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DEVELOPING ENTRY-LEVEL DESIGN PORTFOLIOS

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# PRACTICE

## DEVELOPING ENTRY-LEVEL DESIGN PORTFOLIOS

Strategies for graduating students.

By Janet Lee Coleman

**N**EXT SPRING, more than a thousand landscape architecture graduates will begin looking for work. I know because I will be one of them. So I am interested in what employers are looking for in entry-level portfolios. What turns them on—or off?

To get some answers, I asked recent graduates how they assembled their portfolios and how prospective employers had responded; I interviewed employers; and I informally surveyed departments of landscape architecture to find out how they help students prepare their portfolios.

How important is the portfolio in getting you that job? In some cases, very important. "The portfolio is 75 percent of

what we judge an applicant on," says Sue Overleeson, recruiter for Design Workshop. Not all firms place such a heavy emphasis on the portfolio, however. Many rank it between 25 to 50 percent of what they look for in an applicant. "The portfolio usually is not going to win or lose the job for you," advises Mark Epstein, ASLA, a senior landscape architect at Adolfson Associates in Seattle. "Interviewers...may place more emphasis on confidence (not arrogance) and positive attitude."

Nevertheless, a portfolio is usually the first impression that an employer will have

of an applicant. Monte Wilson, group vice president, planning, of HOK in Atlanta, says, "A portfolio tells us something about the candidate," and he stresses the importance of making this first impression a good one.

Here, then, is the advice I gleaned from professionals, professors, students, and recent graduates. Their insights should help you develop a portfolio that will effectively showcase you, your abilities, and your approach to design.

### Take a Portfolio Design Course

Both recent graduates and current students who had taken a course in developing a professional portfolio said that it gave them an edge. Thomas Rainer, a 2002 University of Georgia graduate, reported that he received very positive feedback about his portfolio. "It was received very enthusiastically at firms," he says. "You could tell that they did not receive too many products like that. It got me in the



JOY DENNINGER LONG



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door." Rainer is now an employee at Oehme, van Sweden & Associates in Washington, D.C., partly as a result of his portfolio.

Unfortunately, guidance in creating a portfolio is not available to every landscape architecture student. Of 43 schools surveyed for this article, only 25 offer any kind of classroom instruction, and only 7 programs dedicate an entire semester to the subject. Most programs teach portfolio design as part of a larger class such as professional practice, graphics, or one of the studio courses. Others have one- or two-day workshops—or nothing at all.

If your school doesn't offer a course, approach your department and ask for an advanced graphics or portfolio class to be added as an elective. If this fails, ask a faculty member or an advanced student who is knowledgeable about page-layout software to hold a workshop. (Your student ASLA chapter may be willing to facilitate it.) If these efforts fail, do what Lin Goepfert, a graduate student at Ohio State University, and her classmates did: They took graphic and computer classes outside of their program, both at Ohio State and at a local community college.

What should a portfolio design class include? It should teach basic graphic design principles, layout, and image manipulation. Eleonora Machado, graphic specialist for the Center for Community Design and Preservation at the University of Georgia, has taught the semester-long course that the landscape architecture school offers. Software that Machado recommends for portfolio design includes Adobe Photoshop for image manipulation; InDesign, Quark Xpress, and Adobe PageMaker for graphics and text layout; and Adobe Acrobat for producing PDF documents.

The course should also provide a setting for critical peer review, which is key to developing a good product. "It's really hard

JANET LEE COLEMAN

to learn the programs on your own," says Jessica Buesching, a recent graduate of the University of Georgia. "A class setting allows you to learn from the instructor and from other students," says Buesching, who is currently employed at Dix, Lathrop and Associates in Longwood, Florida.

Learning how to design a portfolio, Machado points out, "gives you another expertise—graphic formatting." This is a good skill to have: More and more landscape architecture firms are using layout graphics to put together presentations.

Machado recommends first sketching your ideas on paper. "It's too difficult to design the layout while learning a new computer program," she says. "If you start the design on the computer, you are limited by what you know or don't know about the computer program."

It's also a good idea to look at sample portfolios to see what works. If your program teaches portfolio design, there should be an archive of student portfolios. Ask to see it or suggest that your professors mount a portfolio exhibition. And look at well-designed journals and magazines for inspiration. "Pay attention to the way they position the text and images on the pages," advises Machado.

### Plan Ahead

Keep digital copies of your work. My professors at the University of Arkansas advised students in first-semester, undergraduate design classes to scan and save their projects for their portfolios. And because school projects often get damaged or lost, be sure to scan each project as you finish it.

In addition to teaching you about portfolio design, a class will



force you to assemble your portfolio far enough in advance of interviewing. If you don't have a class to motivate you, give yourself deadlines. Human nature being what it is, you might otherwise leave your portfolio until the last minute, resulting in a less-polished product.

It can take 40 to 80 hours to "tweak and assemble" a portfolio, according to Rainer. Students often underestimate how much time it takes to decide what to put in their portfolios, to design the layouts, and to physically assemble them.

### Develop an Organizational System

A logo, a graphic image, an invisible grid, or a color scheme: Something has to tie your portfolio together. "A good portfolio has a consistently pleasant look and feel—the way a gallery supports different pieces hanging on its walls—and effectively describes the skills of the interviewee," says Epstein. Without an organizational system, a portfolio will be disorganized and difficult to read and can turn an employer off, says landscape architect Paul Lindell of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Think of your portfolio as a compositional work—a musical arrangement or a book. It should have an introduction, a body that contains the bulk of your projects, and an end. Establish a rhythm that keeps the reader moving though it.

Examples of organizational systems include the question-and-answer approach that Rainer used in his portfolio: On the left page of a spread, he posed a question, and on the other side, he proposed an answer. Another approach is a thematic one. Joy Long, a recent University of Georgia graduate, explored the concept of light. She divided her portfolio into three main sections: reflection, absorption, and refraction. The reflection section showcased her fine art; the absorption section contained her computer work (she called it "absorption" because it involved the most learning); and the refraction section was reserved for her larger, more comprehensive projects. "I found that having a unified theme helped me tremendously with layout ideas and bringing together my graphic identity," says Long, who is currently employed at Bellinger Foster Steinmetz in Monterey, California.

### Make It Personal

Most employers want to get a glimpse of the person behind the portfolio, so it's important to in-

## TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PORTFOLIO

1. Take a portfolio class.
2. Don't wait until the last minute.
3. Develop an organizational system.
4. Use the same designs for your résumé, letterhead, CD label, and business cards.
5. Make it personal.
6. Show only your best work.
7. Include brief written descriptions of projects and solutions.
8. Limit the portfolio to a dozen pages.
9. Leave enough white space.
10. Know your audience.
11. Use high-quality paper.
12. Avoid handcrafted portfolios.
13. Send both a CD and paper portfolio.
14. Have it edited.
15. Back up your computer files.

clude something about yourself: artistic pursuits, volunteer work, travel experiences, languages spoken, or interesting hobbies. If you had a previous career, mention that. Wilson advises applicants to include a variety of work such as photos, paintings, and early projects. "Show a range of capabilities," he says.

"Show plenty of individual work," suggests Claudia Dinep, ASLA, a partner at Rolf Sauer & Partners in Philadelphia. Display a variety of skills and projects, and most important, show only your best work. "A portfolio," says Epstein, "is only as good as its weakest piece." It is acceptable to include group projects in your portfolio as long as you explain your role as part of a team. This is a matter of professional ethics. Never take credit for something you have not done.

Wilson looks for applicants whose portfolios demonstrate "sophisticated and interactive graphic abilities," but he says that a portfolio should also be substantive. Demonstrate an



JENNIFER OVERTON





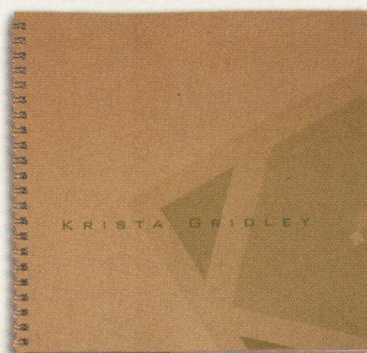
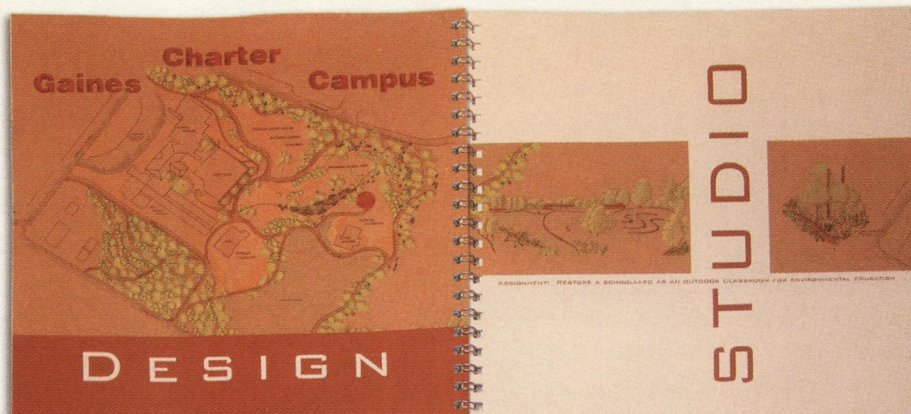
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understanding of the problem and how you approached it. Overleeson stresses that she is interested in seeing the designer's thoughts and ideas behind the work. "We want to see analytical skills. A well-designed portfolio alone will not cut it," she says.

### Be Brief and Clear

A portfolio should show off a designer's "process and and critical thinking skills," says Overleeson. This translates to inserting a concise, informative narrative about the project, including project challenges and how you arrived at a solution. This communicates to a prospective employer that some thought was put into the project. However, keep the text to a minimum. "Lengthy explanations in a portfolio will most likely not be read: Keep descriptions short and to the point," advises Marsha Lea, ASLA, a principal at EDAW in Alexandria, Virginia.

Again, include only your best work from among



KRISTA GRIDLEY

school projects, charrettes, volunteer projects, and private work. If you have a lot of work, edit it. Bigger is not better. "Don't make the portfolio any longer than a dozen printed pages," suggests Machado. If it's too long, you'll lose your audience's interest. If that happens, your portfolio will end up at the bottom of the pile instead of at the top.

"I told my students when I taught the portfolio class that they should only feature their best work. If they only have two

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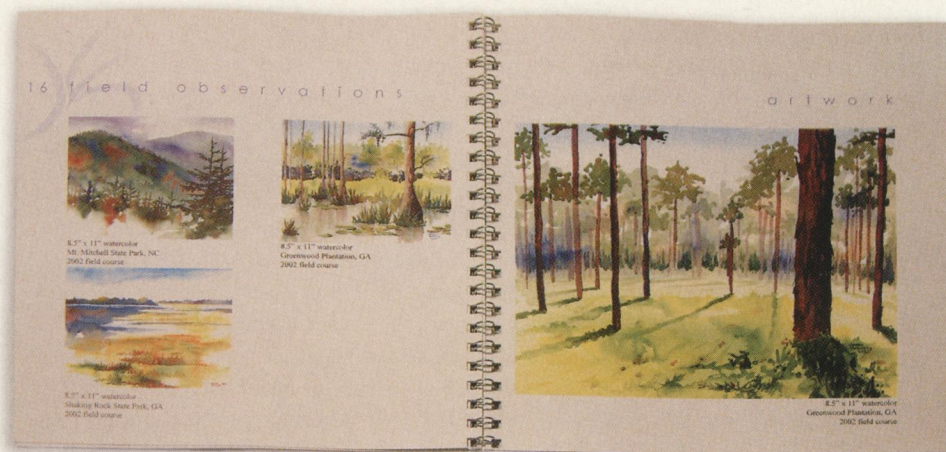
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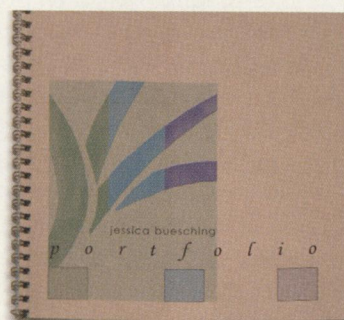
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great projects, then the portfolio should only feature those,” says Rainer, who taught a portfolio class while attending the University of Georgia. New graduates often worry that they are not including enough work in their portfolios, but it’s better to include fewer, high-quality projects than to fill a portfolio up with mediocre work. Employers will not take time to look through a long portfolio. “One or two examples of work is all I need to get an idea about a designer,” says Dinep.



JESSICA BUESCHING

Clarity also applies to portfolio layout. The last thing you want to do is detract attention from the projects themselves. A clean, clear format is best. One way of achieving this is to include white space. Machado advises, “Look at nicely laid-out journal and magazine pages. There is always plenty of well-planned white space.” She also recommends limiting your fonts to three and establishing a hierarchy of font sizes for main titles, secondary titles, main text, and image citations. “Too many fonts makes the text confusing,” she says.

#### Do Your Homework

Customize your portfolio to suit the styles of the firms you really want to work for. In other words, don’t settle for a standardized, one-size-fits-all portfolio. Print each copy of your portfolio only as you need it, and insert appropriate drawings and projects to fit the firm you are sending it to. “Think of your portfolio as a framework and insert and remove items as needed,” advises William



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Shealy, a 2005 University of Georgia MLA candidate.

Failure to do this can cause your portfolio to miss the mark. "We do a lot of conceptual hand drawings," Dinep says about her firm. "A turn-off for me is someone who sends us a portfolio full of heavy computer graphics and zero hand drawings. It shows that they don't know the type of work we do."

So research firms first, and only apply to the ones for whom you are willing tailor your portfolio. How do you find out what kind of work they want to see? Start by asking your professors if they know about the firms you are interested in. Then, since landscape architecture programs often keep tabs on their alumni, you can check if any of your school's alumni are working at those firms. Doing internet research can be very informative, too, because many firms have detailed web sites. Check ASLA's web site for firm information and look for the firm's

work in *Landscape Architecture's* online index. And don't be afraid to ask the firms themselves for information: Most firms are more than happy to talk about their projects.

### Make Reproduction Easy

No matter which format you choose for your portfolio, make it easy to reproduce. Most new graduates will apply for many jobs, and reproduction can be expensive and time-consuming. For example, I recently went to a local print shop and had one copy of my portfolio cropped and bound (I had already printed it). It cost almost \$10. Most employers interviewed still want to see paper portfolios, although CDs are also welcome. Send both formats if you can afford to do so. A potential problem associated with sending only a digital portfolio (via e-mail or CD) is that the employer must print it out, and there's a risk that something may get lost in translation. It is important, however, to have digital copies of your portfolio because some employers require applicants to prepare PowerPoint presentations for their interviews.

A word of warning: Most employers advise against "handcrafted" portfolios. Overleeson says she is not interested in seeing craft projects; she is more interested in seeing content.

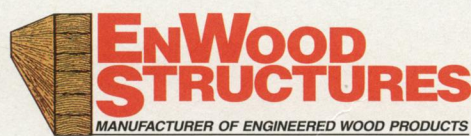
Also be aware that employers don't usually return portfolios. "The applicant should send them knowing that they will not be returned," says Overleeson. This is another good reason to engineer your portfolio in such a way that it is easy and relatively inexpensive to reproduce, and send it only to firms you are seriously interested in working for.

### Edit and Save

Always have someone edit your work before sending it out. We all can become blind to our own work, and a second pair of eyes is invaluable. Simple mistakes such as misspelled words can cost you an interview. Lisa Farina, a registered landscape architect and recruiter for the Brickman Group, says that a portfolio with misspellings might end up in the trash. Be sure to use a spell checker, but keep in



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mind that they are not foolproof. They only catch misspelled words—not improperly used words such as “there” instead of “their,” “then” for “than,” or “principle” for “principal.”

Save your work in two different places. This may sound paranoid, but one computer crash or disc failure and you can lose days, weeks, or months of work. One horror story (which happened at the University of Georgia) involved a student who accidentally turned off the electricity to an electric strip in a university computer lab, resulting in the loss of her own and several other students’ work. Another involved a professor who accidentally dropped her external hard drive; retrieving the lost data cost her \$1,200.

**N**EVER EXPECT an employer to settle for letter-size copies of projects in clear cover sheets in a three-ringer binder. Employers are looking for savvy layouts and sophisticated presentation techniques—the same skills they use to sell projects to clients.

Remember, the purpose behind producing a well-designed portfolio is to communicate to others your abilities and your approach to design and to offer a glimpse of you, the person behind the portfolio. *LAW*

*Janet Lee Coleman is a graduate student in landscape architecture at the University of Georgia and a former registered nurse.*

## Resources

### BOOKS

- *Basics of Design*, by Lisa Graham; Delmar Learning, 2001.
- *Digital Portfolio*, by Anne T. McKenna; Rockport Publishers, 2000.
- *Digital Professional Portfolios for Change*, by Elizabeth Hartnell-Young and Maureen Morriss; Skylight Publications, 1999.
- *The Elements of Graphic Design*, by Alexander White, Watson-Guptill Publications, 2002.
- *The Graphic Designer's Guide to Portfolio Design*, by Debbie Rose Myers; Wiley, 2005.
- *The Portfolio: An Architectural Student's*

*Handbook*, by Igor Marjanovic et al.; Architectural Press, 2003.

■ *Portfolio Design*, 3rd edition, by Harold Linton and Steven Rost; W. W. Norton & Company, 2004.


■ *Résumés for Architecture and Related Careers*, by Editors of VGM Career Books; McGraw-Hill, 2004.

■ *Writing for Design Professionals*, by Stephen Klimont; W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.

### WEB SITES

- General information about graphic design companies, schools, and software: [www.allgraphicdesign.com](http://www.allgraphicdesign.com).
- *Graphic Design USA* magazine: [www.gdusa.com](http://www.gdusa.com).
- *How Design* magazine: [www.howdesign.com](http://www.howdesign.com).
- Qfolio: [qfolio.com/index\\_g.shtml](http://qfolio.com/index_g.shtml).
- Tips on creating a winning portfolio from The Creative Group: [www.creativegroup.com/TCG/WinningPortfolio](http://www.creativegroup.com/TCG/WinningPortfolio).
- UGA's 2004 portfolio exhibit: [www.sed.uga.edu/courses/portfolio](http://www.sed.uga.edu/courses/portfolio).

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