

Zen and the Art of Deliverables

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Information Architecture

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An old Zen saying:

- ➔ “Before a person first begins to seek enlightenment, mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after beginning study, mountains are no longer mountains and waters are not waters; after enlightenment, mountains are again mountains and waters again waters.”

- D.T. Suzuki

Some assumptions for this discussion:

- Design is an activity - as suggested by Krippendorf, McCoy, Buchanan, Dubberly, et al - of not just making things, but also of making sense.
- Information architecture is an area of design concerned with classifying, organizing, and structuring information so that it becomes meaningful.

Therefore:

- ➔ The quality of design deliverables - and their artfulness - can be measured by the degree to which they help people make sense
 - ➔ of concepts
 - ➔ of structures
 - ➔ of things
 - ➔ of behaviors...
 - ➔ to people

- ➔ If sense making is the desired output of design deliverables in general, what is the concern of information architecture deliverables in particular?

“Old” architects sometimes make a distinction:

- ➔ “Problem seeking” is an analytic design activity, and is the concern of the architectural programmer
 - ➔ Preparation and exposure
 - ➔ Statement of the problem

- ➔ “Problem solving” is a synthetic design activity, and is the concern of the architect/designer
 - ➔ Insight and illumination
 - ➔ Creating the solution

Information architecture deliverables should be of both types:

- We often focus on synthetic deliverables, but...
- Good descriptions of problems are necessary to creating appropriate solutions...
- And necessary for the successful practice of information architecture

Analytic and synthetic deliverables:

- ➔ Analytic deliverables help make the problem clear:
 - ➔ explanation of user goals
 - ➔ concept map
 - ➔ content audit/index
 - ➔ systems analysis, etc.

- ➔ Synthetic deliverables suggest solutions:
 - ➔ conceptual models
 - ➔ flow maps
 - ➔ UI specs, etc

Some perspectives

An often expressed aim of education:

- ➔ “To go from the concrete to the abstract.”
- John Dewey in *How We Think*

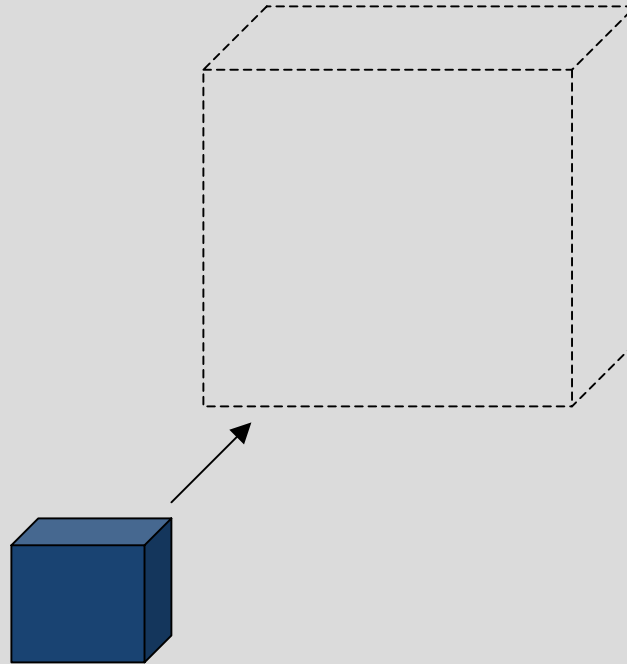
Perspectives

In the real world of business, “abstract” means:

- Not useful
- Not implement-able
- Not understandable
- Not sellable!

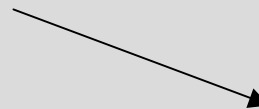
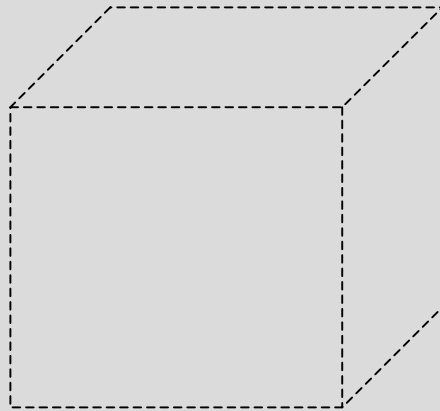
But good design requires abstract thinking

Getting out of the box



It also requires concreteness

From idea

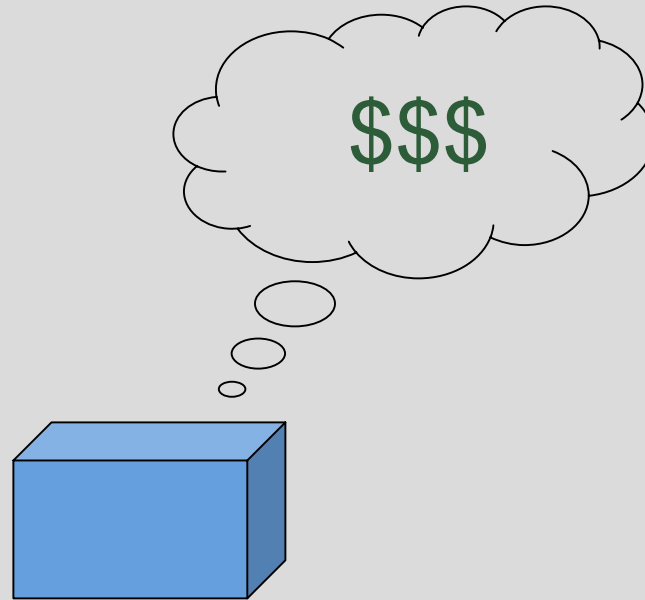


to particular solution



Inventing a subject matter...

Many people claim to care only about the concrete



Do make me think: one
concept most people
like to think about

There's often no time in the project schedule for abstracting...

- ➔ “Thinking time” doesn't look very good on a Gantt chart
- ➔ Project manager wants (NEEDS!) you to:
 - ➔ make a site map
 - ➔ make a wireframe
 - ➔ get that thing into production
 - ➔ do, do, do!
 - ➔ (oh, and could you test it please?)

But there is time for making...

- ➔ Making things can be a useful way of thinking
- ➔ Being forced to articulate concepts often leads to insightful discoveries
 - ➔ answers to tough problems, and
 - ➔ better questions
- ➔ But try to be careful; don't get too attached to form too soon

So concentrate on making things well!

- Deliverables are arguments about your ideas
- Include time for thinking where you can, but don't stop doing because you don't have time to think
- What you do will reflect your thinking anyway; there's no way out
 - site maps reveal how you understand the information you're trying to make available, how it makes sense
 - a chosen interface design reflects your perspective on usability whether or not you've "done it" or written a report

Focus on good deliverables:

- ➔ Your deliverables are often the one thing you have control over on a project
- ➔ They are the direct product of your work, the way you make things make sense

Back to Zen:

“Practice and enlightenment are the same.”

- Zhuang-zi

Thanks

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