

A Guide to Portfolios, Creative Resumes, and the Job Search

Maureen Mitton

Portfolios for
Interior Designers



PORTFOLIOS FOR INTERIOR DESIGNERS

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To my mother, who bought me a portfolio (and a blue wool suit) so that I would finally stop waiting tables and hanging out at the beach. And to my father, who thought nothing of driving across the country—any country—to see what was on the other side.

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PART I

BUILDING BLOCKS





INTRODUCTION

The following quotes sum up key points in this book:

Design—whether graphic, industrial, interior or architecture—is the process of taking unrelated parts and putting them together in an organized unit. ■

—ALEXANDER WHITE, *THE ELEMENTS OF GRAPHIC DESIGN: SPACE, UNITY, PAGE ARCHITECTURE, AND TYPE* (2002)

And:

Work your plan and plan your work. ■

This book is intended as an aid in taking what are often seemingly unrelated elements and putting them together in an organized unit—and not being overwhelmed by the process (that's where having a plan worth working comes in).

Many students, graduates, and job seekers feel overwhelmed by the thought of putting together a portfolio: in representing your entire body of work, the portfolio can symbolize your fears about graduation, employment—even about a successful future. (No small issue there!) However, by breaking down the elements of portfolio development, you can, in fact, develop a plan that yields excellent results.

One key is to stay focused on the tasks at hand and not become overwhelmed by the future or by fear. Instead, focus on working through the process in a step-by-step manner as described in the following pages and symbolized in Figure 1-1.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM TAFE.

FIGURE 1-1 Imagining the job search and portfolio development process as a series of small and manageable steps will keep you from becoming overwhelmed. ■

The following chapters convey the ways in which the components of an interior designer's education, experience, and personal narrative can be put together in an organized manner. Additional information about the process and materials required for finding employment for interior designers is also included.

This book has a somewhat unusual organizational structure. The first section is devoted to the basic information required for the job search and for preparing the portfolio; the second section is devoted to examples. Much like a portfolio, the written components of this book are as succinct as possible, with the focus on the work and images.

OVERVIEW OF THE JOB SEARCH

For those of you who have not searched for and obtained a professional, full-time job previously, a bit of background about the process is included here. Put very briefly, the process can be seen as consisting of three phases:

»» STANDARD FULL-TIME JOB SEARCH PROCESS PHASES*

Phase 1: Preparation

Self-assessment and development of a portfolio, resume, cover letter, and corollary items.

Phase 2: Research and Distribution

Researching potential employers and opportunities; the systematic distribution of the items prepared in phase one.

Phase 3: The Interview and Offer

Preparing for the interview, the interview and follow-up, receiving and accepting the offer.

*Due to ongoing economic uncertainty, many first jobs are not full-time.

The process is, however, more complex than a short list might indicate, and there are many books devoted entirely to each phase mentioned. At specific times in your life, it may be worthwhile to do a serious study of any one of these items or phases. For example, self-assessment is incredibly important as you contemplate moving from one profession to another, or from one specialty area to another. Richard Nelson Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute* (2009) is an excellent resource for those involved in a job search, and it has quite a bit of content devoted to self-assessment for those considering career changes.

Remember the quote about working your plan and planning your work? Success with that concept starts right here. By working through the three phases listed above, you will be developing a plan that you can follow through on. Going through the first steps thoroughly will enable you to develop a clear understanding of what type of job you want or where you want to live; then you will have a plan worth working.

PHASE 1: PREPARATION

A serious self-assessment will help you identify your strengths and weaknesses, as well as the tasks that you find most enjoyable. Most readers of this book, however, have already made the decision to go into design after a previous period of assessment—as well as a huge investment of time and money. Rather than focusing on the type of personal assessment required as you contemplate career choices, this chapter will therefore consider ways of assessing your work, experience, and life story as you begin to prepare a portfolio and other job-search tools.

This type of limited self-assessment requires a careful evaluation of your education, the school or professional projects you've completed, your life experiences, as well as what brings meaning to your life. Think of it as a twofold process. You are assessing your strengths and experiences so that you can state them clearly in your resume and portfolio. And you are exploring what you like to do and what your goals are (project management? retail design? living in an urban setting?). The idea is to assess both what you can do well that makes you happy as well as how you can best demonstrate this to a potential employer.



FIGURE 1-2 Part of self-assessment leads to an understanding what type of living environment—rural or urban, for example—appeals to you. (This is a photograph of Chicago viewed from the Chicago River.) ■



FIGURE 1-3 Self-assessment also requires you to identify strengths, weaknesses, and things you enjoy doing. ■

The basic checklists that follow will help you with both types of assessments.

» SELF-ASSESSMENT: PREFERENCES AND INTERESTS LIST

List at least three types of design you enjoyed in school or in a previous job.

What are your geographic preferences? Are you drawn to a particular region, city, or state? Do you prefer an urban, suburban, or rural setting?

What is your firm size preference? Small firms tend to provide broader experience; large firms offer focused entry-level experience.

Consider stability: is financial or job security more important to you than working on exciting projects?

How much travel is acceptable to you?

How much money do you require? How little can you live on?

Consider time commitments: is a good deal of overtime acceptable or desired, or do you prefer more time off?

Where do you want to be in two years? In five years?

Experienced designers should consider what aspects of work they enjoyed or were successful with: project management, design, specification, client interaction, and so on. (List a minimum of five).

List five additional things that you want or that are not acceptable.

» SELF-ASSESSMENT: STRENGTHS AND PROOF OF TALENTS, SKILLS, AND EXPERIENCE

How do I prove that I am worth hiring? (What must I include in the portfolio and resume?)

Best projects (see chapter 2, The Portfolio Inventory).

Best results on specific projects or experiences.

Job-related skills: software, programming, project management, specification writing, and so on. List at least ten.

Personal or self-management skills such as reliability, tolerance, and flexibility (these are part of who you are). List at least five.

Transferable skills (from seemingly unrelated work that might be used in design, such as the ability to lead meetings, work with clients, etc.). List five, if possible.

Specialized areas of knowledge (foreign languages, metric system use, building construction, etc.).

Specialized certifications such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), National Council of Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ), state certification or registration, and so on.

Unusual experiences that would set you apart in a positive way.

Specialized education such as a Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) accredited program, international study, or a minor or specialization in an allied field.

Organizational leadership experience (with a design association, as dorm management staff, or even as a camp counselor).

» SELF-ASSESSMENT: DEAL BREAKERS

These are things that you are not willing to do or are not interested in. While these are worth identifying, do not be too quick to judge things that you have not experienced.

Project specialty/type of work: what type of project would you refuse to work on?

Values: what do you value that you are unwilling to compromise?

Type of firm or company (in-house designer, furniture dealership, etc.).

Are you able to work overtime and on weekends?

Are you able to travel?

Are you willing to relocate?

Where are you unwilling to live?

What is your absolute bottom line as far as salary?

These lists can be a start toward targeting your thoughts and focusing on your needs and desires. Understanding the answers to the questions in these lists will help you develop your resume and portfolio (phase 1, or preparation) and also aid with phase 2—research into your ideal firms and employers and how to contact them. Detailed information on resume writing and development, including help with skill identification, is provided in chapter 5; what is listed here is merely a beginning, meant to provide a jump start.

Portfolio development—the focus of this book—is another significant part of phase 1. The actual information for the planning and development of the portfolio can be found in the following chapter; that content has been treated separately for the sake of clarity—not because it should be seen as a separate phase.

PHASE 2: RESEARCH AND DISTRIBUTION

Research: Types and Sources

The purpose of this research is to develop a list of potential employers to which job-search materials can be distributed and to gain information about the type of work and projects potential employers are engaged in. Research therefore leads to both knowledge about possible job openings as well as background information about potential employers. The latter is important because it allows you to create customized cover letters and offers insight into a company's corporate culture.

There are two broad categories of resume distribution. The first is *targeted*. This means you find the exact firm—or type of firm—you wish to work for, and *target* your cover letter (and perhaps your resume as well) to each firm. Targeted distribution should also include some form of mini-portfolio or well-designed examples of your work. In some cases, the portfolio will also be edited to include specific projects targeted to an employer.

Broadcasting is another form of distribution in which cover letters, resumes, and samples of work are sent to a *broad* swath of employers. In such cases, less individualized editing is done to the resumes and cover letters. Broadcast resumes by nature are more generic; they are being cast wide, like a large net, in the hope of catching an employer. Nonetheless, a minimal amount of research should still be done about the firms to which broadcast resumes are sent so a project or type of work can be mentioned. (See chapter 5: Resumes and Related Correspondence.)

The decision about whether to broadcast or target resumes comes from answers to the questions in the individual self-assessment. When it is absolutely clear that a defined need creates a target, then research about that specific area should be conducted. For example, if the most important issue in a search is working near Denver, then research should be focused on appropriate employers in that area.

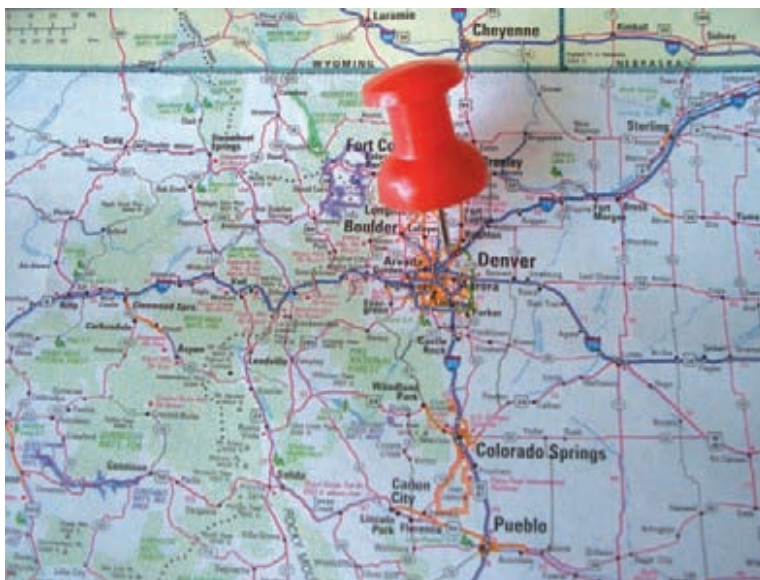


FIGURE 1-4 Self-assessment may identify a particular location or region as the focus of a job search. ■

Continuing with this example, you could pinpoint Denver and then research all of the potential employers within a 50-mile radius. If you are not planning to own an automobile, then you would target your research to employers in areas served by public transportation.

In some cases, the self-assessment will show that a design specialty—library design, for example—should be the focus of the research. Firms specializing in this type of work are uncommon, and specific periodicals and research into recently completed libraries will aid in this type of fact-finding.

While specific situations will vary, in most cases research will lead you to find out what kind of work potential employers do, where they are located, how they can be contacted, and perhaps even where to obtain more information about them. This information is not only helpful in providing the job seeker with a target but is also useful in creating cover letters with accurate references to the work of a specific potential employer. (See chapter 5 for information on cover letters.)

The research necessary for each job will vary greatly with the individual. Remember that research is not simply finding job openings; good research often involves finding out which firms do certain types of work or projects and then targeting those companies with targeted cover letters. In other words, research involves finding out who is doing what where and with whom. The following lists of sources for this type of research are just a starting point.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PUBLICATIONS

While not design specific, these publications can contain information about national and regional design-related business.

City business journals. Major metropolitan areas are served by Business Journals (main site: [HTTP://WWW.BIZJOURNALS.COM](http://www.bizjournals.com)). These tend to cover all businesses within an area, with construction, architecture, and design mentioned often and in special issues. Going back to the previous example, one could check the *Denver Business Journal* ([HTTP://DENVER.BIZJOURNALS.COM/DENVER](http://denver.bizjournals.com/denver)).

Local papers for cities and regions. Much like business journals, local papers cover construction, architecture, and design in special issues, and in sections on the home and business. The *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times* tend to feature international and national design stories.

White pages and yellow pages. Online yellow pages ([HTTP://YELLOWPAGES.AOL.COM](http://YELLOWPAGES.AOL.COM)) for each city are available. Searching for architecture, interior design, commercial interior design, and office furniture dealerships can prove helpful.

DESIGN ASSOCIATIONS

The following have helpful Web sites, magazines, and (in some cases) regional newsletters. It is worth looking at competition winners in addition to feature articles to find information on firms and specialties.

American Academy of Healthcare Interior Designers
[HTTP://WWW.AAHID.ORG](http://www.aaqid.org)

American Society of Interior Designers (ASID)
The national magazine is *ASID Icon*
[HTTP://WWW.ASID.ORG](http://www.asid.org)
[HTTP://WWW.ASID.ORG/BCDEVELOPMENT/JOBS/BANK/DEFAULT.HTM](http://www.asid.org/bcdevelopment/jobs/bank/default.htm)

British Interior Design Association
[HTTP://WWW.BIDA.ORG](http://www.bida.org)

The Center for Healthcare Design
[HTTP://WWW.HEALTHDESIGN.ORG/BLOG](http://www.healthdesign.org/blog)

Chartered Society of Designers (CSD) (UK)
[HTTP://WWW.CSD.ORG.UK](http://www.csd.org.uk)

Design Council (UK)
[HTTP://WWW.DESIGNCOUNCIL.ORG.UK/EN](http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/en)

Design Institute of Australia
[HTTP://WWW.DIA.ORG.AU](http://www.dia.org.au)

The Hospitality Industry Network (NEWH)
NEWH Magazine
[HTTP://WWW.NEWH.ORG](http://www.newh.org)

Interior Design Association Hong Kong
[HTTP://WWW.HKIDA.COM](http://www.hkida.com)

International Interior Design Association (IIDA)
The national magazine is *IIDA Perspective*
[HTTP://WWW.IIDA.ORG](http://www.iida.org)
[HTTP://WWW.IIDA.ORG/CONTENT.CFM/CAREERS](http://www.iida.org/content.cfm/careers)

National Kitchen and Bath Association
[HTTP://WWW.NKBA.ORG](http://www.nkba.org)

Retail Design Institute (for chapter information, awards, etc.)
[HTTP://WWW.RETAILDESIGNINSTITUTE.ORG](http://www.retaildesigninstitute.org)
[HTTP://WWW.RETAILDESIGNINSTITUTE.ORG/JOBS.PHP](http://www.retaildesigninstitute.org/jobs.php)

DESIGN INDUSTRY PUBLICATIONS AND WEB SITES

American Institute of Architects (AIA) state and regional design magazines: State and regional chapters produce informative magazines that include articles on firms and often have lists of companies doing specialized work. To continue with the example given, *Architect Colorado*, AIA Colorado's quarterly magazine, would be the choice for research about design in Denver ([HTTP://AIACOLORADO.ORG](http://aiacolorado.org)).

These publications and Web sites feature articles on projects and firms as well as annual design awards.

Contract magazine

[HTTP://WWW.CONTRACTMAGAZINE.COM](http://www.contractmagazine.com)

Dezignaré

[HTTP://WWW.DEZIGNARE.COM](http://www.dezignare.com)

HealthcareDesign magazine

[HTTP://WWW.HEALTHCAREDESIGNMAGAZINE.COM](http://www.healthcaredesignmagazine.com)

Hospitality Design magazine

[HTTP://WWW.HOSPITALITYDESIGN.COM](http://www.hospitalitydesign.com)

ID magazine

[HTTP://WWW.ID-MAG.COM](http://www.id-mag.com)

The focus of this magazine is industrial design, but the annual design review includes environmental and furniture design categories.

Interior Design magazine

[HTTP://WWW.INTERIORDESIGN.NET](http://www.interiordesign.net)

Lists the top one hundred interior design giants and contains project and billing information about those firms.

Interior & Sources magazine.

[HTTP://WWW.INTERIORSANDSOURCES.COM](http://www.interiorsandsources.com)

International Facility Management Association (IFMA)

[HTTP://WWW.IFMA.ORG](http://www.ifma.org)

Metropolis magazine

[HTTP://WWW.METROPOLISMAG.COM](http://www.metropolismag.com)

ASSOCIATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS FOR ALLIED PROFESSIONS

The following publications and Web sites are not devoted specifically to design, but they occasionally run design-related articles and features.

The Associated General Contractors of America

[HTTP://WWW.AGC.ORG](http://www.agc.org)

Hospitality Net (industry news section)

[HTTP://WWW.HOSPITALITYNET.ORG](http://www.hospitalitynet.org)

Library Leadership & Management Association (LLAMA)

[HTTP://WWW.ALA.ORG/ALA/MGRPS/DIVS/LLAMA/ABOUT/INDEX.CFM](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/llama/about/index.cfm)

Part of the American Library Association (<http://www.ala.org>); cosponsors of yearly design competitions.

National Association of Homebuilders

[HTTP://WWW.NAHB.ORG](http://www.nahb.org)

Nation's Restaurant News

[HTTP://WWW.NRN.COM](http://www.nrn.com)

Retail Traffic magazine

[HTTP://RETAILTRAFFICMAG.COM](http://retailtrafficmag.com)

Networking

Formal networking is the systematic pursuit of new contacts and information. It's organized and planned. Networking is relational. A good networking relationship will be mutually beneficial to both parties. ■

—MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,
CREATIVE JOB SEARCH (CJS) ONLINE GUIDE (2009)

While the term *networking* has become a bit of a cliché, the concept of creating a network of linked contacts is quite worthwhile. A large percentage of jobs are gained by some form of networked relationship.

What most people seek to gain from networking is a series of contacts—that is, names of design professionals and potential employers. Some of these contacts may be helpful immediately, while others may prove helpful only years later.

Networking should be handled systematically. While your demeanor should be casual, the information you gather should be thoroughly organized. For example, at workshops, professional association meetings, and conferences, it is wise to make notes on the back of business cards you collect. Write down information that will remind you of the initial conversation or situation. The most organized networkers keep lists of contacts with phone numbers and dates and stay in touch by following up frequently (but not too often!).

According to the *CJS*, “Networking isn’t begging. In fact, you shouldn’t be asking for a job; you should be seeking information that may lead to a job.” It is imperative that you look at networking contacts as potential relationships, not as job sources.

Most social situations can be seen as networking opportunities; time at the gym, restaurants, and professional associations can all engender conversations about careers and contacts and may lead to good relationships that form a true career network over time. Some additional opportunities for networking are listed below.

» NETWORKING: OPPORTUNITIES

Design-related classes and workshops	Professors
Job and career fairs	College alumni associations
Meetings of any professional organization (becoming a volunteer or an officer can provide the best opportunities)	Internet networking resources
Social organizations (anything from sports teams to local civic groups)	HTTP://WWW.LINKEDIN.COM
Trade shows	HTTP://WWW.NETWORKINGFORPROFESSIONALS.COM
Specialized relationships	HTTP://PIPL.COM/DIRECTORY
Classmates	HTTP://WWW.SPOKE.COM
	HTTP://WWW.XING.COM
	HTTP://WWW.ZOOMINFO.COM