Grantee
How-To Guide
Introducing, Understanding & Applying
the Design Excellence Framework
How do we put Design Excellence to work?

In partnership with the Walton Family Foundation, Gehl has explored this question by engaging with Design Excellence grantees and evaluating eight Foundation-funded projects in Northwest Arkansas.

This document aspires to be a 'one-stop shop' for grantees as they work to understand the Framework and apply it in their projects. It includes three sections: an introduction to the Framework's value (Introducing); an overview of the Framework's content (Understanding); and an overview of the ways to apply the Framework throughout a project's lifecycle (Applying).

We thank you for your commitment to bringing design excellence to life in Northwest Arkansas.
Introducing

Why do we need a framework for Design Excellence?
We all have big dreams for our projects.

Maybe you dream of a serene park where someone can take a pause in nature. Or an arts and cultural hub that celebrates Northwest Arkansas’ creators. Or maybe it’s an everyday place downtown, brimming with a mix of activities, run-ins, and connections. But maybe you need more funding or tools to realize these dreams.
The Design Excellence Framework helps make those dreams a reality in Northwest Arkansas.

A grant provides the funds needed to bring a vision to life, but that’s just the start of the program. The Framework offers a shared language for diverse ambitions, and a system of support and tools to make sure your project achieves those goals to the fullest.
The Framework helps you hone in on measurable goals for your project.

Anchored in principles that capture the ambition for Design Excellence in Northwest Arkansas, the Framework offers a starter set of goals that can be measured before and/or after construction as a marker of project success.
Once you set goals, you can plan how you’ll gauge progress and start collecting data.

Every project’s evaluation plan is rooted in a set of measurable goals. For example, you might measure the social diversity of visitors by observing the age and gender of people spending time in the place.
Analyzing this data allows your team to reshape your goals, monitor progress, and update the design.

With baseline data in hand, your team can get a pulse on everything from what people think of a place to how they tend to spend time there. Insights from data collected before construction may surface new project goals or inform tweaks to an in-progress design.
This analysis can also shape a story of impact for the project — generating support from the region and beyond.

Once you’ve collected and analyzed data after construction, you can take stock of project impact. Communicating project impact won’t just speak to the benefits of the Design Excellence Program; it may also give you the momentum needed to capture more funding or build relationships that will set up your project for long-term success.
Understanding

What does the Design Excellence Framework cover?
The Northwest Arkansas Design Excellence Program promotes the highest level of design in the development of future public buildings and spaces in Arkansas’ Benton and Washington counties.
Four principles are at the core of design excellence, shaping beautiful places that serve local communities.

- **BEAUTY + FUNCTION**
  - **VISION**
    - Strengthens public life
  - **ELEVATES STANDARDS OF SUSTAINABILITY & RESILIENCE**
  - **CELEBRATES LOCAL CULTURES AND PLACE**
  - **BUILDS REGIONAL CAPACITY**

- **BEAUTY + FUNCTION**
  - **CREATES OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE TO SPEND QUALITY TIME IN PUBLIC — MOVING OR STAYING, ALONE OR WITH OTHERS**
  - **REFLECTS AND ENHANCES LOCAL HISTORY AND IDENTITY, AND FOSTERS STEWARDSHIP AMONG COMMUNITY MEMBERS**
  - **ADHERES TO AND ELEVATES STANDARDS OF SUSTAINABILITY — ENVIRONMENTALLY, FINANCIALLY, AND OPERationally**
  - **RaisEs the bar for local design, fosters economic development, and inspires the design community and the public**
Projects can address each principle by setting goals in a range of areas.
To measure progress on these goals, you will set metrics and collect data.

NOTE · We have tools to help you do this!
Metrics can be collected using a variety of methods.

- **Gauge Perception**
  - On-Site Intercept Survey
  - Off-Site Intercept Survey
  - Focus Group
  - Civic Engagement
  - Social Media

- **Observe Activity**
  - People Moving
  - People Staying

- **Map Conditions**
  - 12 Quality Criteria
  - Place Inventory (including Seating, Facade, Sidewalk, Shading, and Lighting Studies)

- **Collect Internal Data**
  - Environmental Data
  - Operational Data
  - Financial Data
Every Design Excellence project must collect a ‘Top 10’ set of baseline metrics, so the Foundation can understand the program’s collective impact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE TOP 10 DESIGN EXCELLENCE METRICS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>QUALITY</strong></td>
<td>% who feel positively about the place, and why (On- and Off-Site Intercept Survey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ENVIRONMENT</strong></td>
<td>Use of eco-friendly features, e.g., energy efficiencies, trees (Internal Data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACCESSIBILITY</strong></td>
<td>#, age, gender, and mode of people moving through or by the place (People Moving)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FINANCE</strong></td>
<td>Budget performance (Internal Data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIAL DIVERSITY</strong></td>
<td>Self-reported demographics of site visitors vs. area residents (On- and Off-Site Intercept Survey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OWNERSHIP</strong></td>
<td>% who feel the project is ‘their place,’ and why (On- and Off-Site Intercept Survey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIAL DIVERSITY</strong></td>
<td>#, age, gender, and type of activity of people staying (People Staying)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AUTHENTICITY</strong></td>
<td>% who feel place reflects NWA identity, and why (On- and Off-Site Intercept Survey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>% who report feeling welcome, and why (On- and Off-Site Intercept Surveys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CITIZEN APPRECIATION FOR DESIGN</strong></td>
<td>% who feel project has raised the standards for NWA design (On-Site Intercept Survey)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTES:** Metrics should be analyzed against respondent demographics to understand variations by race, income, education, age, and gender.

---

**STRENGTHENS PUBLIC LIFE**

**ELEVATES STANDARDS OF SUSTAINABILITY & RESILIENCE**

**CELEBRATES LOCAL CULTURES AND PLACE**

**BUILDS REGIONAL CAPACITY**
Beyond the ‘Top 10’ metrics, each project sets its own goals and metrics within the four Design Excellence principles.
This is not a checklist!

The Framework aspires to foster creative and thoughtful expressions of design excellence, allowing for a diversity of outcomes across all projects.
Applying

What do I do with the Design Excellence Framework?
There are many ways that grantees and the Foundation can use the Framework.

1. **Define Goals and Evaluation Plan**
   Develop an evaluation plan for measuring project goals — so you know where you’re headed and can keep track of progress.

2. **Measure & Extract Insights**
   Evaluate site performance based on your evaluation plan — so you can identify opportunities and measure impact.

3. **Review Design Progress**
   Explore how draft designs meet project goals — so designers can iterate based on core project aims.

4. **Take Performance Check-Ups**
   Test, evaluate, and refine project programming, operations, and design — so the project thrives past opening day, for years to come.

5. **Document & Tell a Story of Impact**
   Leverage analysis of project assessments to communicate regional impact of the Design Excellence program.

6. **Guide Future Investments**
   Take stock of lessons learned to inform future grants and other pushes for change in the region.

---

**Beyond Grant Purview**

---
The four ways of applying the Framework cut across the project lifecycle.

1. Define Goals & Evaluation Plan
   - Draft goals, metrics, methods, stakeholders
   - Incorporate goals into designer RFP
   - Review goals with designer; refine goals, metrics, methods, engagement plan
   - Create data collection plan

2. Measure & Extract Insights
   - Measure baseline
   - Measure post construction
   - Analyze project impact
   - Measure progress toward project goals
   - Identify project updates
   - Refine design, program, operations

3. Review Design Progress
   - Review how draft design aligns with framework goals
   - Repeat design review in subsequent iterations (e.g., schematic)
   - Repeat design review during construction as needed

4. Beyond Grant Purview
   - Take Performance Check-Ups

LEGEND
- Grantee Activity
- Tool Available
- Technical Assistance Available

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE AHEAD!
Click on the links to access tools and resources.
Define Goals & Evaluation Plan

*Develop an evaluation plan for measuring project goals — so you know where you're headed and can keep track of progress*
SETTING GOALS

The Project Goals Framework is the first tool to turn to when you begin your Design Excellence journey.

Use the Project Goals Framework to reflect on the goals you have for your project. Make sure to set goals for each Design Excellence principle — choosing from the illustrative goals included in the document, and/or adding your own. These goals should be the DNA of your project.

Incorporate the Project Goals Framework into designer selection (e.g., RFP). Ask candidates to articulate how their process will incorporate your goals. Once you’ve picked a designer, meet with them to review your Project Goals Framework.
SETTING METRICS & METHODS

Once you set your goals, you can update the Project Goals Framework with the metrics and methods you’ll use to measure progress.

Pair each goal in your Project Goals Framework with a way of measuring it (metric) and a way of collecting data about it (method). Unsure how to make the leap from goal-setting to evaluation planning? See the Metrics Guide for a starter list of potential metrics by principle, and the Methods Guide for a closer look at potential methods.
IDENTIFYING KEY USERS

Understanding the needs of users is key to design excellence and should inform your goals. Identify who you need to engage early in the design process.

Think through who you will engage during the design process. Who will use your space [e.g., locals, visitors, age ranges, types of interests]? What are the underrepresented groups in your community who need to be at the table to articulate their needs [e.g., racial and ethnic minorities]?
Once you’ve identified key stakeholders, consider how you will engage them throughout the process.

Begin to plan out when and how you will reach out to the community. Engagement is crucial to success for a number of reasons. You might engage with the community to understand their needs; to gather feedback and test ideas; to build consensus; or to inform and get the word out about your project. Keep in mind that traditional forms of engagement often fail to reach the right people; when possible, try to meet people in places that are convenient to them, rather than asking them to make time and arrange to travel to you.
SELECTING YOUR DESIGNER

When selecting your design team, consider how they will integrate your project goals and community engagement into the process.

Ask design team candidates to propose (1) a process to ensure that design decisions are steered by the Project Goals Framework and (2) an approach to stakeholder engagement. Once designers are selected, meet with them to review the Project Goals Framework in detail. Make a plan together to ensure that the project goals are the driving force when comparing design alternatives and making decisions.
Measure & Extract Insights

Evaluate site performance based on your evaluation plan — so you can identify opportunities and measure impact
PREPARING MATERIALS

With your goals, metrics and methods decided, you can start preparing materials for data collection.

Use the templates and sample materials from the Methods Guide to prepare your survey materials. The Methods Guide includes tips for creating a data collection plan and defining a catchment area, as well as method overviews and sample materials for gauging perception, observing activity, mapping conditions, and collecting internal data.
CREATING DATA COLLECTION PLAN

As you head into the field, keep in mind these tips.

Set your plan and schedule for data collection. Use the Data Collection Checklist, summarized at right and in more detail in the Methods Guide, as well as the illustrative Data Collection Plan in the Guide.

TIME
› Pick survey days (‘typical’ days; no inclement weather)
› Pick survey hours (2-3 peak times throughout the day)
› Be consistent, especially in counts (so you can compare to data collected after construction!)

PEOPLE
› Consider if you need volunteers (leaders, students, etc.)
› Train them accordingly (collecting and inputting data)

LOCATION
› Decide where you’ll be stationed for each method (number of surveying areas, lines for moving counts)

MATERIALS
› Bring the supplies you’ll need in the field (e.g., clipboards, pens, survey forms, phone charger)
**EXTRACTING INSIGHTS**

Once you’ve collected data, analyzing it can help you track key findings and trends.

Use the Insights Tracker to document what you’re finding. For each metric, you can document the baseline and post measures, impact stories, key quotes from surveys that speak to your project goals, and takeaways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Goal</th>
<th>Metrics</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Key(s)</th>
<th>Takeaway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Columns for you to fill in metrics, data, impact, key quotes, and takeaways.
TELLING DATA-DRIVEN STORIES

With your insights in hand, you can start to tell a compelling data-driven story about your project.

Consult the Data-Driven Storytelling Presentation. It includes tips and examples for how to tell stories that resonate with diverse audiences.
Review Design Progress

_Explore how draft designs meet project goals — so designers can iterate based on core project aims_
INFORMING DESIGN

By reviewing draft designs through the lens of your Framework goals, you can better realize your vision of success.

Schedule Design Excellence Review Meetings to review in-progress designs through the lens of your core project goals. Time these meetings in step with key milestones to ensure that critical design decisions are made in line with your Design Excellence goals. We recommend meeting at least once during the pre-design phase, and at the beginning, middle, and end of the Schematic Design and Detailed Design phases.

In the beginning of the grant, you will have worked with designers to outline a process for ensuring that project goals are central in design decisionmaking. We have provided several example Design Review Worksheets that you could use during this process.

Columns for the designer to indicate how the draft concept fulfills each goal, and how to improve the concept in line with project goals.
Take Performance Check-Ups

Test and refine project programming, operations, and design — so the project thrives for years to come
MONITORING PROGRESS

Even once your project has opened, it’s important to remember that great design is never finished.

Return to your Project Goals Framework over time. Every project has unforeseen challenges and opportunities that arise after opening. Data can help identify these, so consider collecting data periodically — especially in the first 12-18 months after opening. Based on what you find, you might identify opportunities to improve, and refine design or programming accordingly. The Foundation evaluates impact for projects across the program every 3-5 years, so be on the lookout for their Learning & Evaluation team, too.

Note: some grantees may also collect this data as part of their grant.