

Guarding the Borders or Blocking the Way? IAs to Be Banned!

by Andrew Dillon

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Hot on the heels of the Joint Conference on Digital Libraries in Houston in May – where there was not a mention of information architecture (more on this later) – I return to find an alarming message in one of the IA lists. Apparently the State of Ohio has decided that information architects should be banned, or at least renamed. Seems that the Board of Certification for architectural qualifications has a problem with the use of the term *architecture* in the IT sector since it might cause people to have erroneous expectations of the services IAs offer. I can just hear the jokes now! There is no official word yet on how they view cosmetics manufacturer L’Oreal’s use of the term *lash architect*, but no doubt some crusaders will get around to that eventually; after all, innocent people might get hurt.

Now this really does open up a can of worms. If you look hard enough, the term *architect* is used in some very original ways. There’s *PHP Architect**, a magazine for PHP professionals (there’s a group that needs a name change), interaction architects (splitters!), Spiral Architect (a band whose aim is, apparently, “controlled anarchy”) not to mention the more mundane but real job title couplings of chip architect, community architect, screen architect, digital architect, human resource architect, leadership architect, strategic architect...you get the picture.

I mentioned this tempest in a teapot to the dean of the School of Architecture recently, and he was similarly bemused by the apparent concerns of the certifiers. But this is not new in the emerging professions. Software engineers, for instance, have had trouble for years with people telling them they were not “real” engineers, but it hasn’t lessened the demand or the use of the title. This battle has also raged in the HCI world where objections were raised to the title *usability engineer*, a term one still cannot easily use to describe a profession in Texas. Nothing personal, I always hated that term anyhow, but it strikes me as odd that people get upset by labels such as *engineer* and *architect* but pay little or no attention to the use of *scientist* which gets attached to the most unlikely fields of practice (but let’s not go there). Here’s hoping common sense prevails but what are the odds of that once the lawyers get involved?

Perhaps the Ohio Board of Certifiers had already had a word with the ACM and IEEE

because this year’s Joint Digital Libraries Conference was practically an IA-free zone. The great irony of this, to me at least, is that one goes to a conference where a community discusses digital libraries, organization of collections, user interface design, content management, large scale system creation and implementation, and there is not a single mention of IA in the presentations. That’s all right, you say – they may not use the words, but they are really talking about IA anyway. Well, perhaps so, but who was listening? I did not meet anyone there who had been to the IA summit in Portland. How can this be?

Sadly, despite the belief and insistence that IA is a multidisciplinary field or the claim in the DL community that it takes multiple perspectives to bring such technologies to fruition, there is a form of community rigidity at play that keeps some highly relevant groups apart. I am not sure what the basis is exactly. Partly it may be history and funding (the JCDL series was originally populated largely by NSF grant holders or wanna-bes), partly it may be the old academic versus professional divide (the academic community have never been the largest group within IA, but they dominate DL conferences). It’s not difficult to understand how professional groups are so concerned with establishing their own world view that divisions and lack of communication naturally occur. We have these divisions ourselves in IA, and if we could not call the profession *information architecture* I wonder how long it would be before those divisions dismantled the group?

Breaking out of these boundaries is never easy, but sometimes I wonder if it is even possible once a group has self-identified. Maybe the protection of turf is really a cognitive reaction to the flexibility required to see new perspectives, a natural defense mechanism in the face of ambiguous or challenging stimuli, a normal group response once we have self-selected and determined that we need to be distinct from others, with our own rituals, labels and credentials. Who knows? We would need a psychologist to figure that one out – a licensed one only please.

***Editor’s Note:** For those of you like the Editor who are unacquainted with PHP, it is an html-embedded scripting language and stands for “PHP Hypertext Preprocessor.” It’s *recursive*. Isn’t that clever!