

# What Is Information Architecture?

## Practical Definitions and Useful Principles for our Second Decade of Study and Work

by Thom Haller, *Bulletin* associate editor for IA and special section guest editor

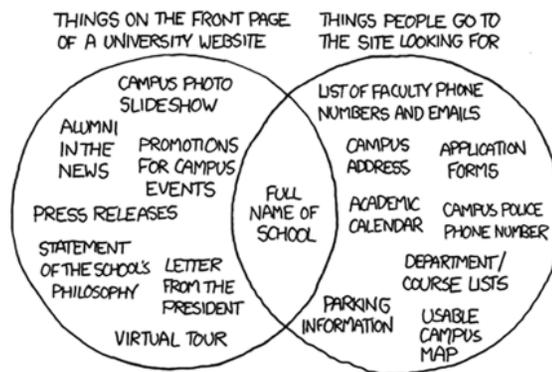
## Information Architecture

One of my former students sent me this cartoon. He called it “a little information architecture humor.”

The drawing points to the real-life challenges faced by those of us trying to structure information so others can find it, use it and appreciate the experience.

We know organizations make many choices about what information to present and how to present it. And we know, as the drawing illustrates, that they often fail. Probably along the way, people and politics have influenced choices that differ from what site users want. Along the way, possibilities are lost because no one thought fully about information structure and use. Typically, in a site like the one depicted above, no one has thought through the information architecture.

FIGURE 1. Randall Munroe. *University Website*. Used with permission (Creative Commons). © Randall Munroe  
Permanent link to this comic: <http://xkcd.com/773/>



Thom Haller, the *Bulletin*'s associate editor for information architecture, is a speaker, writer, user advocate and teacher of principles of performance-based information architecture and usability. Since 1998, Thom has taught classes on architecting usable web/Intranet sites. As a teacher, Thom enables students to structure information so people can find it, use it and appreciate the experience. He can be reached at [thom@thomhaller.com](mailto:thom@thomhaller.com); [thomhaller@twitter.com](https://twitter.com/thomhaller).

Early this summer I attended a professional seminar given by someone I respect. He is well versed in applying taxonomic thinking in a business environment. His organization has garnered a significant following. During his presentation, he offered the worst definition of information architecture I had heard in years. (I won't provide it here. But I can note that he showed us the slide in his PowerPoint slide deck and said, “This is my definition, but I'm not here to talk about definitions.” He then continued with his presentation. I wondered, “So why did you include this in your deck?”)

Last week, I attended a local “meet-up” where agency professionals presented their ideas on developing content. When the primary presenter referred to information architecture, he scoffed and said, “That's so 1996.” I was taken aback.

“Why would he say 1996?” I wondered. I felt surprised to hear the professional label squished into a small time frame. I was not surprised to hear someone use the term with casual disdain; I often hear the term minimized. (For example, I frequently hear the term used as a noun: “We just need an information architecture, and then we'll build this site.” Or, as a 2010 IA Summit attendee noted, “To my colleagues, IA just means working with metadata.”)

As a longtime IA/UX instructor, I typically offer big-picture perspectives such as those offered by Richard Saul Wurman when he introduced the term, saying, “Information architects make the complex clear.” I also direct students to different definitions, including this definition provided by the IA Institute:

- The structural design of shared information environment
- The art and science of organizing and labeling websites, intranets, online communities and software to support usability and findability
- An emerging community of practice focused on bringing principles of design and architecture to the digital landscape

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But as the institute will tell you, this definition is broad. And then humans come along and look at broad definitions and face challenges with what all the words mean. My students look at that definition at the beginning of class and wonder, “What does *structural design* mean? What is a “shared information environment”? By the end of the class, we have constructed our own definitions and elevator speeches (but it’s taken us several weeks).

That’s why I like the definition of information architecture that Dan Klyn presents in this issue. I like its real world tone. I like how it tells the story and helps us understand when information architecture is needed and used. I also like Dan Brown’s straightforward definition (provided as an assumption to the principles he provides in this issue): “information architecture is the practice of designing structures.”

Why define? That question is asked often. I recall attending graduate school parties where my colleagues tried to define *communication*. Their efforts weren’t particularly successful. Communication scholarship languished as communication study became associated with football scholarships and minimal academic rigor. Ever think of rhetoric as “meaningless bombast”? There’s a story of a field of study now diminished in the eyes of the academy and the business community!

As people who believe information structure matters, we have a responsibility to define our work and make the invisible visible. This issue of the *Bulletin* takes some of the voices from the recent ASIS&T Information Architecture Summit. We believe this content can solidify the understanding of what information architecture is (and is not). We hope these ideas can encourage discussion, inspire research and propel action.

### A Peek into Summit Conversations

The promotional literature for the 11th annual IA Summit suggested “the best conversations happen in the hall.” That may be true, but many worthwhile ideas emerged from the conference sessions. You will find many of these conversations online at the Boxes and Arrows site ([www.bboxesandarrows.com](http://www.bboxesandarrows.com)).

Among the presentations online are observations, challenges and perspectives offered in a conversation led by user experience professional

Nick Finck. Nick synthesized this feedback on a blog post (an open discussion among information architects, <http://ow.ly/2jhJ4>) The presentation synopsis asked, “Are we all a part of ‘the looming fate of a fragmented industry struggling to stay alive’ ... or might we instead see a unified, respectful community (with a clear vision, a clear goal, a true value and a solid message)? I found value in many of the observations, especially words from Richard Saul Wurman, who reaffirmed his belief in understanding.

I don’t think in terms of wireframes... I don’t think in terms of information architecture, I think in terms of understanding. I’m interested in understanding things that interest me and I am interested in the systemic rigor of being able to explain. I’m interested in communicating with another human being ...and I am doing it with rigor and responsibility, and that is what information architecture is. Ultimately, it’s not the modality, not the particular technology... it’s just making yourself understandable. [Synthesis from Wurman’s observation during session. [www.nickfinck.com/blog/entry/an\\_open\\_discussion\\_among\\_information\\_architects/](http://www.nickfinck.com/blog/entry/an_open_discussion_among_information_architects/)]

### In this Issue

In this issue we highlight a few of the ideas presented at the 2010 Summit and ideas recently discussed online.

Dan Klyn leads this issue with his story of definition, “A Posting for a Job That Does Not Exist: How We Might Define Information Architects in Today’s ‘Integrated’ Advertising Agency.” He explores work-world perceptions of the label and offers a rationale for those who practice information architecture in an integrated environment.

Beyond a need for definition lies a need for communication. In their article for this issue, “Research and Practice in Information Architecture: Current Relationships,” Keith Instone and Andrea Resmini place this need at the heart of our work: “We believe a large village of practitioners is needed to raise a discipline, and at the heart of the village is the need to communicate.” In this article they call for a community-wide research agenda and a need for practice-led research.

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In his article “Information Architecture, Black Holes and Discipline: On Developing a Framework for a Practice of Information Architecture,” Nathaniel Davis wonders about our challenges to “strategically tackle information with greater precision in more complex situations.” He describes the challenge of increasing information and offers a framework from which we can group and assess IA practice.

Dan Brown closes the conversation with structure to move the conversation forward. He offers eight fundamentals to support information architects and other user experience designers as they meet real-world demands. He concludes by writing:

A serious theoretical framework establishes a place for interpretation, reconsideration and debate. A theory of information architecture

would escalate our conversations, taking us beyond “what do we do” and even “how do we do it” and into something far more interesting: “How do we do it better?”

### What Next?

There’s our question: How do we do this better? How can we focus our research with our practice? How can we move from casual observation toward practice-led research? How can we become confident in our understanding of information architecture so we can attend to our job of creating understanding? Explore this issue. Read different perceptions of definition, identity and roles. Afterward, forward me your thoughts, definitions and priorities for an IA research agenda.

This conversation continues... ■