

COOPER HEWITT

**DESIGN
CAREER
TOOLKIT
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Smithsonian Design Museum

WELCOME!

WHAT IS THIS TOOLKIT?

This is your one-stop shop for advice on mentorship, portfolios, and what working in the design world is really like. The designers interviewed for this volume are all winners and jurors of Cooper Hewitt's 2021 [National Design Awards](#), honoring innovation and impact and recognizing the power of design to change the world.

Take the advice that works for you, and share with friends or the adults in your life. Along the way, check out the prompts on each page! Be sure to check back for updates as we build this toolkit, adding information on everything from salaries to colleges.

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THE (WINDING) PATH



CONSIDER THIS:

Identifying what you excel at and enjoy doing in your free time can help you determine what your strengths are as a designer. You can resonate with both:

When working I like to:

- Work independently
- Collaborate with others

My favorite classes are:

- Ones where I can share ideas and learn new information
- Work hands on and learn technical skills

I am a:

- Brainstormer – I like to daydream and have a million ideas
- Doer – I like to try things out and see what sticks

I like to think about:

- The big picture
- The details

Your journey to a design career doesn't need to be linear. Check out what these designers have to say about their paths towards success:

WHAT WERE ACTIVITIES OR INTERESTS YOU HAD AS A STUDENT THAT INDICATED A POSSIBILITY OF A CAREER IN DESIGN?

"My interests were in art and drawing in particular. I was an artist from a young age. My earliest references to architecture came when I was around 8 years old. I found a lot of expression through drawing characters in certain places. Eventually, the spaces and worlds that they lived in became more real. I also had a hard time drawing hands at a certain time, struggling with the details of limbs and such, so I started drawing buildings more. From there, it was kind of a done deal. I also had an interest in deconstructing and putting things back together."

[Karim Hassanein, Storytelling + Communications Designer, Colloqate Design](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Emerging Designer

"I loved drawing. Since preschool, I remember drawing zoo animals on the wall outside for my class or scribbling all over my mother's accounting books. I had a terrible urge to express myself through art and slowly I was able to channel that energy into my unique practice and vision. I knew from an early age I could make design a career because I had encouragement from friends and family. I became comfortable with feeling uncomfortable and it led me to my first job at Samsung Electronics, where I combined my studies in graphic design with mobile technologies."

[Grace Jun, CEO, Open Style Lab](#)
2021 National Design Awards Juror

WHAT DID YOU STUDY IN SCHOOL, AND WHAT DO YOU DO NOW?

"I studied Graphic Communications with an emphasis in Packaging Science. My program was more focused on the science of printing so I learned a lot about the variety of print processes and how to design effectively for each. Now, my team works on both printed materials like packaging as well as digital mediums like our website, emails and our companion bluetooth app. My formal education was an excellent foundation for some of the work I do, but I also supplemented by being a bit scrappier - watching tutorials, trying to recreate websites that I liked and reaching out to designers whose work I admired and asking them for feedback on my own projects."

[Seth Chinnis, Director of Visual Design, BioLite](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Product Design

"I studied Architecture at UIUC (University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign) and attended the Junior Year study abroad program in Versailles, France. Studying in another country was transformative for me. It gave me the opportunity to be immersed in the buildings, history, and culture of France. As a first-generation college student from a Mexican immigrant family, traveling to countries across the globe enriched my understanding of the power of design. I now own my own architecture firm, UrbanWorks Ltd. in Chicago. We have 18 architects and planners on staff. We focus on positive social impact through design, with an emphasis on schools, libraries, affordable housing and public spaces in the underserved neighborhoods of Chicago."

[Patricia Saldaña Natke, FAIA, Founding Partner & Principal, UrbanWorks Ltd.](#)
2021 National Design Award Juror

NETWORKING 101



SAY HELLO!

Make a list of people whose career you admire. If possible, reach out and ask them to chat informally! Inviting someone for a coffee or tea (even virtual!) goes a long way.

Dear _____,

My name is _____ and I am interested in what you do! Here's a bit about me:

Would it be possible to (meet for coffee / schedule a virtual meeting) and talk about your career path?

Sincerely,

...AND THEN SAY THANKS!

When someone takes the time to speak with you, make sure you show your gratitude! Sending a thank you note is an easy way to strengthen your network and stay in touch with people you admire.

Looking to meet other designers? Check out these tips:

OTHER THAN SOCIAL MEDIA, WHAT ARE WAYS TO GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT YOUR WORK?

“Coming from a bit of an introvert, I’ve always had trouble promoting my ‘brand’ and talking myself up. I’ve had better success in making connections by just being kind. Be diligent about your communication, consideration of people’s time, and forthcoming about your intentions. Interview for a job? Follow up with a sincere and customized thank you message. Inspired by someone’s work? Send them a note and tell them. Have a great experience with a photographer you worked with? Send them a link to the final product and let them know how much their contribution helped the final product. This is more of a slow burn approach but you’d be surprised how much these interactions stick with people and surface again when they are thinking about their next project.”

[Seth Chinnis, Director of Visual Design, BioLite](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Product Design

“A good old fashioned handshake (or face to face meeting) will always win out over a DM. Another thing that helps is if you enjoy what you do every day! Conversations are much more entertaining and engaging if there is some enthusiasm and conviction sprinkled in there.”

[Nick Reynolds, Senior Mechanical Engineer, BioLite](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Product Design

“Make yourself known. Be proactive. Get involved in local industry groups or events. Say hi or ask even just one question. Send your portfolio out there to different companies. Bonus points if you send it to the resource manager directly instead of a generic hello@company.”

[Kathy Liang, Art Director, Imaginary Forces](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Communication Design

HOW DID YOU MEET YOUR MENTOR? WHAT ROLE HAS MENTORSHIP PLAYED IN YOUR CAREER?

“I didn’t have a design mentor, I had to do it all by myself. I’ve decided to dedicate myself to mentoring others. It was challenging by myself. I’ve dedicated my life’s work to helping and supporting other designers.”

[Dr. Cheryl D. Miller, Graphic Designer, Professor, Historian, and Theologian](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Design Visionary

“I was lucky enough in undergrad to join NOMA (National Organization of Minority Architects). The first night I attended a NOMA conference, 3 individuals who recognized I didn’t have a bed to sleep in and didn’t know what I was doing offered me a place to sleep, and have been mentors for me to this day. NOMA has enabled me to see my peers and elders within the organization as mentors. Even if they weren’t there every day, they continued to be the people I went to for advice and comfort in a difficult profession.”

[Karim Hassanein, Storytelling + Communications Designer, Colloqate Design](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Emerging Designer

“My most influential mentor is my mother, whom I learned about business and how to expand my ideas into society. Her energy, hope, and endless supply of encouragement have helped me dream of the impossible and influenced how I view leadership at Open Style Lab.”

[Grace Jun, CEO, Open Style Lab](#)
2021 National Design Award Juror

SHARING YOUR WORK

Getting ready to get your work out there? See what these designers have to say:

WHAT SHOULD A DESIGN PORTFOLIO SHOWCASE?

“Focus on quality over quantity. I’d rather see 3-6 stellar projects than a few really compelling pieces with more mediocre work sprinkled in. This ensures that whoever is looking at your portfolio sees your best work as their last impression.”

[Seth Chinnis, Director of Visual Design, BioLite](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Product Design

“Process, process, process! Communicate how you uncovered the needs and values of your users and draw direct connections from those to the solutions you designed. Don’t forget to highlight the contributions of teammates and co-designers as you describe how collaborating helped lead you to key insights and understanding.”

[Melisa Lopardo, Test Engineer, BioLite](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Product Design

“Make sure your portfolio shows your creativity in work that you show, as well as how you present it (think layout, lighting, graphics). It should also show an attention to detail. Make sure the portfolio is precise and clean. Any attention paid to small things has big rewards!”

[Doris Sung, Principal, DOSU Studio Architecture](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Climate Action

“Communicating the user’s needs and the processes used to arrive at those needs. Then a clear roadmap of the design process by whatever means were needed - sketching, prototyping, 3D modeling.”

[Tim Connelly, Senior Product Engineer, BioLite](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Product Design

WHEN SHARING YOUR WORK, IS IT BETTER TO SHOW A WIDE BREADTH OF KNOWLEDGE OR SHOW YOUR EXPERTISE IN A PARTICULAR SKILL?

“I think in general in life, it is much better to do ONE thing WELL, rather than doing multiple things at a lower level. In other words, it is much better if your portfolio demonstrates expertise in one area. Having said that, it is also good to show glimpses of other things in which you are interested.”

[Behnaz Farahi, Designer and Assistant Professor at the Department of Design, CSULB](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Digital Design

“Up to you! It’s not a one-time decision. Your personal brand, portfolio, website, and resume is a fluid, living expression of you as a designer and it can always be updated to emphasize your professional aspirations as they are today. We’re constantly growing and changing and your expertise should as well.”

[Amy Shouder, AIA, LEED® GA, Ross Barney Architects](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Architecture and Interior Design

“If you are going in for a job interview and want the job to be a good fit, don’t show something you aren’t passionate about!”

[Sarah Bruketta, Associate AIA, LEED GA, Ross Barney Architects](#)
2021 National Design Award Winner, Architecture and Interior Design

SKILL BUILDER

Take a look at the list below, and jot down a time you tried or developed this skill. Circle your favorites + star the ones you want to work on!

- Creativity
- Problem Solving
- Research
- Teamwork
- Technical Skills
- Asking for help
- Pitching your ideas
- Giving/Receiving Feedback

INTO THE FUTURE

The future of design is in your hands. See what experts have to say about what's next:

WHAT SKILLS WILL DESIGNERS OF THE FUTURE NEED?

“Don't lose sight of your curiosity or whatever drove you to pursue design in the first place. If you hold onto that spark, you can keep adapting and growing.”

[Kathy Liang, Art Director, Imaginary Forces](#)

2021 National Design Award Winner, Communication Design

“Design with empathy and creativity. Technical skills can be learned on the job and knowledge is gained with experience but understanding people is key to being a good designer. Learn to listen, understand and respond accordingly. Once you understand who you are as a designer, it will influence how you approach every situation in your career.”

[Sarah Bruketta, Associate AIA, LEED GA, Ross Barney Architects](#)

2021 National Design Award Winner, Architecture and Interior Design

“Don't let anyone convince you that the expectations of fairness, equity, or justice are incompatible with the rigor of the field. They are one and the same, and holding fast to those principles will make you a better designer, architect, planner, or whatever path you choose in this industry.

Lastly, care for yourself! It is a necessary component of your survival and preservation. You have to be able to breathe and take care of yourself to be a more effective and powerful designer, influencing a more equitable and just world through your work. You can and should bring your full self to your career as a designer. Take time to explore and invest your time in other activities and spaces.”

[Karim Hassanein, Storytelling + Communications Designer, Colloqate Design](#)

2021 National Design Award Winner, Emerging Designer

“Adaptive thinking. Having the ability to look quickly at design problems through multiple lenses and see multiple solutions! Design is increasingly intersecting with a broad range of societal issues- equity, diversity, sustainability, and more.”

[Barrett Peterson, AIA, LEED AP BD+C, Ross Barney Architects](#)

2021 National Design Award Winner, Architecture and Interior Design

WHAT ARE YOUR DESIGN VALUES?

Complete the sentence below:

My designs will be _____,

_____ and _____.

I can share my vision by _____.

What else is important to who you are and how you design?