, as TxDOT moves forward with a plan to depress the freeway here and add a cap park.

Other Houston First projects are being considered to enhance the freeways leading to and from IAH and Hobby Airport - maybe with art, maybe with landscaping. Those are long-term efforts, Okan-Vick says. For now, Houston Bridges will add enjoyment and surprise and visual pleasure to a commute.

"And if you're stuck in traffic or going slowly," says Okan-Vick, "you'll be able to enjoy them a little more."

[Bookmark Gray Matters](#). It gives you some ceiling, gives you some swoopy lines.

Written By
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