Wow, you’re all here—really here! Thank you all so much for coming. I think what we have in store is going to be fun and going to inspire you to think more about some of your favorite places.
So, hello there! My name is Therese Huffman. I’m the owner and founder of Signature Design. I have a background in graphic and environmental design and have been running the company since 1993. I’m currently based in Atlanta, Georgia, but Signature Design has worked on projects in China, Canada, Europe, South America, and across the United States.
We are a unique collaboration between planners, designers, writers, architects, and multimedia creatives.

We create captivating experiences for visitors to sites of natural, cultural, and historical significance.

Studio Space, circa 2016
I have to admit something right away: I wouldn’t be anywhere without my team, my clients, and my family. It’s the projects and the communities I work with that have all the answers. We merely follow a creative process and our intuition—to capture the best ideas and make them “real”.

Otis Redding Monument
Gray, Ga
1,000 people attended the ribbon cutting in the small city of Gray, GA. Otis’s wife and daughter officiated the street party.

The Otis Redding Tribute sits next to a new picnic area and visitor center at the entrance into the refurbished downtown. The exhibit has a sound component offering 12 of Otis’s favorite songs to be played.
The clients and organization I get to partner with are one of the best parts of my job.

Some work for municipalities, some for public lands, some with local historical societies, and some with multinational organizations.

But they are all passionate, knowledgeable, and energized by the mission behind the groups they represent.

They are eager to share the stories of these places with everybody.
If this is your first time working with a design team, words like “placemaking”, “interpretation”, and “visitor experience design” can seem a little... esoteric.

“PLACEMAKING”

“INTERPRETATION”

“VISITOR EXPERIENCE”
But our ultimate goal is simple: to design solutions that help all visitors enjoy these special places.

When you or your family visits a new place, there’s an expectation of signage to guide you to the entrance, a plaque to explain a historic building, or a visitor’s center with information.

Our programs aim to be inclusive across age, knowledge, and ability because we want as many people as possible to benefit from these experiences.
So during my brief presentation this afternoon, I’m going to give you a peek behind the curtain to show how Signature Design has turned some empty plots into places that have a real impact on real communities.

When I talk about the work we do at Signature Design, what I typically get asked is, “What did your team actually do here?”

...It’s a good question! Sometimes we design a signage program, sometimes we craft an interactive experience, sometimes we build outdoor monuments, sometimes we tell stories through exhibits...

Most of the time though, it’s easiest just to show what we do.

Here are some of our favorite places we recently helped to make “real”
The Nachusa Grasslands is a 3,500 acres tallgrass prairie conservancy located near Franklin Grove in Lee County, Illinois. It is operated by the Nature Conservancy.
The Visitor Center sits atop a gently sloping hill at 2075 S. Lowden Road and features educational panels that tell the story of the grasslands. People come to experience the peace of the prairie...

Nachusa Grasslands
Franklin, Il
... and hopefully get a look at the bison!

ALWAYS

Nachusa Grasslands
Franklin, Il
As one of 49 National Heritage Areas in the US, the 40,000-acre Arabia Mountain Heritage Area, Lithonia, Georgia, is a place where historic, natural, and cultural sites intersect and are shared with the public.
The mission of the interpretive program is to enrich the visitor while guiding them to “gateways” into cherished places for natural and historic experiences and recreation.
Arabia Mountain Quarry
Lithonia, Ga
The Auburn Avenue Underpass, Atlanta, GA, is a key stop on the route of the new trolley line to run between many of Atlanta’s attractions at Olympic Park and the Martin Luther King historic site. It has not been viewed as an attractive or a safe place.

Auburn Avenue Underpass
Atlanta, Ga

BEFORE
The design of the enhancement was in response to the Community's desire for bringing back the feeling of their neighborhood's long history, much of which was wiped-out by the highway development running through it. Along with goals to make this place feel safe and become a visitor attraction.

Auburn Avenue Underpass
Atlanta, Ga
The 4,000 square foot, Dahlonega Gold Museum is located in the 1838 historic Lumpkin County Courthouse sitting in the center of Dahlonega’s town square.
The Georgia DNR hired us to perform a complete overhaul of this treasured Georgia historic site, which was last touched by exhibit designers in 1981. Now, it has transformed into the centerpiece of the Dahlonega tourism experience.
Before the museum’s renovation the $1.3 Million valued Dahlonega Minted Gold Coin Collection was oddly confined to feel “safe” in a “safe”. It was dimly lit and hard to view.
The new display is a special security case that can be viewed from all sides and edge lights the text and pieces in the collection.
The City of Hickory, NC wants a growing thriving community to attract young professionals and families to want to come there to live.
Through a new branding of the City as “Life. Well Crafted.” and features including “City Walk” a mile-long trail, connecting the Highway 40 Gateway to the center of downtown and the length of the downtown. There are crafted amenities and interpretive experiences interspersed along the urban corridor.
Helen to Hardman Heritage Trail is a mile-long trail built to boost both the City of Helen and Hardman Farm State Historic Site tourism numbers.
The Trail meanders along the scenic Chattahoochee River and provide visitors with opportunities for picnicking, biking and walking, access to fishing and kayak platforms and interactive interpretive stations - while taking in the scenic beauty of this charming north Georgia community.
Whether working with sites of natural beauty or places of historical and cultural significance, our mission is the same: to create experiences that engage, entertain, and enlighten visitors.

So, let’s explore how we set about accomplishing this—how we make places “real”.

Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr. Legacy Bridge
Atlanta, Ga
When it comes to making places real, it helps to follow a proven process. Working in set project phases allows the client and the community to provide continuing input—from the earliest concepts to the finished product.
Our process can be summed up in three main phases: first, Information-gathering; second, Theme & Storyline Composition; and finally, Design & Construction Administration.
Our projects are big and small, public and private, indoors and outdoors—but the most important part of our information-gathering phase is always stakeholder engagement.

Therese and Client on a Site Visit
Arabia Mountain, Ga
We meet with as many people as possible, because a wide range of voices need to be heard!

In addition to our clients, we interview historians, engaged community members, and “keepers of local history”. These are citizens, usually older folks, whose family stories are woven to the fabric of a particular place.

What Myths Or Misconceptions About Hickory Would You Like To See Corrected?

“Furniture isn’t dead; we’ve just shifted into the high-end furniture manufacturing and retained Hickory’s global reputation.

We’ve gone through industry changes, but we always adapted and thrived.”

What Would You Like People To Know About Hickory?

- There are many textures of Hickory: ADAPTATION, RESILIENCY, ELASTICITY

- Our local arts and artisan community is thriving as strongly as ever—and it’s more than just furniture. Pottery is a huge cultural asset. Textiles, weaving, and glass making are also important craft industries.

- There is an immediate need for skilled crafts people to fill industry demands. Local educational institutions are working to attract and train a new workforce.

Incorporating Feedback from a Public Meeting

Hickory, NC
In public meetings, we record comments and aggregate responses to in-person and online questionnaires.
And because there’s no such thing as a dumb comment, we take time to listen to everyone’s ideas.

All feedback is good feedback... mostly.

Courtesy of Parks and Recreation/NBC
We start with this collaborative style of information-gathering in order to build trust. By listening to many concerns and opinions, we start to identify which topics keep coming up and which are most important to the community. When clients and stakeholders trust us enough to open up, we get to the heart of their stories—the heart of what make these places “real”.

Dahlonega Gold Museum Oral History Recordings
Dahlonega, Ga
After our field work, we get down to business with the hard research.

We gather historical resources like photographs, maps, letters, and artifacts.

We dive deep into trusted sources like libraries ...
online databases ...
... and state and national archives.

Admission Card to the Georgia State Archives pictured with 1923 Sears & Roebuck catalog.
While gathering information for the Dahlonega Gold Museum, we made a special trip to the Georgia State Archives. In their mining and geology archive, we unearthed a trove of maps, diagrams, and photographs.

Research from online databases and print resources
Dahlonega, Ga
We also make use of local museums—and even antique shops! Sometimes we find unexpected treasures....
The discovery of a 1942 issue of LIFE magazine provided the imagery for Dahlonega’s historic courthouse experience. Now, alongside historically-accurate furniture and props, visitors experience life-size photographs of real people from when the building was a functioning courthouse.

Research from print resources for the historic courthouse

LIFE Magazine
Once the preliminary information-gathering phase wraps up, the process moves into stage 2: Identifying Themes and Crafting Storylines.

Upon reviewing our research, notes from interviews, comments from the public, and feedback from the client, we see patterns and concepts repeat themselves and overlap.
At its heart, though, this process is about intuition, empathy, and picking up on nuances: we boil down our information stew to its essential parts, which we call “themes”.
In one of our interpretive interior programs, our client wanted to mention every single milestone of their organization’s 150-year history.

A very robust website with 150 years of archives

Southern Education Fund
From their massive online archives, we were able to identify and capture the history into just 10 themes. They were really impressed by the clarity this process achieved.

The Power of Literacy

Philanthropy and Public Education

Advocating for Education

Sharing What Works

A few of the themes we identified

Southern Education Fund
“The interpreter who creates a whole, pares away all the obfuscating minor detail and drives straight toward the perfection of his story will find his hearers are walking along with him—are companions on this march. At some point, it becomes their story as much as his.”

– Freeman Tilden, Natural and Cultural Interpreter
While researching a downtown development project, we read about the rise and fall of the furniture industry in Hickory, North Carolina. As we learned more details in meetings with city officials and community members, we began to craft a story about the adaptability and resiliency of the city’s makers.
Though the furniture and hosiery industries were hit hard, manufacturing plants soon pivoted to corner the fiber optics market. Today, 40% of the world's fiber optic cables are made in the Hickory area.

**THEME:** The Furniture Industry

To demonstrate the transition of textile to fiber optics: both products are organized in spools. Can you juxtapose two representative spindles:

Textile Spindle is smooth, silky thread has unique shape fo the wooden interior rod, has metal details in base. Feels weathered and old.

Fiberoptic spool is wrapped with the thick, round cord, which has a shiny/plastic sheen. Show this thicker cord.

Render this for the top detailing.

Show the two end connectors for the fiberoptic spool.

**STORYLINE:** Resiliency and Adaptability
So, finally, after engaging the community, gathering information, and identifying themes and storylines... the design phase begins.

- 1 -
INFORMATION-GATHERING

- 2 -
THEME & STORYLINE COMPOSITION

- 3 -
DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION
We break down the design phase much like an architecture firm would: presenting drawings and incorporating feedback at the 30%, 60%, and 90% complete phases before delivering the final 100% package, which we call “design intent” drawings.
From the very beginnin', we establish the mission, goals, and big ideas: what should the visitor experience be like?

We ask, “What should this place look, smell, sound, and feel like?”
At every phase, we present our drawings, concepts, and ideas to the client and incorporate their feedback.

This ongoing dialogue strengthens the trust between the parties and ultimately yields better and more creative outcomes.
During the 0-30% design phase, we brainstorm and gather our best concepts into storyboards that show the client our different design approaches.

30% DESIGN

30% concept sketch for outdoor visitor area

Nachusa Grasslands
These presentation are two-way streets, with lots of dialogue.

We all walk down the road together!

30% Design

30% drawings for Cor-ten steel elements

Nachusa Grasslands
During the 60% design phase, we run with the winning concepts and start bringing them to life. We draw more detailed elevations, plans, and mockups to work out our ideas.

Then we present internally to our client, to the public at open meetings, and to Council or Board reviews, where we record and process feedback from all sources.

60% drawings begin to work out scale and dimensions

Nachusa Grasslands
The 90% Phase results in the delivery of Design Drawings Package. The package contains all information necessary for a fabricator to understand the design and intent for construction.

We follow this phased process every time, so that our clients walk with us through the entire journey to making these places “come to life”.

And while some firms are only equipped to see the process this far, Signature Design has the expertise to take it to 100%!

90% elevation drawings for final approval by the client

Nachusa Grasslands
100% CONSTRUCTION

Coneflower and other prairie elements fabricated in Cor-ten steel
Nachusa Grasslands
100% CONSTRUCTION

Fully-installed interpretive panels and Cor-ten steel elements

Nachusa Grasslands
100% CONSTRUCTION

Fully-installed interpretive panels and Cor-ten steel elements

Nachusa Grasslands
We like to offer construction administration services, so you can be sure that what you signed-off on is what’s being built.

In face what I hear time and time again is...

“Wow, this looks just like your drawing!”

“WOW, THAT LOOKS JUST LIKE YOUR DRAWINGS!”
After the excitement of the ribbon cutting, the big question our clients have about their new projects is
“Was the project successful?”

There are many metrics we use to measure success in our projects. Some you may expect, like an uptick in visitor traffic or a boost to tourism spending, while others are trickier to nail down, like the memories a family makes together.

For our purposes, the two tandem strategies we use to measure success are called “statistical metrics” and “formative metrics”.

PART III

METRICS
OF SUCCESS
Statistical methods of evaluation use hard data and mathematical equations to judge the effects of a given project. By creating a formula, we can quantify the objective facts and analyze them.

This method is not subjective: it uses mathematical equations to evaluate the statistics we gather. While this type of analysis doesn’t capture every detail of the visitor experience, we use these hard facts to guide change & decision making.

This is great news for us and our clients! It means that judging successful design is no longer ambiguous—guessing—it can be quantified.

So, what kinds of models and metrics are we talking about here?

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Let me start with a simple example from one of our projects: the Helen to Hardman Heritage Trail in North Georgia.
According to the Georgia Department of Tourism, local communities can expect local spending of about $125 per person per day with the development of a historical, cultural or tourism destination in their area.
At the opening of the Trail, Governor Deal reported that the impact of the trail to the local economy from visitors to the restaurants, shops, and local attractions factored into the statewide tourism count of a “record breaking” $63.1 billion economic impact in 2017 and was already up by 3.8% in first quarter 2018.

We get these numbers from webcam feeds, visitor logs, and in-person observations.
For an ambiguous area like an outdoor trail, we first draw an "area of activation circle" around the trailhead visitor exhibit we want to track.

Then for two weeks, we perform meticulous testing. How many visitors entered the "circle"? Were they mostly family groups, or solo visitors? How many visitors made a "contact" with the program, meaning they stopped to read or interact with it? How long did the visitor spend at the site overall?
After this observational period is finished, we bring our clipboards and spreadsheets together to crunch the numbers and project data over the next year.

If the ratio of projected contacts compared to the total cost of the exhibit is between 60–70%, our return on investment falls within a valuable range:

QUARTERLY: X

ANNUAL: X

10-YEAR PERIOD: X

LONG-RANGE R.O.I.
We can also use these statistical tools to measure the effectiveness of specific features within an exhibit.

Did visitors use our branded hashtag?

Were motorists able to follow the roadside signs to the entrance?

How many people posted a picture from our selfie station?

Were visitors with accessibility concerns able to read the interpretive content?

The more information we have on visitor habits, the better we can fine-tune the experience to yield better results.

From top left: Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr. Legacy Bridge; Dahlonega Gold Museum; City of Acworth, GA; Hardman Farm State Historic Site
While statistical methods don’t capture the nuances of the visitor experience, they do provide valuable data. And since many decisions about funding and grants are based on demonstrating a numerical return on investment, these metrics can be invaluable to an organization working to secure ongoing funding.
Statistical methods of evaluation use hard data and mathematical equations to judge the effects of a given project. By creating a formula, we can quantify the objective facts and analyze them. This method is not subjective: it uses mathematical equations to evaluate the statistics we gather. While this type of analysis doesn’t capture every detail of the visitor experience, we use these hard facts to guide change & decision making.

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In order to understand the deeper meaning and connections made between people and places, we gather information from visitors using “formative metrics”.

This qualitative method of information-gathering is designed to dive deeper into the more personal aspects of the visitor experience.
At the beginning of any project, we set goals and intentions for the finished project:

Are visitors leaving with a greater appreciation for the grasslands?

Are they joining the “Friends Alliance”?

What are people saying about our visitor center on TripAdvisor?
Essentially...

“Where did we make connections with visitors, and how meaningful was it to them?”

Once we ask these questions and define these goals, we can track whether we’re achieving them.

For this method to be successful, we need to ask the right questions to the right audience.

Enjoying the peace of the hiking trails
Arabia Mountain
“Quantity is good—
but quality is even better.”
Crafting these questions is critical. We work backwards from the goals set at the beginning of the project. The goals create our baseline for visitor responses and defines the criteria we'll be evaluating.

May 12, 2017

Friends of Bobby Brown Park
Bobby Brown State Outdoor Recreation Center
2509 Bobby Brown State Park Road
Elberton, GA 30635

BOBBY BROWN

Preliminary Interpretive Questions

1. What is the most interesting story or piece of history about the area? What is the key take-home message?

2. What are the main challenges of the area? Are there behaviors you would like to encourage or discourage in your visitors? (Location is hard to find, not enough amenities, campers are too loud; want to encourage understanding of the history of the area, want to encourage young families to visit, want to encourage fishermen to renew their licenses...)

3. What would you like to see built in the recreation area? (Interpretive signs, a venue for weekend festivals, guided or self-guided tours, historical reenactments, designated stargazing nights, geocaching, Petersburg flat-bottomed boat races... get creative!) Please check the box for any that interest you in addition to writing your own ideas.

- A marina or fuel station for boats
- Infrastructure (cell tower, visitor showers, country store/snack bar, more roads...)
- Horse trails
- Mountain bike trails
- Nature/hiking trails (guided or self-guided)
- Interpretive signs about history, flora/fauna
Formative information is collected mostly from visitor responses to surveys. These can be through webforms, social media polls, or in-person questionnaires. It's important, though, to use the appropriate tone and medium for the audience you're addressing.

Many people appreciate being handed a questionnaire about their visit, but some may find that approach too invasive. So we ask ourselves: "What creative ways can we engage visitors that will encourage them to participate?"

For younger tech-savvy visitors, using a series of "slider polls on your Insta story" may be the right move. My Millennial copywriter assured me that this is indeed "a thing".
We got some excellent formative data with our Helen to Hardman Heritage Trail.

From listening and observing, we learned that seniors like exercising on the gentle grade of the shaded path—our trail is much more accessible to them than the surrounding North Georgia Mountain’s hilly roadways & trails.
We also learned that many young families were using the smooth pavement to teach their kids how to ride a bike.

There are plans to build platforms along the Chattahoochee River's edge of the trail for parents to teach their children to fish!

Wide paths accommodate family groups and those with disabilities.

*Helen to Hardman Heritage Trail*
Once we collect a large enough sample of data, patterns emerge and we begin to pull out themes. How many people responded the same way? Was there more than one person who thought the video was too loud? How many people plan to come back with their grandkids next time? Did people get emotional at the same point in the exhibit?
We then collate the data and think about the “story” the data is telling. We turn the patterns from the data into charts, graphs, maps, etc.

These visual representations of data make it easier for clients & colleagues to grasp the implications of the visitor comments and plan for solution to improve the visitor experience.

Southwest

What we heard:

- Commission artists to create art through everyday objects (signage, gateway pieces, local attractions) that reflect the flavor of the local community.

- Engage the youth both in schools and older students in Atlanta University Center (all educational institutions).

- Create interactive and narrative-based art that reflects oral and written histories, and history of community changes over time (demographic/racial diversity).

- Consider local community spaces leading to the BeltLine and use facades of abandoned buildings/industrial properties as potential places to showcase art.
This is where training in graphic design and visual communication really comes into play!

It’s a challenge for us all to create good visual explanations.

If you’re interested in designing visuals for greater impact, I can certainly recommend some resources.

- Visual Explanations by Edward R. Tufte
- Graphic Design for Non-Designers by Tony Sedon & Jane Waterhouse
We also evaluate Intangible Values.

What are some examples of intangible values:

Please play the video file “Real Places, Signature Design.mp4” which is attached to this presentation.

On the video you will find:

1. Case Study: Nachusa Grasslands
   Intangible: Beauty, Stewardship, and Provocation to protect endangered places

2. Case Study: Southern Education Foundation
   Intangible: Inspiring the Next Generation

3. Case Study: Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area
   Intangible: Spiritual Connection to Nature

4. Case Study: Dahlonega Gold Museum
   Intangible: The WOW!

5. Case Study: Helen to Hardman Farm
   Intangible: The FUN!
Whether at the end of a long hike or the end of long day out with the family, what people really remember is the FUN!

We do our best to design memorable experiences for visitors to enjoy, but what really matters are the people they share those experiences with.

They’ll always remember the fun they had with their family.

The thrill of reaching the summit, amplified by the presence of friends

*Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area*
If our goal is to make these places come to life, to make them “real”, then they must outlive Signature Design’s involvement with them.

But because our clients and communities have walked alongside us throughout the process, they understand how far the project has come… and how it could continue to grow.

...I think these projects are a little bit like a garden: our initial planting is lovely... but the real joy is in watching the life inside mature over time...
To start a conversation about how Signature Design can elevate your next project, visit:

SIGNATURE DESIGN

www.thesignaturedesign.com

"Together, we can create experiences that educate, entertain, and inspire wonder."
- Therese Huffman, Signature Design