Thunderbird Bridge
Beth Galston, Artist
1999, Phoenix, AZ

Materials: Concrete, metal railings, lighting, earth contours, crushed granite, plants
Dimensions of bridge and landscape: 300' W x 1000' L

I was hired by the Phoenix Arts Commission as the artist on a team designing a vehicular bridge on the Piestewa Peak Parkway, a new eight lane freeway. The site was Thunderbird Road, located several miles north of downtown Phoenix. My role was to develop a concept to beautify the bridge and mitigate its impact on the neighborhood. My design includes a flowing shape with serpentine terraced walls, a textured rocklike surface, brightly colored serpentine railings, and a special lighting system.

The bridge originally proposed by the engineers was a square concrete box culvert with twenty four foot high walls facing nearby houses. I imagined I was a community member, and asked: How can I alter the bridge to humanize its scale and integrate its form into the surrounding environment?

In my design, I rounded all the lines of the bridge to soften its look and create a graceful, flowing shape. Round corner columns were exposed to lift the structure up and create the feeling of a gateway. The abutment and soffit were curved; and serpentine terraced walls were added, bringing the bridge's height down to a more human scale. These terraced walls flow from the inside of the bridge, undulate, and disappear into the landscape. On top of each terrace is a brightly colored serpentine railing.

I wanted the bridge to feel like a natural rocky form, so I chose a fractured granite surface pattern for the concrete. Oriented horizontally, this pattern creates long, wavy lines that echo the serpentine design. Surrounding the bridge, I created a sculpted landscape of earth mounds and contours, which extend for several hundred feet on all four sides of the bridge. This creates the appearance of natural hills, echoing Squaw Peak in the distance. This mounded landscape, as well the terrace walls, is planted with native vegetation.

The bridge's curved form is dramatized by a special lighting system. Blue light washes the front of the corner columns and yellow light backlights them, accentuating the gateway effect as one approaches and drives through. Lights along the terraced walls silhouette the serpentine railing by illuminating it from behind. Inside the bridge, recessed ceiling lights continue the smooth lines and feeling of lightness.

In this project, I collaborated with bridge engineers, representatives of the Department of Transportation, and the City of Phoenix to produce a design that was functional as well as aesthetically pleasing.