

## EDITORIAL

Dan Klyn  
The Understanding Group

## Information Architecture is a Way of Seeing

In the Midwest of the USA where I live, there is a thinly-veiled disdain among Medical Doctors for “Doctors” of Chiropractic. Depending on which generation of MD or DC you consult with, you’ll hear different arguments for why one or the other approach is better. In my personal experience with lower back pain this past Spring, the severity of the malady—and not the weight of the opposing arguments—dictated my immediate course of action: I was unable to walk, weeping from pain and in need of narcotic pain killers. Immediately. And they don’t give prescription pads to DC’s.

After handing me a print-out of instructions for a series of strengthening exercises and a prescription for Vicodin, the attending physician got ready to send me on my way. Surprised and still squirming with pain, I asked sheepishly, were we not going to take an X-Ray image of my back? The doctor smiled and said it was unnecessary.

Ten long and painful days later, having found no relief aside from what had been in the now-empty prescription bottle, I decided to try the alternate approach. In the office of a chiropractor, I viewed an X-Ray image that showed two distinct mis-alignments of the spine. Another ten days and two brief appointments after the initial chiropractic consultation and treatment, my pain was gone. Incredulous, I asked this miracle-working DC why the MD who treated me with printouts and drugs didn’t bother to take an X-Ray when I was in her care. The chiropractor’s answer has been rattling around in my brain ever since:

*Even if the MD had taken an X-Ray, she would not have seen what I saw. Show us each the same image and we see different stuff.*

The analogy is one I’ve begun to use with my clients and students to explain how information architecture (IA) differs from other approaches to this work. Organizations wrestling with today’s complex information challenges have a wide variety of options they can explore before settling on the fundamental approach to the problem space. What’s different about approaching from an IA perspective? To the organizations and practitioners who are gathering evidence about the “pain” that ‘s correlated with the ways information is organized, accessed, retrieved and understood, how do we characterize information architecture’s unique way of seeing?

The continuing work of scholars and researchers in our young field builds and expands the vocabulary for describing this way of seeing. Throughout the “dot-com bubble” of the late 90’s and at the advent of Web 2.0 there was a pervasive notion among practitioners that conversation about information architecture was necessarily difficult (and often fussy). Brilliantly clear new work published here in the *Journal* by the likes of Sally Burford and Jorge Arango afford no-fuss, panoramic views into IA’s way of seeing the design of information, spaces and information spaces. Arango calls these spaces “Environments for Understanding” and they persist across channels and media, from the familiar information places of the World Wide Web to the Swiss Alps, as you will read in Jan Eckert’s research paper.

As our profession matures, and especially as our collaborators and clients accrue experience working from other approaches, IA must continue to differentiate the value of its particular way of seeing the same “picture” of information system performance and usage behaviors that our colleagues from other disciplinary approaches consult in their work. To borrow again from the medical context and metaphor I opened with, in cases where business performance and user delight suffer from poorly-aligned ontologies, failing taxonomies and maladaptive patterns of use, IA offers a systematic way of seeing that allows fundamental – we could even say “skeletal” - bases for taking corrective actions that lead to positive outcomes.

As I drove to work this morning, I noted that my hometown is lousy with doctor’s offices and chiropractic clinics. Apparently, for those who suffer as I did, the provision of relief is not a zero-sum game. Differing approaches provide different kinds of value, ways of seeing and paths toward a better way of living. The articles in this quarter’s *Journal* continue the conversation around information architecture’s unique way of seeing: read on, you will not be disappointed.

**Dan Klyn**

Guest Editor

## IN THIS ISSUE

Issue 1, Volume 3, consists of three articles.

In his article “SnowSense – A Case Study of User-centered Location-based Services”, Jan Eckert describes a project on Location Based-services (LBS) currently being developed at the IUAV University of Venice. The project set out to open up new ways for preventing avalanche-related accidents by applying a user-centered design approach and mobile technologies to the problem of informing skiers of local weather and topological conditions. Eckert addresses how the current research framework seems to suggest that LBS are evolving and changing the way people interact with the places they live and work in.

In her article “Web IA: A Very Inclusive Practice”, Sally Burford argues that information architecture is a critical aspect of the organizational use of the Web to deliver information and to communicate with clients. Burford sees information architecture as a relatively new instance of information organization drawing from traditional practices but presenting its own characteristics and unique contexts. Her article contributes to a greater understanding of Web information architecture as a practice that requires myriad conversations, negotiations and collaborations by multiple and diverse people who all make a contribution to the information structures of the enterprise website.

Finally, in his invited article “Architectures”, Jorge Arango parallels building architecture with information architecture and offers a new, vibrant view of the discipline and the practice. Arango maintains that we perceive information spaces the same way we do with physical spaces, a fact our language, which always ends up revolving around clumsy architectural metaphors, reflects constantly. Building up his case through numerous examples and making a point for a shift towards understanding, Arango moves on to answer two very important questions: Who designs these spaces? And are these designers aware that they are designing space when they do so?

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