

Chapter 1

Why Do I Need a Portfolio?

Why all the fuss about design portfolios? I already have great-looking project cutsheets!

If you are a student of design, just getting started in your chosen creative industry, this is a reasonable question. Without any guidance on the matter, it would be easy to believe that all a recruiter really needs to know is that you do decent work. Unfortunately, the portfolio is a convention of the design industry and, to get a job, you must have one; it's the universal measure of your progress and abilities. Design firms just don't hire designers fresh out of school without first reviewing their student portfolios. Unlike many other occupations (think, for example, auto sales, accounting, or nursing) where a résumé may be the only document ever submitted in a job application, every designer must present a résumé *and* a portfolio for review if they are to be considered a credible candidate.

Despite this vital role in the search for professional employment, the design portfolio just doesn't get much exposure in the classroom. As a student of landscape architecture, I don't recall ever even seeing a portfolio until my junior year. At that point in my emerging career, my portfolio (I'm being generous with the term here; I was not a highly organized student) was little more than a roll of drawings and a few beat-up presentation boards in the back of my dorm closet. As graduation loomed, I began to realize (with some anxiety, I might add) the importance of assembling something that would be suitable for sharing with prospective employers and for presentation during interviews. While most programs now do a better job of stressing the importance of the portfolio and providing useful resources for students, I still feel that many programs could improve on this.

But what should my portfolio contain? What should it look like? As I was nearing graduation from college, we had just two options: a presentation binder containing expensive reproductions and photos or full-size original drawings. Color copiers, digital

plotters, computers, email, and overnight delivery had not yet been invented. Primitive times, indeed! When asked to share a portfolio, we had little choice but to either visit the office and present it in person or send expensive photographic reproductions by snail mail (with a hopeful request that they would be returned). “It’ll *probably* get there by the end of the week” was as reassuring as a postal worker would get about delivery in those days. Understandably, most of us were hesitant to send something we had so much time and money invested in through such an unreliable service. In a pinch, we sometimes used our original drawings for an interview, though unrolling those large rolled-up drawings in an interview was always a little awkward. The classic design portfolio was (and still is) the better option. If assembled professionally and presented well, it communicates your skill set at the same time it reveals that you have a good sense of organization and an aptitude for presentation.

Today, digital technology has utterly transformed how we create, store, and transmit our creative work. We now handle portfolios in ways that we could not have imagined when I entered the profession. Everything you need to produce and share your portfolio is right there on your computer desktop. Unlike the dark ages of the twentieth century, when a portfolio was essentially a glorified scrapbook, we no longer need all those old analog tools—double-stick tape, photographic darkrooms, press-on letters—to put together a portfolio. Better yet, it costs absolutely nothing to create an unlimited number of copies for distribution. And, by simply pushing the “Send” button, you can forward your portfolio anywhere on the planet instantly. How could this get any easier?

This ease of production and sharing has, unfortunately, also created a bit of a “production line” mindset. Because portfolios are so easy to package and share, many candidates (students and professionals alike) believe that simply attaching an assortment of PDFs of their work to an email and blasting it off to as many firms as possible is all one has to do to secure a job. You *might* get lucky with that approach, but chances are, most recruiters who review such a submittal will see it for what it is—an untargeted portfolio assembled with little regard for what it says about you or your suitability for the position they are trying to fill.

Your portfolio must be more than a bunch of school projects hastily clamped together! Your portfolio is THE document by which you communicate everything about your academic and professional self to a prospective employer—your personality, your skill set, how you think, your ability to present yourself, why you are the best candidate; all of this and more are determined by a recruiter without you even being in the room. You need to control this narrative!

After years of leading university-level portfolio reviews, I’ve observed that many of the students who participate in these sessions are nervous about the design of their first portfolio and they understandably ask a lot of questions. When I first started hosting these reviews, I presented examples of nicely designed portfolios and pointed out why they were “good.” That, however, didn’t always fully address the students’ questions. In fact, highlighting beautiful portfolios likely made the whole thing even more challenging for some students. In the hope of making the topic more

approachable, I dissected the portfolio and began to talk in detail about its individual components: cover, table of contents, project cutsheets, etc. But that too had its limitations.

I came to realize that I had been presenting the portfolio as though it was still a professional scrapbook. It wasn't until I reflected on what I, as a recruiter, look for in a portfolio that I realized I was approaching it all wrong. Of course, you need an attractive cover and informative project cutsheets to show off your talents, but those things don't tell the whole story. To get onto my interview shortlist, your portfolio also needs to reveal your potential to be a member of our team. *Do you communicate and work well with others? Are you creative? Do you have strengths that will make our firm better?* Beyond understanding your skill set, I need to know *who* you are.

While it is clear that the students who attend our portfolio reviews are looking for technical advice on portfolio design, I've found that many students also need a little emotional support. *How do you feel about my portfolio? Do you think I can get a job with it?* Thinking back to my senior year in school, I recall the technical challenges of designing my first portfolio, but I also remember the huge emotional impact it had on me during that period. Through the course of a single year, I went from a state of **confusion** (*Where do I start?*) to being **overwhelmed** (*How am I ever going to finish?*) to **confidence** (*Boy, this looks great!*) to **uncertainty** (*What if they don't like it?*) to being completely **discouraged** (*I didn't get the #!&# job!*) to **exhilaration** (*I got my first job offer!*). These emotions are part of the challenge inherent to making the transition from student to working professional and they need to be addressed.

What has evolved from years of reviewing student portfolios, hosting university portfolio reviews, and engaging in one-on-one interviews with students is a "plan of action" for portfolio design that I now call *The Four S's*. Rather than dwelling entirely on portfolio content and production, *The Four S's* is an organizational mindset focused on the added value of telling your story, revealing your style, demonstrating your strengths, and sharing all of it effectively. You are so much more than a grade point average and an infographic full of software skills!

The Four S's are:

1. **Story:** Telling Your Story.
2. **Style:** Defining Your Style.
3. **Substance:** Giving It Substance.
4. **Sharing:** Sharing Your Work.

To ensure that each "S" is thoroughly addressed, a full chapter of this book has been dedicated to each topic. Each chapter is further subdivided into the three key deliverables of the typical professional job application: (1) the **Cover Letter**; (2) the **Résumé**; and (3) the **Portfolio**. To illustrate how these concepts can be applied to your design portfolio, I've assembled examples from a variety of student portfolios I've received in recent years that I feel have expertly integrated The Four S's into their portfolios. Let me introduce you to The Four S's.

STORY

First, the obvious. The good old days of submitting that wadded-up old résumé for a summer job at the corner grocery are now behind you. As a graduate of a university design program with a certificate or professional degree, you now need a much more sophisticated and visual way to communicate your new skill set to potential employers. Your résumé is still important, of course, but it must now be supplemented with a design portfolio containing examples of your best student work. As you set out to assemble your portfolio, one question should loom large: “*How can I differentiate myself from my classmates?*” The answer, in part, lies in how well you tell your *Story*. What is your unique *Story*?

At a time when most graduates of design school have mastered AutoCAD, InDesign, and Photoshop, software skills alone rarely set candidates apart. Most young designers are so proficient with design and drafting software that these abilities are now considered a baseline competency, just as drafting (by hand, of course) was in the days before computers. You don’t have to look at many job ads to see that, “Proficiency with AutoCAD,” is the lowest common denominator of every entry-level position advertised; nothing unique there.

During interviews, to better understand a candidate’s story, I ask them to describe their strengths (note that I didn’t use the word *digital*; I’m hoping you will tell me something unique about yourself like “I’m an organized designer” or “I’m a great conceptualizer”—it’s not a software kind of question). To my dismay, the answer is usually “I’m great with AutoCAD” or Lumion or Rhino or whatever the software *du jour* is. Unless you’re seeking a CAD Tech position, software skills will not be the primary focus of most interviews. You’ll need something more valuable than that to make yourself stand out.

Yes, recruiters *are* looking for candidates with well-developed software skills, but they expect that of *everyone* who applies. What they want are well-rounded employees who have software skills *and* who can think and can write and can work well with others and can make presentations—the list of good answers to this question of “strengths” is surprisingly long. We can train you to improve your technical and software skills; it’s much harder to teach you to be collaborative or to be organized if you don’t already possess such traits. Identifying and then building your portfolio around your strengths are central to telling your story.

In a recent article on *The Motley Fool* website, “10 Soft Skills Hiring Managers Are Looking For;”¹ author Maurie Backman reinforces this notion that the best candidates aren’t necessarily the most technically proficient. The best candidates are those who are technically proficient *and* possess a range of well-developed soft skills. Unlike job-specific technical skills (hard skills), soft skills are skills that are not unique to a

¹ Backman, Maurie. “10 Soft Skills Hiring Managers Are Looking For.” *The Motley Fool*. 7 January 2018. Web. 11 April 2018.

particular job; they can be applied universally in the workplace. Backman’s article identified ten interpersonal soft skills that are highly valued by recruiters:

1. Oral and written communication
2. Attention to detail
3. Customer service
4. Personal drive
5. Integrity
6. Problem-solving capacity
7. Independence
8. Organization
9. Teamwork
10. Troubleshooting ability

Do you possess any of these sought-after soft skills? Backman stresses that soft skills are as important in the workplace as technical skills and that recruiters look for them in *every* candidate. While few of us possess *all* these skills, most of us are naturally good at *some* of them. As you prepare to graduate, recognize that you now command a unique blend of education, technical skills, project experience, *and* soft skills that will make you a valuable addition to the right office. To maximize your chances of getting to an interview, inventory your soft skills, integrate them into your portfolio, and be prepared to confidently demonstrate them during interviews.

In Chapter 2, “Tell Your Story,” we’ll look at specific techniques you can utilize to create a portfolio that stands out from the crowd. As you read on, give some thought to what makes you a unique candidate. Those qualities are there—you just need to be aware of them. There may be a few recruiters out there who don’t care about what makes you unique—they only need your technical abilities. I can assure you, however, that not all recruiters are that shallow; the good ones really do want to get to know you. It’s your job to help make that happen. Hiring a new employee is time-consuming and every recruiter wants to be sure that you’ll be a good fit in their workplace “family.” The more effectively you communicate your *Story* and illustrate that you are both a capable *and* unique candidate, the quicker you’ll find yourself in an interview.

STYLE

Once you’ve settled on the elements of your *Story*, you will need to determine how to best communicate it to others—both digitally and in person—in your own unique *Style*. One of the chief complaints I hear from fellow recruiters about digital portfolios is, “They all look alike these days.” I don’t totally agree with this view, but I do understand why a recruiter would say this. With most students using the same software to create portfolios and recruiters using the same office equipment to review and print them, it just makes sense that we would see many similarities among the portfolios we review.

With high-resolution graphics and the universal availability of desktop publishing software creating a level playing field for candidates, the challenge now is to find a way to introduce your *Style* in a way that will stand out and be noticed. In large part, this is a function of good organization, competent graphic design, and an understanding of what looks professional, both on a monitor and in a printed document. Much of your appeal as a candidate depends upon this.

Starting with the opening page and concluding with the back cover, your portfolio must present your unique style in a smooth and compelling viewing experience for the recruiter. Ease of navigation, clear organization, high legibility—these are just a few of the elements that contribute to a positive digital viewing experience. Consider the experience of reading a good online book: you download the book with one click, double-click on it and immediately open to a well-designed and relevant cover, scan the table of contents, read the introduction, and then dig into the story. This is Publishing 101—an orderly well-designed presentation orients readers and guides them effortlessly through the story. Your goal should be to create a similar user experience for your portfolio.

And it's not all digital. You also need a professional-quality hardcopy presentation portfolio for those pesky in-person meetings—interviews. Over the last two years, the Covid-19 global pandemic has prevented us from hosting in-person interviews, and we have been doing interviews by video. That, however, is not expected to be the case for much longer. With the nationwide vaccine program already in place, we can already see the workplace beginning to return to normal. When that happens, upon being shortlisted, you may be asked to visit the office and present your work in person. The degree to which you leave a good impression on your interviewer will depend not only on your portfolio content, but also its tactile and visual quality and how well you present it.

In Chapter 3, “Define Your Style,” we’ll review the elements of *Style* using a range of samples from well-designed student portfolios, discuss current trends, and look at ways you can add your individualized touch to your presentation.

SUBSTANCE

Regardless of how wonderful your portfolio may look, it's only as good as the content—the *Substance*—that backs up your claim that you are a competent designer and that you can make a valuable contribution to the recruiter's firm. Yes, you do need good imagery, but polished graphics are only window dressing here—you still need something to lure your customer into the store and buy your product.

Most recruiters, unfortunately, don't take the time to review every drawing and read every project description in your portfolio. Sure, they'll scan your project cut-sheets (e.g., project summaries), but they probably won't notice that your design solution reduces local hydrocarbon emissions by 35% or that you used chamfered tropical hardwood on that rooftop deck. They want to know what your strengths and skills are, understand your role in the project and, most importantly, determine your potential to

be a designer and future employee in their firm. As they review your portfolio, they're asking themselves questions like, "Were you the team coordinator?" or "Did you create these awesome renderings?" or "Did you develop that cool design concept?" *Does your portfolio answer "substance" questions like these?*

You could come right out and say, "I understand design conceptualization" or "I'm very creative" in your cover letter or résumé but seeing is believing. Recruiters want visual evidence to confirm that you have the technical skills you claim to have. That said, a portfolio containing work that illustrates, rather than describes, your technical prowess is a more effective portfolio. How do you go about *showing* rather than *telling*? Well-designed and consistent project cutsheet templates might illustrate your graphic design skills. The inclusion of your concept development doodles might reveal how you work through a design challenge. Placing well-written descriptive captions below every graphic might show off your writing skills and identify the software skills you used to create them. These are just a few techniques you could use to illustrate your unique abilities and help a recruiter clearly "see" your *Substance*.

In Chapter 4, "Give It Substance," we'll look at samples from well-designed student portfolios and discuss how they address the *Substance* that recruiters look for. Remember, recruiters typically have only a few minutes to review your work and make an informed decision regarding your suitability for a position. Helping them quickly find what's important and determine that you are, in fact, a qualified candidate will increase your odds of being shortlisted.

SHARING

Now that you've put in all this demanding work and created a portfolio that you are proud of, it's time to put it to the test and submit it for a job. The design portfolio is *the* industry standard for the presentation and evaluation of an artist's or designer's capabilities—it's the price of admission for *every* interview. Virtually every employer you communicate with from this day forward will ask to review your portfolio before they consider inviting you to interview. Unbelievably, the way you share your portfolio with a recruiter can have as much impact on how you are perceived as a candidate as the actual content of your portfolio itself.

In Chapter 5, "Share Your Work," we will look at different techniques you can use to share your portfolio. You should, by the time you start networking and applying for jobs, have your digital portfolio and its companion hardcopy presentation portfolio in "ready" mode and have a clear plan for sharing them quickly and effectively with recruiters. This is not the time to be experimenting with file formats or fumbling around with cutsheet layout—you should have these details worked out and be ready to confidently press "Send" the moment you get a request. When you do get that call for an interview, being ready to meet immediately communicates that you are a candidate who takes your job search seriously. You may never "finish" your portfolio, but you'd better have it "ready" to share when a recruiter calls!

Assembling your first design portfolio may feel like a monumental undertaking as you get started—it did to me as I set out to create mine. Truth be told...it does take a *lot* of arduous work to do it right. But don't let that overwhelm you. You've had plenty of practice in school tackling complex semester-long design projects, right? You've used the design process in school to break those projects down into more manageable chunks. One step at a time. The only difference between those projects and this one is that this project is focused entirely on YOU and you'll be working on it for the rest of your career. This challenge may seem daunting, but you can do this. *No one understands this subject matter better than you!*