

IA Growing Roots - Concerning the Journal of IA

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Last September a new definition discussion broke out on the Information Architecture Institute (IAI) Members List ([ia-members](#)). It was fueled by an initial mail concerning a supposedly deceitful narrowing down of the IAI's vision, carried out in secret. As with many other similar threads, popular success among list members was huge and led to a number of spin-off threads, calls to arms, calls to reason and a fair share of thought-provoking posts. Then it quietly died down.

The international IA community is now roughly 10 years old, and defining *information architecture* has been an elusive and maddening task since the beginning. And an enormously intriguing one for information architects worldwide as well, it seems, to the extent that the issue has been awarded its own well-known, fairly successful acronym, DTDT (Defining The Damn Thing).

The debate seems unending, and the most differing positions, opinions and views imaginable have been shared through the years, spanning the gamut from blog post to scientific paper, from slide deck to full-blown nothing-spared mailing list confrontation. Since Peter Morville's own seminal *Defining Information Architecture* in 2000, the IA community has never ceased to try and define itself, often with a certain morbid indulgence in self-deprecation. Why is that?

Well, for one thing a definition is inescapable if anything has to be communicated. Words represent our view of the world, but even without taking a full leap into cognitive psychology and linguistics, there are simpler, common sense considerations to be taken into account. First, this "define

craze" that regularly seems to seize IAs is somewhat a sign of the times and actually fairly common, and it's a consequence of two different conditions, one internal and the other external: The community is young and somewhat necessarily shallow, and we live in very fast times.

Being young means that different layers are constantly confused in conversation: the self, the role of information architect, information architecture as a practice, information architecture as a discipline. These layers are not the same, but they end very often being considered as interchangeable. IA acts like the lively teenager who does not like to listen to his grandpa saying that there are so many hues of gray in the world and that not everything is black or white: I am an IA, therefore IA is what I do. Or vice-versa. Being shallow translates to a certain uneasiness, self-consciousness and scarce hindsight. Everything is new, but boredom is just around the corner.

In similar fashion, but along another development friction line, it is also common experience that those regarded (or who regard themselves) as founders often relate ambiguously to the growth and change that naturally transforms their initial intuition into a mainstream practice or discipline. Individuals grow out of old clothes, the field changes under the new drive of a thousand other sometimes-colliding views. Indeed, anyone even remotely aware of how free and open source software projects grow knows this transformation is almost always the case once an enterprise – or an idea – matures. But that does not mean the field is dying – quite the contrary. It usually

means new punks are coming along, and they are making all current *maître a penser* old school. And they redefine. Think of architecture – arts and crafts, modern style, post-modernism. This is the way it works. And in a way it's also true that every single information architect is entitled to her own personal definition or redefinition. But to have IA change in response to her vision, she has to be influential now and in years to come. Le Corbusier set out to change architecture. Did he manage to do that? Of course, but he himself was first misunderstood, then congratulated, then criticized and then considered largely passé. The discipline of architecture, though, is still there, even if Gehry and Phidia share as little resemblance as their buildings.

Then we live in fast times. For the first time in human history, everyone's definition of a discipline, field or possible venture gets confronted with a thousand other views before it gets through the screening of professional filtering institutions (guilds, unions, committees, scientific peers, publishing houses). Clay Shirky's *publish first, filter second* definitely holds true. Following this advice, we find that what is obviously political, the definition of a *discipline*, is done in public and in front of a potentially enormous audience. That it gets debated from the very start does not surprise anyone, but neither should it surprise anyone that a comfortable settlement is hard to reach. Opinions once heard only verbally move to tweets, posts and comments easily and quickly. IAs should be the least surprised of all.

Think for a while of the controversy still engulfing psychoanalysis, under whose umbrella Wikipedia informs us, lie "at least 22 different theoretical orientations regarding the underlying theory of understanding of human mentation and human development," and imagine a 21st century Freud blogging about his newly conceived ideas on hysteria, neurosis and the subconscious. Then think of the riot that

would stir up if Dr. Freud were to be half as successful as he was back in his day: Psychoanalysis 2.0 would make Web 2.0 look like nothing.

On the other hand, though, we definitely do have a phenomenological definition of IA: IA is what has been going on in the self-identified IA community of practice (and related academic oases) in the last 10 years or more. As simplistic as it might sound, this type of definition holds true for most of what we consider settled, often as non-specialists in the field: Someone looked back and drew lines.

In that September discussion, at a certain point the *everything is a nail if you have a hammer* mantra popped up and an accusation of hubris was spoken out loud: IAs see the world as "everything is IA or concerns IA." Marking the boundaries, expanding them, borrowing from others – that sounds precisely like what any growing field of expertise does all of the time. The point is, the accusation might or might not stand, but the *everything is a nail* meme is largely the way we codify ideas and make sense of progress.

German architect Peter Behrens was hired by AEG in 1907. He designed their entire corporate identity, from logo to product. Fetch a book on the history of design and you will see he is mentioned as the first-ever industrial designer, which he surely was, though the term itself was coined years later, and applied to Behrens *post facto*.

We still call Abbot Suger of 11th-12th century Saint-Denis fame, an "architect." We call Herodotus and Rabanus "historians." These labels are ones they didn't choose for themselves, and we mean totally different things by them today than we did when someone first used them. In particular, Herodotus would have had a hard time fitting into the current definition, but we use these labels nonetheless because they allow us to compare, understand and move forward. Our brain is not a computer. People living in the 12th

century didn't think of themselves as living in the Middle Ages, and Facebook is not really the new AOL.

Is it all that there is? Of course not. But again facts have a certain relevance. Even if someone's ideas about information architecture are mind-boggling, if they do not discuss them in public, embody them in some communicable artifact and get them to be influential, they are moot. This reality is the main reason behind the upcoming peer-reviewed scientific *Journal of Information Architecture*, due in Spring 2009. For the discipline to mature, the community needs a *corpus*, a defining body of knowledge, not a definition.

No doubt this approach may be seen as fuzzy, uncertain and highly controversial in places. Political, even biased.

About REG-IA

The REG-IA (Research and Education Group in Information Architecture) is an international volunteer initiative of the Information Architecture Institute (www.iainstitute.org). Started in January 2008, it currently comprises academics from Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Poland and Norway.

The basic premise behind the group is that although IA is a well-established profession and a thriving community of practice, it is not yet a fully recognized academic discipline and it is not, with a few notable exceptions, an acknowledged course of study in most of the EU. That situation means very little communication among institutions, no common perspective(s), no shared understanding(s) and a constant need to reinvent the wheel.

Even though this scenario seems to be slowly changing, we think a little help and perspective is needed to avoid loss of momentum and fragmentation, and the group believes this help and perspective are the responsibility of the people currently researching, teaching and practicing IA. As such, the group's main purpose is to provide the basis to establish IA as a full-fledged academic discipline and bridge the two camps of professional practice and academia for the common good, as we believe they are both equally needed for the field to grow and mature.

But again, some overlapping and uncertainty and controversy will always be there: Is the Eiffel Tower architecture or engineering? The answer is that it depends on whom you ask, and why you ask. And did the people who built it consider themselves doing architecture, engineering or what? The elephant is a mighty complex animal, as the blind men in the old Indian story can tell you, and when we look closer, things usually get complex.

The IA community does not need to agree on a "definition" because there is more to do. An analytical approach must be taken on the way the community sees itself, with some critical thinking and some historical perspective. The community needs to grow roots. We hope the *Journal* will help along the way. ■

Resources

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