

Preface

A brief history of information architecture

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What we recall is not what we actually experienced, but rather a reconstruction of what we experienced that is consistent with our current goals and our knowledge of the world.

Memory, Brain, and Belief by Daniel L. Schacter and Elaine Scarry, Harvard University

History is written by the writers. And as websites, blogs and search tools transform our information landscape, history will increasingly be chosen by the readers. In the past decade, I've had the good fortune to have played a role in the emergence of information architecture as a discipline and a community of practice. As a reader, writer, user, architect, activist, manager and entrepreneur, I have experienced first-hand the tumultuous childhood and adolescence of the profession. It was fun. It was painful. It was exciting. It was a lot of work. And it's over. For better or worse, information architecture has entered a new stage of maturity. So, before senility sets in, I'd like to tell you a story about what really happened. Of course, built upon the imperfect foundation of false memory, this story is horribly biased and tragically flawed. My only hope is that you, gentle reader, will also find my story to be interesting, persuasive, and perhaps a little contagious. After all, like I said, history is chosen by the readers.

The Argonauts set sail (1994)

Immediately after graduating from the University of Michigan's School of Information and Library Studies, I joined a start-up internet training firm named Argus Associates. I didn't want to be an entrepreneur. I simply couldn't find any jobs in established companies where I could design information systems.

Argus was owned by faculty member Joseph Janes and doctoral student Louis Rosenfeld. As employee number one, I had a difficult first year. I worked mostly alone, for little pay and no benefits. I lived in a cardboard box in the middle of a busy road. Okay, I exaggerate, but these truly were tough days to be an 'information architect', particularly since we didn't yet have a label to hang our hats on.

We did do some interesting work though. We taught people to use state of the art internet tools such as Gopher, Archie, Veronica, FTP and WAIS. We created a guide to nanotechnology resources on the internet. And, as NCSA Mosaic launched the web as a multimedia medium for the masses, we began to design websites.

We found ourselves using the architecture metaphor with clients to highlight the importance of structure and organization in website design. Lou got a gig writing the *Web Architect* column for *Web Review* magazine, and I soon joined in.

In 1996, a book titled *Information Architects* appeared in our offices. We learned that a fellow by the name of Richard Saul Wurman had coined the expression 'information architect' in 1975. After reading his book, I remember thinking 'this is not information architecture, this is information design'.

And so, while some folks adhered to the Wurman definition, we became evangelists of the LIS (library and information science) school of information architecture. We argued passionately for the value of applying traditional LIS skills in the design of websites and intranets. We hired 'information architects' and taught them to practise the craft. We embraced other disciplines, integrating user research and usability engineering into our process. And, along the way, we built one of the world's most admired information architecture firms.

A polar bear is born (1998)

Lou pitched the idea of an information architecture book to Lorrie LeJeune at O'Reilly in 1996. She didn't bite. But a year later, she called us back. At industry conferences, Lorrie kept hearing web developers complain about a pain with no name. Users couldn't find things. Sites couldn't accommodate new content. It wasn't a technology problem. It wasn't a graphic design problem. It was an information architecture problem, we explained, and so began the book.

In February 1998, after countless nights and weekends spent writing, the O'Reilly book on information architecture was published. Sales began slowly but grew steadily as increasing numbers of people discovered the name for their pain. Jakob Nielsen called it 'the most useful book on web design on the market' and Amazon named it 'Best Internet Book of 1998'. Information architecture had arrived.

A community takes shape (2000)

In April 2000, a very special event took place at the Logan Airport Hilton in Boston, Massachusetts. Lou worked closely with Richard Hill of the American Society of Information Science and Technology (ASIST) to organize the first annual Information Architecture summit, bringing together people from universities, libraries, web consultancies and Fortune 500 firms to share perspectives.

The energy at this conference was incredible. This was the first large scale gathering of the information architecture community in history. And we were at the pinnacle of the internet revolution. Stock valuations and salaries were going through the roof. We were all overworked, living on internet time, but loving it all the same. The SIG-IA discussion group spun out of this event, and a community was born.

Back in Ann Arbor, business was booming for Argus Associates. We created a new community-oriented business unit called the Argus Center for Information Architecture and organized a wonderful IA2K conference in La Jolla, California.

Along the way, we had become a 40-person company with roughly \$4 million in revenues and a world-class client list. Information architecture had lifted us to heights that were exhilarating and just a bit terrifying. At such times, life is great, provided you don't look down or ahead.

The valley (2001)

We all know what happened next. The bubble burst. A few trillion dollars disappeared into thin air. Budgets were slashed. People lost jobs. Companies folded. As a firm specializing in this new-fangled, near-invisible thing called information architecture, Argus was a canary in the coal mine for much of the IT industry, and it all happened real fast. After seven profitable years, it took only five months to move from feeling the pinch to closing the company.

Upon announcing that Argus had ceased operations, we received hundreds of heart-warming messages from all over the world. People told us how our book had changed their lives, giving them the confidence and credibility needed to jump-start a new career. This outpouring of support was truly the silver lining in a dark cloud.

But many saw the fall of the house of Argus as an ominous symbol for the entire profession. We tried to combat this pessimism, but it was tough to sell a positive, long-term vision while many in the community trudged through the valley of shadows.

Emergence (2002)

2002 was a big year for information architecture. We emerged from the valley with new strength and maturity. We connected top-down and bottom-up. We reached out to our colleagues in user experience, visual design and content management.

Boxes and Arrows (<http://boxesandarrows.com/>) burst onto the scene, triggering a wonderful cross-disciplinary resurgence of writing and discussion. We launched the Asilomar Institute for Information Architecture (<http://aifia.org/>), an international professional association dedicated to advancing the design of shared information environments.

And we collectively published an impressive array of new books. In *The Elements of User Experience*, Jesse James Garrett explored strategy and structure within the context of user-centered design. In *Information Architecture: blueprints for the web*, Christina Wodtke brought Richard Saul Wurman back into the story, unifying the LIS and RSW schools of thought. In *Information Architecture: an emerging 21st century profession*, Earl Morrogh tackled the history and future of the field. And, of course, we completed a second edition of *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*, featuring a heavier, wiser polar bear.

Tomorrow's architects (2094)

So, where do we go from here? How will the landscape of information architecture change between today and 2094?

Certain trends are already visible. For instance, the leadership of the discipline is becoming increasingly international. This book, edited by Alan Gilchrist and Barry Mahon of TFPL, is but one example, injecting a distinctly European perspective into the global dialogue that will shape the future of information architecture practice.

On a higher plane, a strange blend of social, economic, environmental and technological factors will shape our future in an unpredictable manner. Today, as an information architect, I earn my living in ways I could barely have imagined just ten years ago. If I'm still around in 2094, I expect to inhabit a radically different world. That said, I bravely and perhaps arrogantly predict the practice of information architecture will be alive and well on its 100th birthday.

Well, that's my story. You decide whether or not to make it history. And if you disagree with my bold prediction, let me know; let's make a long bet (<http://longbets.org/>) and I'll see you in 2094. In the meantime, read this book, become a better information architect, strengthen the practice, foster findability, make the world more usable and, whatever you do, don't forget our bet. I intend to collect.