Interpretive planning and design is a complex enterprise, demanding high levels of coordination and flexibility. Interpretive projects tend to involve an unusually large number of variables, each of which can affect the outcome of the initiative and all of which are closely interconnected with one another. At Main Street we try to approach the development and design of each new project without preconceived notions of what it should look like, or even what interpretive methodologies or media might be utilized. The possible techniques for achieving any given set of interpretive goals and objectives are enormously varied, and quality interpretive planning and design demands that we remain open to new ideas. We believe that right concept and design approach for any project can only be determined through an intensive process of research, development, review, and active collaboration and conceptual brainstorming among all project stakeholders.

At the same time, certain basic considerations inevitably pertain. These core concerns are briefly discussed below:

Audience
What is the target audience for the project? Are there other secondary or incidental audiences, and if so, how important are they?

Exhibit planners and designers are the visitors’ advocates. We should always begin from a visitor's perspective and try to learn as much as possible about the visitor populations for whom we will be developing and designing our exhibits. Who will come to this facility, and why will they come? What do they want or need to know? What existing information - and what misunderstandings or
misconceptions — will they be carrying with them when they arrive? Only by making a sincere effort to truly understand our intended audience can we plan and develop appropriate interpretive experiences.

In addition, we need to think about when visitors will come, and in what numbers. Is the attraction seasonal? Are there predictable peaks and valleys in the volume of visitation?

Content
What is the core content that needs to be communicated in these exhibits, graphics or experiences? Is it primarily informational, or primarily affective and experiential? What do we want audiences to remember two hours after they visit? Two months? Two years?

It is essential that interpretive planners establish clear and realistic content goals for projects, and that these goals (generally described in terms of themes, sub-themes, topics, and sub-topics) be carefully matched to anticipated audience characteristics, to the location of the project, and to the methodologies that will be utilized. In our office, the development of a compelling project storyline and a concisely articulated set interpretive goals and objectives always precedes design.

As the legendary interpretive planner Freeman Tilden once noted, “Information, as such, is not interpretation,” but at the same time, “all interpretation includes information.” What is most important is that we understand the differences between the two, and that content is presented in appropriate ways. “The chief aim of interpretation,” Tilden observed, “is not instruction but provocation.” The goal of interpretation is to engage visitors, luring them into a deeper investigation of a topic than they might otherwise have chosen. At Main Street, our approach is to try to create an experience within the exhibition which encourages investigation by evoking the wonder and delight that comes from exploring history or nature. We try to help visitors make connections and discoveries, learning as they go.

Information, by contrast, needs to be presented as simply and directly as possible. Information is practical and may be essential. Especially in the context of an outdoor recreation area like Bear Mountain, where visitors’ health and safety may depend upon how well they understand (or
how effectively we communicate) the practical realities of their proposed experience, information can be vital to the success of even an informal day hike. At a minimum, quality visit planning support can help ensure that visitors enjoy themselves and that the fragile resources of the Park are protected and preserved. Occasionally, it can save lives.

Informational components must provide clear, complete and concise answers to frequently asked questions and enable visitors to make visit planning decisions without placing an undue burden on visitors center staff. They must be accessible, located in such a way as to foster effective visitor circulation patterns, and designed to address the needs of different audiences. In addition, design of these elements must consider the informational requirements of both “average” and “peak visitation” periods, with appropriate levels of redundancy deliberately designed-in.

Methodology
As a general rule, it is usually a good idea to try to design for a variety of learning styles. We believe that in most instances multiple interpretive opportunities should be offered for each of an exhibition’s key themes. Thus, a visitor’s first encounter with a topic might take the form of a simple overview or advance organizer, while a more in-depth treatment might be offered in an interactive or mixed-media element elsewhere in the project. A key goal of the development and design process for any project is to identify an appropriate level of redundancy, as well as effective and complementary techniques for delivering our messages.

We tend to think that a non-linear exhibition program composed of interrelated but distinct “stories” or thematic zones usually is preferable to a one-way informational sequence. Adopting a non-linear format allows greater flexibility in visitor circulation and traffic management, and also enables us to more accurately target specific themes in our interpretive components. This sort of “thematic” approach to the interpretive plan also helps to accommodate subsequent revisions or additions to a project, if changes need to be made at a later date. To ensure continuity of experience, we seek to establish conceptual linkages which run through all of an project’s exhibits.
We believe in a philosophy of “appropriate technology” for the exhibits we develop and design. This means that we strive to carefully match delivery methods and to content, context, and established goals and objectives. Sometimes the best technology for an exhibit is remarkably simple, while in other cases sophisticated technological solutions may be more appropriate. For example, simple, durable exterior signs or wayside graphics panel are one method of providing information and interpretation in an outdoor setting; digital media (audio or text-and-image based programming for PDA’s, cell phones, or MP3 players) is another. Both have advantages and disadvantages. Neither one is “better” than the other – the goal is to find the most appropriate interpretive methodologies for each job.

Location
Especially for outdoor experiences, the character, qualities and constraints of the location will exert a significant influence on interpretive planning and design. Does the setting demand a specific style of interpretation? Does it impose physical demands (such as a linear circulation flow, or a complex visitation pattern) that must be accommodated by the interpretive design?

Similarly, we need to concern ourselves with the experiential qualities of our visitor’s desired “sense of place.” Will the provision of information, however valuable, negatively affect the visitor’s ability to connect with the fundamental beauty or power of the site? How much interpretation is enough, and when does it cross the line to too much? This is essentially the Goldilocks paradigm: you’re looking for “just right.”

Finally, location (in exterior settings) tends to raise issues of maintenance and durability. If project components will be subject to extremes of weather or visitor use/abuse, they must be planned and designed accordingly.

Operations
Interpretive exhibits, graphics, and visitor experiences need to be planned and designed with careful attention paid to the operational capabilities of the organization and/or individuals that will be tasked with operating and maintaining them.

Whose job description includes direct responsibility for interpretive components? How much time and resources will
be made available? Is there an annual budget for upkeep and refurbishment of these components? What is the anticipated maintenance cycle for project components – and what is the desired lifespan?

Does the organization have an active program of personal interpretation or informal education programs (ranger talks, docent-led activities, school group programs, scheduled hikes, etc.) that might benefit from being complemented by or integrated with the interpretive components?

It is important to recognize that the development, design, fabrication and installation of interpretive exhibits is an enterprise that most facilities are not likely to repeat again soon. Simplicity, durability, and long-term ease of maintenance are paramount concerns. It doesn’t matter how clever an exhibit concept is if the device doesn’t work when a visitor tries to use it.

**Budget**

As an exhibit fabricator we often work with likes to say, “We can fill any amount of space for any amount of money. The question is what we put in it.” Design, production, fabrication and installation of interpretive exhibits and graphics is a very expensive enterprise, and it is absolutely critical that project participants – designers and clients alike – are clear and open about the project budget throughout the planning and design process.

Set reasonable and realistic budgets that accurately reflect the real cost of doing the kinds of things you envision doing. Monitor project component implementation costs regularly along the way by developing and revising allowance-based budget frameworks that take into account all of the anticipated cost categories for your project, including hard costs, soft costs, and “hidden costs” such as staff or volunteer time.

If your reach exceeds your grasp, adjust one or the other. Be honest and don’t kid yourself. Budget problems are like infections: they only get worse and harder to deal with.