

THE PERFECT DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE PORTFOLIO:

HOW TO CURATE A PORTFOLIO THAT GETS YOU NOTICED



kappa
executive search



Your portfolio plays a crucial role in helping you secure your dream interior design or architecture job.

But creating your perfect portfolio can be tricky, taking quite some time to get right. It's easy to fall into the trap of focusing too much on the quality and detail of your work, and forgetting to use your portfolio to convey your individual design style, personality and passion. These things, along with your technical ability, is what makes you unique and shows your potential new employer that you're the best person for the role you're applying for.

While your design portfolio should be an accurate reflection of all of these things, it should also show off your design thought process, how you communicate your ideas and the pride you have in what you've achieved.

What's more, your portfolio is used at different stages of the job application and interview process so it's well worth having two tailored versions:

1. Your job application portfolio
2. Your interview portfolio

Your application or sample portfolio should lure your potential boss in, showcasing just enough talent and technical skill to propel them to invite you to an interview. The interview version should then draw them in even further by effectively telling them your personal design story whilst reinforcing your expert technical skills. If this melds well with their company culture and the role, it's likely you'll end the interview with a big smile, not to mention an offer following shortly thereafter.

This guide will help you design a unique, yet functional design portfolio. While we recognise that there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to architects and interior designers, this guide will assist by painting broad brushstrokes (or pencil lines) that act as the building blocks for a portfolio that will both attract and impress potential employers.

1

DEFINE YOUR PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

All successful design projects start at the same point – defining the purpose and the audience. It is no different for your design portfolio.

Your design portfolio has two intertwined purposes. The first is to show off who you are and how you work. If this first purpose is achieved, so should the second – to secure you a new job!

Let's look at the first purpose, well, first.

It is all about you. Your portfolio should demonstrate your personality and flair (your 'who') and your technical ability (your 'how'). The work you include must be what you have done on particular projects (not just projects you have worked on). It should also illustrate your organisational skills and the fact that you understand project progression.

The second purpose is all about them. To secure a great job, your portfolio must be geared to the right audience. Spend some time thinking about your intended target. Are you going for jobs with large, high-end firms that specialise in commercial developments? Or are you aiming for smaller, boutique establishments that primarily focus on residential redesigns? Defining your 'who' dictates what goes in your portfolio.

2

ALLOW FOR ADAPTABILITY

Before we move onto what to include in your portfolio, let's speak for a moment about what you use to create it.

It's important you select a design platform that allows for adaptability. There are many merits to creating multiple portfolios (more on that later) but suffice to say, it's wise to utilise a software program that makes it easy for you to adjust your portfolio according to the needs of the job you are applying to.

A FEW PROGRAMS WE LOVE FOR ONLINE PORTFOLIOS INCLUDE:

- 🎨 **Portfolio Box** – designed specifically for architects
- 🎨 **Format** – flexible and dynamic with a variety of themes to choose from
- 🎨 **Pixpa** – beautiful and professional with plenty of extra tools

AND SOME IDEAS FOR OFFLINE PORTFOLIO CREATION:

- 🎨 **Microsoft PowerPoint or Word** – an oldie but a goodie, easy and simple to use
- 🎨 **Adobe Illustrator or InDesign** – slick, sophisticated and easy to use
- 🎨 **Canva** – drag and drop your way to portfolio success

Now we get to the million dollar question – what do I include in my portfolio?

Too much content and you risk your reader suffering a severe case of ‘eye glaze’; too little and it’s difficult for them to make an accurate judgment about your relevant skills. In both cases, the likely outcome is that they skip over your application.

To curate the right content, many designers opt for a general portfolio, including a third academic work, a third professional and a third personal. But when applying for a job, this is likely too much. Your portfolio must be geared to suit the audience so it makes sense to incorporate more of the professional, over the academic or personal.

In this case, we suggest leaving your academic credentials in your CV and focus on approximately 70% professional and 30% personal to help you showcase your personality, design flair and particular passions. Should you be at the start of your career, you might have a slightly different split and wish to include some of your academic work as well. Either way, remember that less is more.

On a related point, if you are fairly new to the design and architecture game, you’ll need to ensure your portfolio accurately demonstrates two key things:

1. **Your technical ability** in that you’re willing and able to put in long hours at the computer doing CAD drawings and development work.
2. **Your potential** to be a brilliant lead designer.

Hiring managers look carefully for both of these attributes when considering an application.

Now, let’s delve a bit further into each portfolio category with some tangible tips on what to include.





Professional work

The right mix of professional examples highlights your versatility (a very attractive attribute in a potential new designer or architect).

Aim to include:

1. A variety of imagery

Those glossy renderings are great, but be sure to include sketches too. Being a good sketch artist is still highly valued in the design industry – even in this digital age – as it not only showcases your drawing aptitude, but how you conceptualise and communicate your ideas to your team and clients.

If you only have a few years of design experience, it would be worthwhile including some images that illustrate your technical CAD skills too. It shows you're capable of doing the more technical aspects of the role, especially when the hiring manager is going to be asking themselves 'how is this person going to pay for themselves in the first three months?'. Showing them you are happy to work alongside a senior design person producing the nitty gritty technical documentation is key.

2. Progress shots

The final product will always be impressive but there is a lot to be said for the value of illustrating progression. It's also another way to demonstrate your raw skills and ability to execute end-to-end, so think about including sketches, progress pictures and documentation.

3. Niche shots

Perhaps you're a master when it comes to line weight, or the king/queen of small space design? If so, your portfolio should contain work that reflects that.

4. Projects that directly speak to the potential employer

Tailor your portfolio according to the job you covet, i.e. a high-end commercial firm or a smaller one focused on new home builds. Also consider the fact that established architects are also most concerned with structural elements, while designers look for that top-layer aesthetic. In deciding what projects to include, keep these details top of mind.

This is precisely when using an adaptable portfolio design platform is most beneficial. You can easily chop and change projects to suit particular job applications.

5. The right number

Hiring architects and designers often only have a matter of minutes to peruse an application and design portfolio. If you can showcase who you are in two or three key projects, that is infinitely better than blindly portfolio 'stuffing'. Just be sure to choose one 'hero' and some great 'supporting role' projects that truly reflect your strengths and the influence you had in the work. Remember, less is more!

Personal work

Many of the tips from the 'professional' work section apply here. But the choice of projects in this area should illustrate what makes you unique over another designer or architect. This may require a bit of soul searching, but thinking about your passion projects is a good start.

Aim to include something tangible if possible. So much is done digitally these days so if you excel in the 'hands-on' field, it's worth highlighting this. It might be a photo of a model piece furniture you made, or a design-related hobby such as photography. Think outside the box and be sure to include something that will get your potential new bosses talking!

4

CREATE THE RIGHT STRUCTURE

Your portfolio structure should use relevancy as its guidepost, not chronology. For example, if the role you're applying for sits in the documentation space with a side of concept design, ensure your projects reflect this in the same order.

Relevancy is also important as in an interview situation, it's highly unlikely you will be able to present your portfolio in its entirety. Ensuring the most relevant projects (which are hopefully your 'heroes') are front and centre gives you the best chance of success.

Another way to help tell your design story structurally is to organise projects into categories. Some examples might be architecture design, interiors, or urban scale, but there's lots of scope to come up with your own.

If you choose to use this structure, a table of contents will help the reader quickly and easily navigate to the sections that are most relevant or of interest.



There is much to cover in this section as the way you lay out your work speaks directly to the way you design. It's important to remember that many potential employers view your portfolio not for the work you've done, but the way you've chosen to tell your story. It speaks volumes about your potential and the way you will behave 'on the job'.

When thinking about your layout, consider these:

1. White space and graphics

Your graphics are the most important part of your portfolio. They must capture – and keep – the interviewer interested.

White space and big pictures are your friends here. Ensure your work is not overly cluttered with a good balance of white space. What you don't include is just as important as what you do.

When it comes to pictures, carefully choose the most appropriate for the project. In some cases 3D models or renderings may work well, but in others, a diagram is much more effective. If you have multiple images for one project, pick graphics that show different skills or angles.

How many is the right number of pictures? When deciding, it's best to aim for quality over quantity.

2. Font

You may want to stand out by using an out-of-the-box font, but clarity is vital so a simple font works best for all paragraph text. Use something a little more unique and outstanding for your headings and subheadings. Also, be sure to use line spacing of 1 or more to ensure your sentences are easy to read.

3. Words and captions

This is not something you will want to hear but it's highly likely most of the words you use in your portfolio won't be read. As such, caption sparingly. For most pictures, the basic facts are enough such as project type, year, medium, materials, client and technique.

4. Consistency

Pick a style and layout and stick to it. You might like to work with a particular visual rule or specific geometry, but whatever you choose, don't start with one and end with another. Doing this may give off the impression you don't have great attention to detail.

When applying, you will most likely submit a softcopy portfolio. But in an interview situation, you could go with either a hard or softcopy. Let's look at the pros and cons of each method and then some tips on how to get it right depending on the option you choose.

HARDCOPY PROS

- 🎨 **Tangible** – nothing beats the feeling of physically flipping through a portfolio.
- 🎨 **Portability & safety** – you just print it and go. No fussing around with a laptop that has suddenly frozen, or turning up with a USB but having nowhere to plug it in at the interview!
- 🎨 **Showcase your flair** – while it's good to keep the layout and design simple for clarity, a hardcopy version gives you the opportunity to select tactile materials – such as folder, paper etc. – that illustrate your particular style.

HARDCOPY CONS

- 🎨 **Printing** – If you choose a particularly large print size, you will be tasked with transporting a hefty portfolio to the interview. What happens if it rains and you've parked a distance from the interview? It has happened to many an interviewee.

TIPS:

1. **Stick to standard print size.** A5 to A3 sheets are best.
2. **Ensure your portfolio is adequately protected from unforeseen elements.**

SOFTCOPY PROS

- 🎨 **Adaptability** – easy to chop, change and create bespoke portfolios according to the job.
- 🎨 **Follow up** – send a softcopy of your portfolio as a follow-up email after your interview. It has two advantages: one, the recruiters have more time to peruse your outstanding portfolio in their own time, and two, it will keep you top of mind and shows the interviewer how keen you are about their role. Should you utilise this option, ensure your portfolio file is named correctly (your first and last name), therefore once it gets downloaded, it doesn't get lost in a sea of files.

TIPS:

- 1. Ask ahead.** Ask the interviewers if they will have computer screens available to utilise and if so, what sort? Ensure your file parameters match the screen resolution.
- 2. Take your own.** Better yet, load up your tablet or laptop and take it with you. The screen should be large enough for multiple people to view, plus the file size and screen resolution should be appropriate so it will load quickly and look its best. Time spent waiting for an image to populate causes much frustration!

SOFTCOPY CONS

- 🎨 **File size** – too big is a frustration for potential bosses or team members as they wait for it to load (or download from your email).
- 🎨 **Control** – you have limited control over how your portfolio will be viewed or if it can be in an interview situation (perhaps they aren't interviewing with a computer in the room?).

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WHY YOU SHOULD HAVE MULTIPLE PORTFOLIOS

As you may have noticed, there are a few key situations where having more than one portfolio is beneficial.

The first is when you are applying for a new role. A small version can be used as a teaser to impress recruiters enough that they want to meet you in person. At the interview, you get your chance to shine with both your personality and your 'main stage' portfolio. It expands on the smaller version in more detail, highlighting all your achievements, technical abilities and passion for your craft.

Another situation is when you are applying for distinctly different jobs. You need to be able to showcase the skills each one is after. Two (or more) portfolios will be called for in this scenario.

Finally, as we've shown above, there are merits to both hard and softcopy versions. To cover more bases, consider creating both versions. While they will be different, it's a good way to highlight your skills, on paper *and* digitally.

In an interview situation, it always pays to be prepared so practising your portfolio pitch is paramount.

Some practise tips:

- 1. Memorise** your portfolio page by page.
- 2. Ask someone from within your industry to roleplay** with you if possible. Seek feedback to help you perfect your pitch.
- 3. Practise pitching upside down.** You will likely be talking through your portfolio with it facing the interviewer so it will be upside down. Practise pitching from that view. It may also be the case you can't see your portfolio at all (on a computer screen facing away from you). This is also where it helps to know your portfolio inside-out so you can talk to it without having to view it.
- 4. Remember your portfolio is only **ONE** part of the interview.** The interviewer will primarily focus on whether they feel they can work with you. Your communication skills and showcasing your personality are just as important as presenting your portfolio.

As you can see, having the right portfolio is a brilliant way to get your foot in the door of that great design or architecture firm you've always had your eye on. If you can make your personality shine from within it – and back that up face-to-face – the odds of success are firmly stacked in your favour.

Should need any further assistance in curating your design portfolio, please [connect](#) with us as we'd love to help.

ABOUT KAPPA EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Kappa Executive Search helps connect Architecture and Interior Design professionals with great career opportunities.

We always place candidates into roles with their best interests at heart and we make it our business to be your partner in growing your career over the long term. Kappa Executive Search are dedicated to the design industry with over 10 years of specialised Interior Design and Architecture experience. We have access to some of the best jobs on the market and would love the opportunity to meet with you to discuss your career goals.

Get in touch:

Kappa Executive Search

T: (02) 9402 0735

E: info@kappaexecutive.com