

Elements of a Successful Design Portfolio

Contributed by the AIA Knowledge Resources staff

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SUMMARY

The AIA Knowledge Resources staff asked four AIA members who have viewed dozens, if not hundreds, of portfolios during their tenure in the profession for their comments on student design portfolios. We hope their thoughts on what they like and don't like to see will help those developing a portfolio for the first time.

INTRODUCTION

The comments below are organized in two segments: (1) what reviewers like to see and (2) what they don't like to see. Since some of their comments were similar, we paraphrased them. The four members who contributed to this resource are (in alphabetical order)

Deborah DeBernard, AIA, of the Washington, D.C., office of Leo A Daly Architects;

Alan Ford, AIA, of Alan Ford Architects in Denver and previously managing partner of Hutton Ford Architects;

Jan Harmon of HOK's Los Angeles office; and

Michael Mauch, AIA, of RWA Architects in Cincinnati.

WHAT OUR CONTRIBUTORS ENCOURAGE

Layout/Design/Graphics

A student's design portfolio should highlight the individual's abilities and interests, with a focus on content quality. Similar to the design of a book, basic considerations are layout, color, paper, and font. The layout and graphics should complement the work within the portfolio, rather than compete with it.

Be sure to use large, clear images; there is no excuse for poor quality photography. In an interview with *Architect Magazine*, Jan Harmon recommends that students place their work in chronological order so viewers can see their progress over the years. She also tells students to put their very best work on the last page because it is easy to keep a portfolio open to that page during an interview.

Content

The contributors agree it is important to include construction documents if you have had experience developing them either in school or in the workplace. A working knowledge of BIM or CAD, if you have it, is important to demonstrate. Nonetheless, the contributors mentioned that they appreciate seeing hand-drawn sketches, either artistic or architectural. "Final renderings are nice, but process sketches that show design ideation offer more insight into design progression and logic," explains Mike Mauch.

Résumé

Our contributors also have suggestions for improving students' résumés. Don't just say where you worked; say what you did there. If you have little work experience, include other personal interests so an employer can learn about you. Include all relevant experiences, even if they are not professional (e.g., volunteering with Habitat for Humanity or extensive travel).

Interview

How you present your portfolio is as important as the content in the portfolio itself. Potential employers assess your verbal communication skills during an interview as you present your work. A successful portfolio presentation should progress at the interviewer's pace. Add interest to images by telling the story of the project.

Your conversation should show you have researched the firm. Discuss how elements of your projects relate to the firm's values. "I cannot emphasize this enough—the individuals who stood out for me over the course of more than 150 interviews were those who did not just go through the motions but understood what our firm was about and spoke knowledgably and with commitment as to why they believed they were a good fit," Alan Ford affirms.

WHAT OUR CONTRIBUTORS DISCOURAGE

Graphics/Layout/Design

The contributors generally dislike highly technical portfolios, online portfolios, and portfolios on CD. “Sometimes online or CD portfolios look too polished, as if they are PowerPoint presentations,” states Debbie DeBernard. They lack the personal, artistic quality that can only be achieved by touching the paper and flipping page by page through the portfolio in person.

Sometimes the design of the portfolio itself is too complex and over-designed. All of the respondents discouraged complex packaging. The focus should be on the design content of the portfolio, and the packaging should not overpower it. Keep text to a minimum; reviewers have limited time to read during an interview.

Size

Refrain from creating uniquely sized portfolios. Keep them at least 8.5” by 11”, nothing too small. In fact, consider that the viewer might use reading glasses, and keep text sizes at a normal reading scale.

Résumé

Make sure résumés are concise and free of errors. Do not over-design your résumé. Proofread it many times and have someone else proofread it, as well; there is no excuse for typos. One of the reviewers typically points out typos to interviewees, not to be rude, but so they can fix their mistake.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 03.01.01 Five Basic Presentation Formats
- 07.02.03 How the Talent Strain Affects Architecture Firms

For More Information on This Topic

See “Recruiting and Hiring,” by Laurie Dreyer-Hadley and Kathleen C. Maurel, Assoc. AIA, in *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 9, page 229.



See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



Feedback

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Key Terms

- Practice
- Employment
- Personnel management
- Recruiting and hiring
- Portfolios
- Résumés