Stop Hiring Portfolio-Polishers — Find the Ones Who Actually Think

In the rapidly evolving world of UX/UI design, the decisions you make in your hiring can actually make or break a product. For many recruiters and design leaders, the reflexive reaction is to treat a designer's portfolio as the absolute indicator of ability. Stunning case studies, pristine mockups, and elegant prototypes — they glow with promise. However, an outstanding portfolio can just as quickly be your downfall. The risk of hiring portfolio-polishers — designers whose skills are in aesthetics but fail in problem-solving and reasoning — is still one of the field's most long-standing blind spots.

Design is not art. Though the ability to make something beautiful is certainly useful to the experience of a user, design, by its very nature, is about function, clarity, and purpose. A user interface can be staggeringly beautiful and still fail to properly guide users towards their objectives. A portfolio full of beautiful renders can demonstrate ability in Figma, Sketch, or Adobe XD; however, it does not necessarily demonstrate one's ability for critical and deep thinking, the capacity to challenge assumptions, or the ability to work seamlessly across disciplines.

This is an open invitation to product leaders, hiring managers, and design teams everywhere: fight the urge to hire designers based on their visually appealing portfolios alone. Instead, seek out groups of designers who have critical thinking abilities, who can ask good questions, and who approach problems with curiosity and humility.

Simon Carson
www.carsonharris.co.uk
07976 302377

The Alluring Appeal of Aesthetics

It is simple to see why it is so tempting to hire someone with a stunning visual sense. Snaps of professional-looking interfaces are an immediate, hands-on guarantee that a designer is capable of delivering something beautiful. For managers burdened by the responsibility of hiring the right person, this seems like a short cut around talent discovery. Design, of course, does not happen in a vacuum. The poorly documented, messy steps in the design process—where actual innovation is happening—involve user research, iterative problem-solving, collaborative ideation, testing, and the learnings derived from failure.

A refined portfolio demonstrates exactly what a designer wants it to demonstrate. It is a carefully told story, often with style taking precedence over substance. Seldom does it contain their failures, the blind alleys they pursued, or the nuanced compromises they were forced to make. It does not convey how they worked with users, negotiated with engineers, reacted to data, or argued—and even changed—their minds when faced with criticism. In reality, it provides little insight into their thinking.

Design, of course, does not happen in a vacuum.

The Genuine Art of UX/UI Design

Great UX/UI professionals are introspective and thoughtful. They start with empathy, examining the root of user pain and its deeper motivations. They analyze business requirements, challenge common assumptions, and probe hypotheses. Achieving a harmonious blend of aesthetics and usability, simplicity and completeness, elegance and accessibility is their strength. They recognize that success is not in the mere aesthetic appeal of a design system, but in its utility and simplicity for users.

Curious designers ask themselves questions like:

- What problem, I ask, are we really solving?
- Whom are we serving, and what could success look like for that person?
- How does this interaction add to the user experience as a whole?
- What are the constraints that face us—technical, business, or time—and how do we shape our design within those?

They are not academic exercises in themselves, but rather the daily reality of product design. They are, nonetheless, too often overlooked in portfolios, in spite of their significant value. They merit a closer look.

The Problem with Portfolio-Polishers

1. Surface-Level Design Without Depth

Many portfolios today are filled with unsolicited redesigns of popular apps—Netflix, Spotify, Airbnb—where the designer changes the UI for the sake of aesthetics but ignores real business and user needs.

These projects often lack:
- Research: No user interviews, no data-backed decisions.
- Constraints: No budget, timeline, or technical limitations considered.
- Impact: No measurable outcomes—just subjective improvements.

Hiring such designers means bringing in people who can make things look good but can't justify their decisions when challenged.

2. Over-Reliance on Trends Over Fundamentals

Dribbble and Behance are full of:
- Excessive animations that look cool but harm usability.
- Unrealistic UIs (e.g., apps with no text, just icons).
- Dark mode everything without considering accessibility.

A designer who blindly follows trends without understanding why they exist will create visually appealing but dysfunctional products.

3. Lack of Problem-Solving Skills

Stop evaluating engineers on trivia. Focus on:
- Problem-solving Many case studies follow a cookie-cutter structure:
    1. We identified a problem (often vague).
    2. We conducted user research (usually superficial).
    3. We designed a solution (without exploring alternatives).
    4. Users loved it! (no real validation).

Real UX/UI work involves:
- Trade-offs: Balancing business goals, user needs, and tech feasibility.
- Iteration: Accepting that the first idea is rarely the best.
- Collaboration: Working with PMs, engineers, and stakeholders—not just working in Figma.

A portfolio-polisher may struggle when asked:
- How would you handle pushback from developers?
- What if the data contradicts your design?
- How do you prioritize features with limited resources?

real-world scenarios (e.g., debugging, system design).
- Collaboration and communication skills.
- Growth potential (can they learn, not just recite algorithms?).

How to Identify Designers Who Actually Think
1. Look for Real-World Problem Solving

Instead of judging portfolios by aesthetics, assess:
- Complexity of problems tackled: Did they work on ambiguous challenges?
- Decision-making process: Can they explain why they chose a solution over alternatives?
- Outcomes: Did their work lead to improved metrics (conversion, retention, usability)?

Ask in interviews:
- Tell me about a time your initial design failed. What did you learn?
- How do you handle conflicting feedback from stakeholders?

2. Prioritize Process Over Polish

A strong designer's portfolio should show:

- Early sketches & wireframes (not just high-fidelity mockups).
- Failed experiments (proof they iterate).
- Collaboration artifacts (user research notes, stakeholder feedback).

Red flag: A portfolio with only shiny final screens and no messy, real-world process.

3. Assess Critical Thinking Through Exercises

Instead of take-home design challenges (which often reward polish over thinking), try:

- Whiteboard sessions: Give them a vague problem and observe how they break it down.
- Design critiques: Have them analyze an existing product's flaws.
- Scenario-based questions: How would you improve onboarding if metrics show high drop-off?

4. Value Communication & Adaptability

A great designer:

- Explains their reasoning clearly (not just it looks better).
- Accepts feedback without defensiveness.

Red flag: A portfolio with only shiny final screens and no messy, real-world process.

- Adapts to constraints (budget, timeline, tech limitations).
- Ask: Tell me about a time you had to compromise on design. How did you handle it?

Shifting Hiring Practices

1. Stop Rewarding Behance Bait

Many portfolios are optimized for likes, not real impact. Instead of:
✕ This redesign looks beautiful!
Ask:
✅ How did this design improve the user experience?

2. Hire for Potential Over Perfection

Junior designers with strong critical thinking skills will outperform seasoned polishers in the long run. Look for:

- Curiosity (asks questions, challenges assumptions).
- Humility (admits mistakes, seeks feedback).
- Resourcefulness (solves problems with limited data).

3. Involve Cross-Functional Teams in Hiring

Instead of just designers reviewing portfolios, include:

- Product Managers (to assess business alignment).
- Engineers (to evaluate feasibility awareness).
- Data Analysts (to check if they use metrics).

Hire Thinkers, Not Just Makers

The best UX/UI designers aren't just pixel-pushers—they're problem-solvers. They don't just make things look good; they make things work for real users in real scenarios.

By shifting hiring focus from polished portfolios to critical thinking, companies can build teams that:

✔ Solve real problems (not just aesthetic ones).
✔ Adapt to challenges (instead of sticking to trends).
✔ Collaborate effectively (instead of working in isolation).

Stop hiring portfolio-polishers. Find the ones who actually think.

Ready to Build a UX/UI Team That Moves the Needle?

At Carson Harris Associates, we connect ambitious companies with UX and UI professionals who don't just make things pretty—they make things work. Whether you need user researchers, product designers, or UI specialists, we help you hire talent that understands design is about solving problems, not just adding polish.

Ready to hire designers who solve problems, not just decorate them? Let's talk. I help teams find UX/UI talent with brains, not just Behance bait.

Don't settle for portfolios that impress but don't convert. Work with a partner who knows the difference.

Simon Carson
Carson Harris Associates Ltd
+44 (0)207 636 3000
sc@carsonharris.co.uk
www.carsonharris.co.uk

About Us

Carson Harris Associates was founded by Simon Carson in 2004 as an executive search firm specialising in UX/UI, software engineering and app development.

Simon has over 30 years of experience in the industry, having served previously as the Sales Director of US based, Management Search International. As Managing Director of Carson Harris, Simon oversees our business development and client relationship management, and is on hand to provide one to one guidance on all aspects of the hiring process.

Our delivery teams are based in London, Dublin, and Nairobi, and our consultants have hands-on experience in their specialist fields.

With collaboration always at the heart of what we do, our partner companies now range from startups to globally recognised brands.

At Carson Harris, we've got a proven track record of consistently securing desired outcomes for the companies we work with.

Generating CVs and portfolios is the easy part of recruitment. Understanding the talent behind them is where Carson Harris excels. We give our partners solutions rather than options.

Carson Harris Associates Ltd,
www.carsonharris.co.uk
+44 (0)207 636 3000

Testimonials

"We've been using Carson Harris for over five years now, since our early startup days, and they've been an integral part of our journey. From the outset, they became our first choice for product and UX roles—two areas that are absolutely crucial to the success of our company. Their deep understanding of our needs and ability to deliver top-tier talent has been key to our team's growth"
Hemal Vaghela

"Carson Harris have been on our PSL for many years and always one of our first go to's for software devs and UX designers. They build proper relationships and the calibre of candidate they provide is always top notch. I've dealt with dozens of agencies over the years and Carson Harris will always be one of my favourites for the professionalism they provide as well as the relationships I've built with them. Could not recommend them more highly!"
Sarah Lamontagne

" I have used Carson Harris for both perm and contract placements and wholeheartedly recommend them. I always feel incredibly well taken care of and like I am their number one priority. The quality and speed of the short-listing is unmatched and the way they understand how to pitch my company and to manage the candidate flow is great. No-nonsense, refreshingly honest recruiters."
Adina Kuse