

# Pace-layering Meaning and Whatever Comes First: The IAs Are Back in Town

by Andrew Dillon

Portland in March was the venue for the fourth IA Summit, and it proved to be a lively and positive event. Attendance was up (287 in total), enthusiasm was high and audience engagement with the presenters was ongoing. The keynote speaker was Stewart Brand ([www.well.com/user/sbb/](http://www.well.com/user/sbb/)), who gave a wide-ranging talk on the similarities between building physical and information spaces. His exploration of pace layering intrigued many and was a source of conversation the entire weekend. Since I haven't enough time to describe it succinctly, let me just say that pace layering refers to the rates of change found in the world and in systems within the world, from the extremely slow pace of nature to the highly volatile pace of fashion. Among many bull's-eyes he hit within his keynote, his point that information architecture needs to understand and accommodate such concepts in its designs gave me one of the most memorable points of the summit. You can find an admirable summary of the issue by Tanya Rouborn (and lots of other relevant Summit links) at <http://iaslash.org/node.php?id=7313>.

Picking out highlights of the Summit is a thankless task. I am destined to upset some and insult others, so to play safe, let me say that I really enjoyed the panel on Wayfinding – and not only because I was on it! Organized by Rashmi Sinha, who asked Marc Bernstein, Susan Campbell and myself to be provocative,

we got the formal presentations out of the way in less than 30 minutes and opened the floor to discussion for the remaining hour. Some folks stood in line for most of that hour just to get their turn at the microphone and I had the sense that we could have stayed there for another hour, so willing were people to get involved. Why this topic stirs so much emotion remains something of a mystery, but I suppose having told people that I thought navigation is not the issue, it is meaning that matters, there was bound to be a reaction. The discussion extended for over two weeks on SIGIA-L, and you can find a good set of audience notes from the panel at [www.visuallee.com/weblog/amys\\_IASummit2003\\_notes.html#wayfinding](http://www.visuallee.com/weblog/amys_IASummit2003_notes.html#wayfinding)

Three parallel sessions for most of Saturday and Sunday made coverage impossible but I tried to get a flavor of many of the sessions at the cost of moving in and out of them, sometimes mid-speaker. I liked what I heard in most sessions, didn't care for some of it. But I particularly enjoyed Jared Spool's polished delivery on information scent (though I didn't believe it!), Cecilia Romaniuk's overview of the site design for BBC television's long running soap-opera Eastenders (did you know fans look up information on the site to learn which characters "know" that another character is having an affair?) and Mike Alexander's study that showed users

could be blithely unaware of their own costly errors. The lack of names attached to talks on the program also meant you never quite knew who was going to talk next or what you were stepping into – an inconvenience at first that seemed like a good idea after awhile.

Reflecting on the Summit now, the feeling is that IA has moved forward. Presentations covered many levels but for the first time it was possible to go through the entire summit without having to hear introductory level material or the definition question rehashed again (I am sure definition was raised in some sessions but I missed them, thankfully). The blogs started early ([www.margin.walker.org/iasummit.php](http://www.margin.walker.org/iasummit.php)), even from those not

present at the summit ([www.blackbeltjones.com/work/mt/archives/000548.html](http://www.blackbeltjones.com/work/mt/archives/000548.html)), indicating the breadth of interest in IA that can be found across the globe, even if current events made travel to the Summit less attractive to colleagues from overseas. The general consensus is this was a Summit where ideas triumphed over labels, and turf boundaries mattered less than getting involved. It was even possible to mention the word *theory* without setting off alarm bells (at least too loudly). Could this be a reflection of a newfound maturity in the field? Perhaps. Maybe I just missed the sessions that would have annoyed me and made my teeth ache but I am not complaining – I had choices. Sure, I missed

the “everyone-in-a-room” sense of community of the first summit but times have changed and few sessions will now keep the attention of all attendees.

As another summit ends, it is worth reminding folks that these never were intended as annual conferences, but try and tell that to the attendees, many of whom are not ASIST members (we’re working on that) but who view this summit as their home. The best line I remember from Brand, quoting Jef Rothenberg’s utterance, was “Digital information lasts forever or five years – whichever comes first.” With IA Summit #5 now in view, IA may be mainstream or mature – and I have suspicions which of these comes first.

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