

Stefan Kovalik

Design Engineer · Creator of Perception-First Design™

I set the standard, engineer the context Claude builds from, and verify what comes back.

San Francisco, CA · (805) 708-9047 · kovalik@gmail.com

aurochs.agency · cognograph.app · github.com/skovalik · linkedin.com/in/kovalik

I'm a self-taught designer with a degree in psychology. Reading people never came automatically to me, so I learned it on purpose, at a nightclub door and then in improv, which filled in the social instinct I lacked. None of it was intuition, which is exactly why I could write it down. Fifteen years went into that, and it worked. A smart-home brand tripled its revenue. A vacuum-sealer company has kept me for a decade. The written version became Perception-First Design, a five-layer framework grounded in cognitive psychology. This past year I made the same move on Claude, which is really all context engineering is: take the judgment, make it explicit, and Claude starts producing expert work. Education Labs is hiring people to do for everyone what I taught myself to do for one, and after a year of doing it alone, I would rather do it next to people who can push me.

FEATURED WORK

The methodology

Perception-First Design™

Open-source design methodology and LLM skill · github.com/skovalik/perception-first-design

A five-layer design methodology grounded in cognitive psychology (built on roughly 100 peer-reviewed sources), plus an LLM-backed skill that applies it: it codifies how a senior designer reasons so the judgment is repeatable, auditable, and runnable by someone who isn't me. Open-source (CC BY-SA 4.0 and MIT), trademark filed. This is my thesis in one artifact: take expert judgment and turn it into a system that makes people more capable.

Tools I direct and ship

Python, MCP servers and CLIs, mostly open-source · github.com/skovalik

Cognograph · cognograph.app · github.com/skovalik/cognograph · spatial AI workflow canvas; graph-based context assembly feeds connected nodes into prompts. Electron, React, Three.js.

conduct · github.com/skovalik/conduct · my operating-rules kit for Claude Code: the version-controlled corrective record described below, shipped as an installable plugin that verifies its own install.

aurochs-recall · github.com/skovalik/aurochs-recall · memory architecture for AI conversations: verbatim drawers, a BM25 index, and a knowledge graph. Local SQLite, no paraphrasing.

aurochs-qa-pipeline · github.com/skovalik/aurochs-qa-pipeline · multi-agent QA review (parallel lens reviewers that adversarially verify each finding).

aurochs-voice · github.com/skovalik/aurochs-voice · voice model for AI-assisted writing: verbatim captures routed by recipient and register, with an audit pipeline that promotes recurring patterns into canon.

aurochs-platform · a multi-tenant platform and static-site generator that builds and hosts the client sites below.

Selected client work

Simply Smart Home · [sshome.aurochs.agency](#) · design rationale · my automation pipeline run on my own prior body of work, built in three days: a concept rebuild and design system for the smart-frame line I led design for, given the original brand and product line as deep context. The discipline: "the site is the matte, the photo is the print." *Pipeline demonstration on my own prior work.*

Mehrwerk GmbH · [mehrwerk.aurochs.agency](#) · design rationale · paid consulting on information and messaging architecture for a non-English B2B domain (PFD applied); I built the working prototype in an afternoon and refined it over two weeks, delivered with a public design-rationale page. *Consulting engagement; implementation by a separate vendor on the architecture I defined.*

Matthew Frederick · [matt.aurochs.agency](#) · design rationale · portfolio rebuild for an oil painter on a color-native system that samples every interface color from his paintings; first build in three hours, refined over a week, with a strong lift on its PFD perception audit. Client dashboard, contract e-signing, and invoicing in place. *In staging.*

Nick Leoni Studios · [nickleoni.com](#) · portfolio for a fine-art portrait photographer, built in six hours on my platform with the client in the room, live on his own domain the same day, then refined. *Live.*

Vacuum Sealers Unlimited · [vacuumsealersunlimited.com](#) · production WooCommerce I designed, built, and operate (decade-long relationship): migrated 2,000-plus products onto the platform, and run it end to end: the live VPS, a Cloudflare edge migration, an auto-renewing Let's Encrypt TLS rebuild proven end to end, uptime monitoring, recurring maintenance, and root-cause incident response. Roughly quadrupled the store, from under \$1M in 2019 to a \$3M-plus annual run rate. *Live.* A proposed front-end redesign is staged at [vsu.aurochs.agency](#) (design rationale).

SELECTED WRITING

Make Me Think: Perception-First Design for the Post-Usability Era. Perception is upstream of cognition. A 12-chapter counterpoint to Krug's *Don't Make Me Think*. Free PDF and EPUB. [aurochs.agency/writing/make-me-think](#)

You Wouldn't Vibe Code a Car. A Perception-First Design analysis of why memes work and video doesn't: a meme costs a second and one cognitive channel, video costs all of them for a payoff you can't skim, and the "pivot to video" was a response to fabricated metrics, not audience behavior. The same lens turned on AI work: rendering was never the hard part, so value moves to specification and verification. [aurochs.agency/writing/notes/you-wouldnt-vibe-code-a-car](#)

The Multiplier. A 108-day audit of my own AI-augmented output, with method, math, and confounders disclosed; the honest read came in under the claim I started with. A case study in measuring a capability honestly instead of flattering it; the number it landed on is in the piece. [aurochs.agency/writing/notes/multiplier](#)

EXPERIENCE

Aurochs

San Francisco · 2025 – Present

Founder and Design Engineer · aurochs.agency

- Founded a solo design-and-build practice: client websites, product design, and creative work shipped end to end, with Perception-First Design as the standard and a Claude pipeline I direct doing the execution.
- Audited 108 days of my AI-augmented pipeline (about 7,000 sessions and 220,000 tool calls): built the measurement itself, disclosed every confounder, and published the honest read, which landed under the multiple I started with.
- Keep a version-controlled record of where the models fail me, fabricated verification, planning drift, instruction regression, with the written rule that catches each next time, and built the tooling that enforces it: a self-installing operating-rules plugin and a multi-agent QA review that adversarially verifies each finding instead of trusting one reviewer.
- Design, build, and operate production client systems hands-on: WordPress and WooCommerce, Cloudflare Pages and Workers, server hardening, TLS and DNS, and incident response for live commerce.

Simply Smart Home

Dublin, CA · Oct 2019 – Mar 2025

Design Director (2022–2025) · Lead Product Designer (2019–2022)

- Led brand identity, digital design, and marketing strategy for a consumer-electronics line, directing a cross-functional team across product, marketing, and UX: drove a 22% increase in e-commerce sales, tripled retail placements, and grew annual revenue 300% in 2023.
- Built a library of high-quality 3D product imagery using virtual photography, replacing physical photo shoots and cutting asset-production cost across marketing, packaging, and retail. Managed end-to-end product design for the ClicSmart and PhotoShare mobile apps.
- Designed and developed the company's e-commerce website and ran a demographic-targeted brand refresh that drove a 233% YoY sales increase in 2021. Product placed at Walmart and Costco.

QTBIPOC Design

Remote · Aug 2020 – Present

Technology Director and Brand Strategist · 501(c)(3) nonprofit · qtbipoc.design

- Founding member: built the organization's first website and trained five junior designers in content management and site administration, lifting its perceived authority in the space. Co-founded the planning committee and helped graduate the first three cohorts to an 80% completion rate.

Kovalik Design

Los Angeles · 2019 – 2021

Founder and Website Contractor

- Rebuilt VacuumSealersUnlimited.com, migrating 2,000-plus products to WooCommerce, a client I still operate today. Built brand and lead-generation sites for a stencil artist and a nonprofit video company, the latter contributing to six-figure contracts and Emmy nominations.

The iO Theater

Chicago · 2016 – 2019

Website Designer, Developer, and Administrator

- Relaunched the venue's site on WordPress with an SEO overhaul (40% organic-traffic lift, top-three Google ranking) and led a TicketFly POS integration that grew online ticket sales from 50% to 75% and cut staff content-entry time in half.

Tantum Technologies

Dublin, CA · 2010 – 2016

Co-Founder and Website Designer

- Co-founded a web and hosting agency at 23; the sole design function for 15-plus startup ventures backed by Shark Tank's Barbara Corcoran, building scalable e-commerce and POS-integrated sites engineered for broadcast-driven traffic (up to 120,000 unique visitors in 10 minutes) on two-week deadlines.

EDUCATION

University of California, Santa Barbara

2011

B.A. Psychology · focus: cognitive psychology, perception, and decision-making. The root of Perception-First Design.

TECHNICAL SKILLS

Design

Brand identity, UI and UX, interaction design, design tokens and component libraries, motion, 3D product visualization. Adobe Creative Suite, Figma.

Methodology

Perception-First Design™ (creator): a five-layer diagnostic framework grounded in cognitive psychology, applied to any surface.

AI and orchestration

Claude Code (daily), the Claude Agent SDK, MCP, plugin and skill authoring, multi-agent orchestration, context engineering. My strongest technical axis.

Web and hands-on engineering

WordPress and WooCommerce (custom plugins and themes), PHP, JavaScript, HTML and CSS (custom properties, container queries, OKLCH), SEO. Managed hosting and devops: Cloudflare (Pages, Workers, R2), server hardening, TLS and DNS, incident response.

Architect, direct, verify

Systems I specify, direct AI to build, and own the QA on, rather than hand-author: Python tooling and retrieval (SQLite and FTS5, knowledge graphs, custom static-site generator), multi-agent QA orchestration, React and TypeScript apps, Three.js and WebGL, Electron. Testing with Playwright; accessibility via axe-core, Lighthouse, and manual ARIA.

Languages

English; Spanish (conversational). United States citizen.