# Information Architecture in *JASIST*: Just Where Did We Come From?

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The emergence of Information Architecture within the information systems world has been simultaneously drawn out yet rapid. Those with an eye on history are quick to point to Wurman's 1976 use of the term "architecture of information," but it has only been in the last 2 years that IA has become the source of sufficient interest for people to label themselves professionally as Information Architects.

The impetus for this recent emergence of IA can be traced to a historical summit, supported by ASIS&T in May 2000 at Boston. It was here that several hundred of us gathered to thrash out the questions of just what IA was and what this new field might become. At the time of the summit, invited to present a short talk on my return journey from the annual ACM SIGCHI conference, I entered the summit expecting little and convinced that IA was nothing new. I left 2 days later refreshed, not just by the enthusiasm of the attendees for this term but by IA's potential to unify the disparate perspectives and orientations of professionals from a range of disciplines.

It was at this summit that the idea for the special issue took root. I proposed the idea to Don Kraft, hoping he would find someone else to run with it. As luck would have it, I ended up taking charge of it myself, with initial support from David Blair. From the suggestion to the finished product has been the best part of 2 years, and in that time more than 50 volunteers reviewed over 20 submissions.

## So Where Are We Now?

If there were doubts about the sustainability of this topic at the original summit, these have been removed with subsequent summits (2001 in San Francisco, and 2002 in Baltimore). Both events have been well-attended, lively meetings with diverse participants who have moved on from an early (and perhaps natural) obsession with defining the field of IA to a concern more recently with refining the craft and

practice of information architecture. The ASIST SIG on IA runs a very lively listserve, open to members and nonmembers alike, and the ASIST Bulletin carries my regular IA column (see www.asis.org for details). The debate continues and some issues seem to never reach resolution. You will see that in some of the articles included here. In this overview I am exercising my prerogative as editor to outline the Big Six issues that have dominated discussions among IA's since that landmark summit in Boston.

## Issue #1: Defining Information Architecture

I adopt a broad definition of IA to avoid the exclusion of people who really could bring important ideas to bear on the problems we tackle. IA is NOT just LIS, nor HCI nor Applied Computer Science nor Graphic Design nor . . . add your favorite here. There are basic themes in the mass of definitions that have been proposed over the last 3 years, and I want them all in the resulting one we eventually agree upon.

In the interests of inclusion, and to explain how the present issue established scope, here is the working definition I used for this issue: "IA is the term used to describe the process of designing, implementing and evaluating information spaces that are humanly and socially acceptable to their intended stakeholders."

I leave it that open so that we cover the organizational, blueprinting, and experience aspects, and allow for IA roles to cover these aspects (see issue #2). Needless to say, I consider business and organizational aspects to be covered under human and social acceptance—to each their own context, and the reference to stakeholders is to broaden design beyond the potentially limiting concerns of direct users. Acceptance is determined by many things, including (but not limited to) money, time, aesthetics, mood, ability, etc. For those who care, there is a smattering of ethics in there too, which I recall from my undergrad days in psychology classes being a defining attribute of any profession.

One aspect of the definition that needs clarification is the craft nature of IA. I consider IA to be a craft because it

manifests the classically defined craft characteristics of producing functional artifacts through a process that does not separate design from manufacture. Furthermore, like many crafts, IA being software-based, may exploit software as both a resource (raw material) and a tool (design aid). This is not to say that IA cannot be a science or is not scientific in approach since both share the essential trial and error approach to problem solving, and the resulting IA is surely an embodiment of theory (see Dillon, 1995). More, it is the case that craft and science are phases on a continuum, with the attainment of scientific design remaining a goal rather than a reality in software development. For now and the foreseeable future, the craft status of IA seems fixed.

## Issue #2: Information Architecture or Architects of Information?

This is really the issue of IA as process or role. Cohill (1991) made the argument that there is a need for a new professional, the information architect, a project manager who combined technical knowledge of computation with knowledge of organizational theory and ergonomics. I have a lot of sympathy with this idea, and I recognize that the use of the term "architect" in this context speaks to many people in a positive manner.

Although I believe it is possible to continue talking about information architects as if they play a distinct, agreed role in today's world, such talk will only get us so far. Beyond the individual job title there needs to be an accepted and recognized process with demonstrable outputs in which such professionals are engaged. If anything, the early stages of the IA debate have been conducted by people more interested in explaining what IA is not, rather than what it is. And although there is a general weariness over the constant search for an agreed definition of IA, it is difficult for a field to gain a foothold if its own practitioners cannot publicly reach agreement.

I do think there is a process of information architecture, and our first efforts at definition should concentrate on that, not on the role of each of us may play as IAs. From my perspective, there is process called science or engineering, but people do not usually call themselves "scientists" or "engineers" without some further qualification or contextualization ("rocket scientist" and "knowledge engineer" being contemporary examples, perhaps even ludicrous ones). Similarly, there is a process of IA, and within it, many of us practice specific roles. We tend not to have the neat labels totally together yet, and maybe that is the major problem for some people. I always tell my students that User-Centered Design is a real activity, with methods and models, but don't expect to land a position with the title "user-centered designer." Looking for a job solely on the basis of a process is not easy . . . seen any vacancies for "scientists" lately?

But conducting user-centered design does require specific skills and does involve methods and practices that shape designs in desirable ways. Information Architecture just happens to be a much better term for user-centered design, and the creation of usable information spaces. It remains a goal, an output, and a process, so little wonder we have yet to tie it a specific role for a professional.

## Issue #3: Big IA- little IA?

Is information architecture really just a term for the definition of metadata fields or controlled vocabularies? The little IAs would have us believe that this is best way of thinking about it. But there is another camp, the big IA folk who see the IA as the vision maker who articulates the overall design plan (http://argusacia.com/strange_connections/strange004.html) . In reviewing submissions and discussing the reviews, I took what may be called the "big IA" view, as articulated under issue #1.

Little IA is much more manageable. It justifies its existence by pointing to the WWW as its raison d'etre, draws parallels with information science concerns such as classification and information retrieval, and generally finds a ready audience with library scientists and those with a strong interest in organization.

Big IA seems to have a much more ambitious agenda. It assumes that information spaces need designing on multiple levels, and that the user experience of life in that space is a direct concern of the information architect.

In my own mind, little IA is interesting but insufficient to warrant the use of the term "architecture." On the other hand, while big IA justifies the use of that term, it again places huge demands on any profession to provide the right answers. But such demands should not be an objection, only a challenge. You can get a sense of the division between big and little IA in the papers included here but I'll let you figure that out for yourself.

## Issue #4: IAs and/or UE?

Related to the big IA–little IA debate is the specific concern of how user experience (UE) should be addressed within the professional concerns of IAs. For many in the community it is impossible to address architectural issues seriously without incorporating the insights and concerns of the usability professionals. Historically, the separation of usability evaluation from the activities of interface design has been a problem for software design processes, and many of us feel that emergence of IA is partly a result of concerns with users and their tasks. There is an uneasy alliance here, however; not least as the usability community has carved out a niche for itself that appears self-sustaining and (after a long campaign) partly understood by the software community. Under such circumstances, why confuse matters with a new term such as IA?

Some in the IA community feel that usability should remain separate. These, largely the little IA folks, recognize the importance of user experience but feel that addressing and evaluating usability extensively is a separate role for a related but distinct profession using different methods to answer different questions.

My interpretation of IA is that any conception of a field with architecture in the title cannot escape the impact of designs and structures on real people. Thus, the division between IA and usability is to me a historical hiccup, a leftover of 20th-century thinking that failed to grasp the fundamental integration of the technologies of information in the lives of 21st-century citizens. I believe that although some will continue to press for the division, such a perspective will prove to be a degenerative paradigm that will be an oddity to scholars and practitioners in 20 years.

### Issue #5 : If It Ain't the Web It Ain't IA?

There are many in the IA community that view the field as dealing only with design of Web sites. Although the recent emergence of IA ties neatly to the Web's own historical evolution, it seems implausible to me that we can make such a neat division of information design issues into those that are Web-based and those that are not. Even if we take a Little IA stance, there seems to be no clear reason to view issues of organization and structure for Web sites as independent of the same issues for stand-alone information spaces accessed, for example, via CD-ROM or a local hard drive.

I suspect that much of the emphasis in this division resides in the need some perceive to give IA a unique identity, but such attempts serve to jettison the knowledge and work of generations of information designers, including current specialists who see no such dividing line (see, e.g., the work of the Society for Technical Communication—http://www.stcsig.org/id/whatis.html). As we move towards weblications and integration of the Web and the local, it seems that such divisions will cease to have even superficial appeal to new IAs.

### Issue #6: Experience or Qualification?

Finally, a big issue among members of the IA community is the issue of qualification. Just how does one become a qualified information architect? With the paucity of current degrees in the subject available to interested people, the tendency has been for professionals emerging from a variety of disciplines, LIS chief among them, to label themselves as IAs on the basis of experience and job title.

Although we are seeing many new classes with IA in the title (not all of which are merely renamed LIS classes), the move towards formal degrees is, perhaps understandably, moving a little slower. Kent State has stepped forward before most in offering its Masters degree in IA and Knowledge Management but Robins (2001) mentions at least two other degree programs (Capitol College and the Illinois Institute of Technology), and states that many LIS programs are recognizing the importance of the field and acting accordingly.

### So Where, in the End, Are We Going?

In the present issue is a collection of articles representing a spectrum of perspectives from academics and practitioners, practical and theoretical, all offering one angle on issues collected under the label information architecture. In it you will find considerations (not definitive statements) of important contemporary issues that are being shaped even as we think, from curricular (Latham) to method (Large et al.); from conception (Haverty) to case (Hauck and Weisband); from theory (Toms) to practice (Burke); with data (Cunliffe) and speculation (Rosenfeld). Even this carving up is partial, because several articles cross several of these divides.

The articles are not the definitive word on IA; it would be impossible to expect any collection to be such given the dynamism of the field. But these articles do offer a valuable snapshot. This is IA as seen by a variety of thinkers in the early 21st century. No doubt all will think again about these issues and evolve a more refined perspective, but these articles do represent, in current parlance, a sense of Big IA and what the field covers. Drawing in people from outside the normal community of ASIST conference or IA summit attendees, I believe these articles represent a landmark effort, and there is no doubt in my mind that IA represents an exciting and important mix of ideas and perspectives that can serve to bridge traditional divisions in the information studies disciplines. Regardless of how the field eventually becomes labeled, the issues IA has brought into relief must be addressed, and in so doing, such addressing will help shape the future of information science. Predicting the future is a thankless task, but the opportunity to stand still and survive as a practitioner or theoretician has passed—the information domain will be as much the province of architecture as the physical world, and those that will shape the new spaces will impact humankind on a level that will prove beyond the reach of physical architecture. This is only the beginning— get involved.

### References

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