



# Andrea Resmini

## Presence, Thing-ness, and World-hood

### Editorial

So, where were we?

The publication of the Spring 2021 issue marks the beginning of a new cycle in the life of the Journal of Information Architecture, one that brings with it a few long-awaited changes, the most immediate of which is a refactoring of the platform running the Journal itself.

While a number of improvements have been thrown in for good measure, this first round mostly intended to get the Journal out of its thirteen years old hiding hole and give authors, readers, and staff alike something that works as expected in 2021.

We aren't done yet: we are still working on the content, through the code, and on the information architecture itself of the Journal. As we sail forward, expect changes, new features, and of course the (hopefully) occasional glitch or misstep. If you spot any already, we'll be grateful if you raise a flag and let us know.

## The Journal of Information Architecture and the Way Forward

For part of 2019 and all throughout 2020, the Editorial Board has been working on ensuring that tactical goals, what the Journal needs, and strategic goals, what the Journal wants to accomplish, were clearly defined as separate sets.

As of April 2021, the Journal feels like a seaworthy privateer which by skill, luck, or any combination of these has found its way out of a long spell in the doldrums and is now racing on a steady southwesterly wind. If you allow me to stretch the metaphor way beyond the tearing point, she's an altogether different ship in many ways, rebuilt while at sea, trim and well-rigged, ready to engage but still far from being what the Editorial Board wants it to be.

In the coming months most work will be tactics. The backend will be adjusted, tweaked, and readied for a major overhaul in late 2022 or early 2023. Before the end of 2021 it will be possible to download all past issues

as individual PDFs formatted for print. The Editorial Board will take formal steps to obtain Open Access accreditation and the assignment of DOIs to all papers published, starting from the newer ones. Initiatives will be started in early 2022 to attract and secure funding to keep the Journal open and free.

What about strategy though? Where is the Journal sailing to? What does it want to accomplish? Let me beat this privateering metaphor into the ground: the Journal, she's small and manned by a small crew. This is a tactical advantage we intend to exploit: what we lack in firepower we make up for in manoeuvrability, and we intend to use that "to ply there up and down, not quite exactly in the service of the Crown" [1]

What this means is that nothing changes but everything changes. The new course that starts with this issue will push for a contemporary take on information architecture and offer critical reflections on the state of the field, in the hope to contribute, through the transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary commingling of practitioners and researchers, to widen and consolidate that body of knowledge that Dorte Madsen mentioned as one of the primary strategic outcomes of the Journal in her [original editorial](#) for the first issue in 2009.

How we intend to do that is where we want to shake things up a bit. This is not the moment to be shy. In 2014, eight years ago and already echoing conversations that had been doing the rounds for at least another eight years, I wrote in my preface for "Reframing Information Architecture" that

*(i)nformation architecture has changed. When the practice went mainstream in the mid 1990s, library and information science, the core body of knowledge and expertise introduced by pioneers Lou Rosenfeld and Peter Morville, seemed to be all that was necessary.*

*Information architecture was mostly seen as some sort of library science for the Web, largely tackling problems of labeling, categorization, and ordering.*

*Today, the illusion of the Web as a library and the Internet as a different and separate world have given way to a much more complex scenario. We live in a post-digital world in which digital and physical blend easily, and the Internet is a piece in a larger mechanism where our activities and our use, consumption and production of information happens across multiple contexts through multiple devices and unstable, emergent choreographies.*

*We moved from the screen to the world: (...) conversations about labeling, websites, and hierarchies have been replaced by conversations about sense-making, place-making, design, architecture, crossmedia, complexity, embodied cognition, and their application to the architecture of information spaces as places we live in.*

It's about time the Journal walks the walk. Strategically, this means engaging with the idea of presence, thing-ness, and world-hood.

## Presence

With the departure of the Information Architecture Institute in late 2019, establishing literal presence is probably the most important field-related strategic task that the Journal can accomplish right away.

But presence can be interpreted in other ways, all of them relevant to the **mission** of the Journal: make the role of information architecture in design (and non-design) conversations visible; make “presence” an important concept in a world where information is seamlessly embedded in the fabric of everything; consider the impact of the blending of digital and physical on the field and on society; turn the attention to principles that support the very idea of “presence” as consent, participation, co-creation; help build the necessary bridges to those fields where information architecture is already a factual but unrecognized component.

## Thing-ness

We’re being pulled in two opposite directions. On one hand, Weiser’s (1991), Negroponte’s (1998), and Mitchell’s (2003) predictions of digital weaving itself “into the fabric of everyday life until (it is) indistinguishable from it”, becoming “like air and water” and being “increasingly smeared across multiple sites and moments in complex and often indeterminate ways” have proven themselves true.

Many “things” have lost their “thing-ness” [2] in the past thirty or forty years: everything that has been digitized has. Music. Books. Money. Meetings. Whiteboards. Friendships, some argue. The list is long. Many other things that were “things” became processes, or experiences.

On the other hand, the postdigital world is also a world of new “things” that have been ecologically successful (Krippendorff 2006): wearables, mobile phones, tablets, sensors, cameras, and smart objects of any kind.

Isn’t this simply the logical result of a process that necessarily looked first at what made things different in order to give them a name and then matured beyond this self-imposed limitation? One that shows how ad-hoc, artificial, and happenstance the distinction between digital and physical has always been? What are we gaining by keeping these categories in place in the third decade of the 21st century? More importantly, what are we losing?

## World-hood

Heidegger famously conceptualized world-hood (or worldhood), a word the Oxford English Dictionary insists to inwardly define as “the state or condition of being a world”, as the necessary existential structure of “dasein”, usually translated as “being there” or, unsurprisingly, “presence”. Heidegger himself considered “being there” to be an inappropriate rendition of the German term, and insisted that “dasein” identifies a way of existing that is “being-in-the-world”, being a part of something while understanding its incessant transformation and ultimately its being bigger than we are (Dreyfus 1995).

The world-hood the Journal intends to contribute building in 2021 is a postdigital (Pepperel & Punt 2000) world [3] of Negropontian banality, one where digital carries no value in itself, where it is as interesting as electricity is, no more “virtual” than a movie, no more “technology” than a fridge. A world where digital has become, again unsurprisingly, just another part of “presence”, a “thing” in the Heideggerian sense. And its information architecture is just a part of the information architecture of the world at large, present for sure when we design a product or a service, but also there when we discuss the plan of a city, the organization of a hospital, or our plans to terraform Mars.

Dorte Madsen invited us all to the dance twelve years ago. That party is over, but a new wind is blowing, and we intend to sail with the tide. Are you coming?

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## Footnotes

[1]. As Mark Knopfler eloquently states in “Privateering”.

[2]. Thing-ness (or thingness) as a concept derives from the distinction operated by Heidegger between an object, which has a specific use, and that same object when it does not serve that function any more and thus becomes a “thing” whose old value-in-use has been shed and can then be reconfigured. Brown (2003) has discussed “things” from the perspective of cultural studies, and Buckland has famously described the concept of “information-as-thing” (1991). For why Heidegger considered things “thingly” see Minar (1999).

[3]. For a down-to-earth but fairly accurate take on the meaning of postdigital (or post-digital), see “[Welcome to the post-digital world](#)”, Simon Jenkins 2011 op-ed piece for The Guardian.

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A two-times past president of the Information Architecture Institute, Andrea co-founded the *Journal of Information Architecture*; *Architectora*, the Italian Society for Information Architecture; the *Academic / Practitioner Roundtable*; and *World IA Day*. Andrea is a compulsive reader of WWII submarine warfare trivia, Tolkien drafts, and Jack the Ripper case studies. He is the current Editor-in-Chief of the journal.

