



## *Tilikum Crossing*

by Bruce Forster



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #121

### Commentary

What does it take to make a successful photograph like this? Gleaning information from Forster's EXIF data, one might be tempted to say a Nikon D300 with a Nikon 24–120mm f/2 lens. Alternatively, one might be tempted to say it requires a certain light, or the perfect place to stand. *Presence of mind* and a *sensitive eye* would probably make the list. I would propose that *all* of those are of secondary importance.

The most important component to make a photograph like this is *permission*. Although it's not obvious in the photograph, this kind of work is always a collaboration between the photographer and those in a position to grant access, vantage point, and cooperation. Gathering and preparing the best camera gear and even waiting for the light are relatively easy steps to accomplish. Gaining permission and cooperation from both the authorities and the subjects photographed is a much bigger task. It is a task that demands from us considerable commitment, time, and effort.

When I was working on my book, *Made of Steel*, I learned very quickly that without permission and cooperation, the project had just about zero chance of progressing beyond my dreams. I learned, as no doubt Bruce Forster has also, that long before I pulled out the camera, it was necessary to cultivate a relationship that led to cooperation and permission. When I spotted a potential site for photography, I'd park the car and walk in empty handed.

I'd strike up a conversation, ask questions, show interest — and only after some time would I mention my photography project. I spent far less time photographing for that book than I did in simply talking with people, getting to know them, establishing a relationship, earning their trust, and eventually their permission. During my interview with him, Forster explained a similar approach with this bridge building project. Before he made the first photograph, he'd spent considerable time just laying the foundation for the photography and developing partners of both the authorities and the workers.

My old business mentor used to advise, “Business is people.” Without hesitation I would plagiarize his advice for all of us by saying that, “Photography is people.” We all spend hours developing our photographic skills, but perhaps there are even more important lessons we need to add to our skill set: the treasure of an inquiring mind, the gift of gab, the ability to ask questions, empathy for the other guy, a genuine smile that opens doors, the talent and verbal skills to express ourselves and sell our photographic ideas, and understanding of what it takes to make partners out of strangers. Not all photographers come by these skills naturally, but that doesn't mean they can't be purposefully learned — just like the mechanics of photography itself.