A Metaphor for Content Strategy
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EDITOR’S SUMMARY
The planning, building and furnishing of a house create an illustrative metaphor for developing a website and handling its content. A construction blueprint demands consideration of how a building will be used, the total space, subdivision of space into rooms, intended uses for separate spaces, location and maintenance plans. Similarly, information architecture for a website requires understanding of who the users will be and how they will use the site, what options should be provided, maintenance and expansion plans and budget. Like furniture in a house, website content must be suited to user needs and to the subspaces, layout and functions of the site. Content should be actively managed, enhanced and pruned as needed without hoarding unnecessary material.

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I recently spoke to a group of information architecture/user experience students and discussed a metaphor for content strategy. I suggested that if you were to build a house, you would not just collect some lumber and nails from the hardware store and start building. You would work with an architect and builder who would guide you through the process.

Building a website – or developing an entire online presence – requires the same type of effort, skill and planning.

Building
When embarking on building a house, the architect and builder might ask these questions:

- How long do you plan to be there?
- How much do you want to spend?
- How many rooms do you need? What rooms do you need?
- How much space do you have?
- Where are you building? Building at the beach is different from building in Alaska.
- Do you expect the house to need additions/adaptations/changes as time goes on?

All that discussion happens before the blueprint is created.

When planning a website, similar questions need to be asked:

- What do your users want to do?
- How will they use it?
- Where will they use it?
- Who are “they”?
- Do you see anything fundamentally changing in the near future that needs to be accommodated?
What resources do you have for maintaining it?  
What are you starting with?  
How much do you have to spend?

So you lay out a plan that outlines the project based on those answers. You can (and should) take this step whether you have $10,000 or $1 million to spend on your website. If you do not answer these fundamental questions, you will be highly unlikely to succeed.

You should perform a content audit or inventory during this stage, which will lead to an assessment of what is redundant, outdated or trivial (ROT) – and what is missing.

Once it’s built, you need to furnish it. How will you do that?

Furnishing

If you build a new house, you need to figure out what you are going to put in it. You would not plan to use your dorm-room furniture in a brand-new 3,000 square foot house. So you figure out what you can move, what needs to be thrown out or given away and what you need to purchase. You also have to think about window treatments, floor coverings and other furnishings.

Similarly, when you have a new website, you cannot just move your old content (text, images, videos, documents, etc.) into the new site. Like a house, a new website has different rooms, different needs, different layouts and different functionality. Your content needs to be adjusted to accommodate the new site. If you did a content audit or inventory at the beginning stages of your project, you can turn that information into a full matrix that accounts for every piece of content. This way, you can move right into your new website when it’s ready.

All of this is content strategy. It is the planning for the care and feeding of not just your website but your entire online presence – be it your website itself, social media channels, mobile apps or email campaigns. It is an important part of creating an online presence that delivers the right information or functionality to the audiences you want to reach at the time they need it.

Hoarders?

I encourage you to think about your own web presence. How is your house constructed? Perhaps you find form follows function. Or perhaps you can identify with a student who after thinking about this metaphor offered her assessment, “I like the metaphor. But I’m afraid our site is so full of unnecessary content we might soon look like an episode of the A&E television show “Hoarders.”