Information Architecture: Looking Ahead

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It may be a bit strange to consider where the field of information architecture (IA) is headed. After all, many would argue that it’s too new to be considered as a field at all, or that it is mislabeled, and by no means is there a widely accepted definition of what information architecture actually is.¹

This uncertainty hasn’t crimped the discussion, however; unlike Gertrude Stein’s Oakland, there certainly is a there there. Practicing information architects probably number in the thousands, and this vibrant group is already building various forms of communal infrastructure, ranging from an IA journal² and a self-organizing “library” of resources³ to a passel of local professional groups⁴ and degree-granting academic programs.⁵

Most importantly, there is no talk about the field disappearing in the face of the current economic downturn. Information architects, often working in “new economy” settings, have certainly felt the bite of the recent layoff mania. However, many employers have finally begun to realize that many of their key business problems are actually information problems, and that there are now a class of professionals—information architects—who can help address these problems. Information architects themselves are showing both resiliency and strong optimism regarding the long-term demand for their services.⁶ So the profession has achieved a beachhead that will enable it to stabilize and perhaps even grow during these difficult times.

So, the field is picking up momentum. But what kind of field will it become?

A best-guess answer may come from looking at history. When have other fields come together quickly, why, and what did they become? And can these past disciplinary lifecycles work as predictors for the evolution of information architecture?

There are many candidate fields to consider, but the one that may ring truest is the emergence of management a century ago.⁷ Professional management arose in response to a revolutionary event: new transportation and communication technologies that enabled the rapid growth of multinational corporations.⁸

Where management often had been concentrated in the hands of a single individual, with the reigns passed from father to son, the multinational corporation demanded a class of management professionals with different yet complementary areas of expertise. Modern management, as an applied field, drew from many disparate professions, ranging from manufacturing to law to banking, and integrated these practices in new ways. Today’s MBA programs provide what is ultimately an interdisciplinary education, integrating practices and perspectives from areas as diverse as psychology (embodied in organizational psychology and marketing) to engineering (management information systems) to mathematics (accounting and forecasting).

¹ These topics appear with great regularity on the main information architecture discussion list, SIGIA-L (http://www.info-arch.org/lists/sigia-l/).
² Boxes and Arrows, a journal dedicated to information architecture debuted in March, 2002 (http://www.boxesandarrows.com).
³ An information architecture “wiki” was begun in October 2001, and has rapidly gained steam as a collection of distributed information architecture resources; using wiki software, responsibilities for content addition, modification, and even deletion are shared by the distributed information architecture community (http://www.iawiki.net).
⁴ Information architecture “cocktail hours” are proliferating, and may be the grassroots kernels of local “chapters” of a future professional association of information architects (http://www.IAwiki.net/CocktailHours).
⁵ Information architecture courses have been taught at a number of academic venues, including programs in information sciences, librarianship, and graphic design. Now full specializations in information architecture are beginning to emerge as well (http://www.IAwiki.net/DegreeInIA).

⁶ According to the September 2001 ACIA survey, “Short and Long Term Outlook for Information Architects” (149 responses), 47% expect demand to increase a little over the next 5 years, and 32% expect it to increase a lot. Long-term need for information architecture services will explode: 26% of respondents predict it will grow a little, and 62% predict it will grow a lot (http://argus-acia.com/iask/survey010907.html).
⁷ Peter Morville (http://www.semanticsstudios.com) first suggested this analogy between information architecture to management (in a personal communication).
⁸ This topic is explored further in Alfred D. Chandler’s The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Belknap Press, 1980).
Information architecture and many related "new" fields are reactions to the demands and pressures caused by another revolution: the advent of the Internet and its suite of related technologies, and their impact on information creation, dissemination, and use. Put simply, the design of today’s "post-Web" information systems is an order of magnitude more complex than it was 10 or 15 years ago. These systems now cater to more and more demanding users than ever before; these users can represent every segment of the human population, varying widely in language, culture, motivation, and need. And they require more content and functionality.

Similarly, increased scope, volume, and format types result in greater content ambiguity, muddier information retrieval performance, and therefore, place additional pressures on information system design. Many of today’s information systems are not only crucial to a business’ survival, but, in fact, are the business. With such variation in users, content, and context, the post-Web era presents us with many more design challenges than were ever imagined just a few years ago.

No single discipline can supply the tools, techniques, and expertise are sufficient to address these challenges. Today’s information architect often comes from one disciplinary home (e.g., graphic design), and already has begun to learn something about another discipline’s perspectives and prac-

FIG. 1. The blind men may never truly grasp this particular elephant.  

FIG. 2. Information architecture and its "sisters" (other "new" fields) draw upon many established disciplines for tools, techniques, and expertise.


tices (e.g., usability engineering). Tomorrow’s information architect will likely know much more, or may work on an IA team that features information architects from many different disciplinary perspectives.

What “traditional” fields might be strong sources for tools, techniques, expertise, and experience for information architects? Any that are at all concerned with the communication and consumption of information. So the field of IA will ultimately integrate much of what merchandisers, data modelers, ethnographers, story tellers, and others already know, and apply this wisdom to the design of the new generation of information systems.

Of course, although we may determine what the practice of IA will be, we may still be debating how to define it and what to call it for some time to come. The fact that knowledge management, user experience, information architecture, and other “new” fields tread upon much the same ground with significant overlap is testament to just how challenging it is to design today’s information systems. We are all grappling with the same issues, regardless of what we call the solution. This situation recalls the old story about the blind men and the elephant¹¹ (Figure 1).

Whichever “new” field we champion, none of us quite comprehends, much less addresses, the enormity of the unruly mammal of post-Web information system design. Perhaps in the years to come, we’ll find a way to resolve these new fields, merge their communities of practitioners, and bridge the lexical gaps that can make it so difficult for these practitioners to communicate with each other. In the meantime we can look forward to independently mining the established professions, uncovering old gems of wisdom and practice, integrating them into our methodologies, and applying them to the new challenges of post-Web information system design. To conclude, Figure 2 shows a view on how these professions, old and new, are related, and where information architecture fits.

¹¹ The Indian fable of the blind men and the elephant is detailed at http://www.wordfocus.com/word-act-blindmen.html.