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Footnotes to “Re: The Future of Information Architecture”

Introduction

The article “Re: The Future of Information Architecture” was first published on September 24 2019 (Hobbs 2019). Although written in relation to the dissolution of the Information Architecture Institute (IAI), its content presented a reflection on the field at that time with an eye to the future. The present article serves three purposes: preservation and historic record of the original text; documentation of concerns facing the field at that time, with regards to its institutional status; and as a commentary and further conceptual elaboration roughly two years post the dissolution of the IAI.

The IAI operated between 2002 and 2019, originally as the Asilomar Institute for Information Architecture (AIfIA), as a 501(c)(6) non-profit organization within the jurisdiction of the USA “dedicated to advancing and promoting information architecture” (AIfIA 2019). “Advance” has to be interpreted broadly in this context, since the IAI, as a 501(c)(6) organisation, took on the role of a board of trade focused on the promotion of the field and practice rather than its discipline [1]. It is probably fair to say that the IAI, despite shortcomings, came to be the body most representative of the field internationally. Its 17-year run, along with its annual conference—the ASIS&T Information Architecture Summit, then IA Conference—is significant for its duration and, in its early period, for representing an original and pioneering field which greatly contributed to the maturing of the early web.

Notwithstanding these successes, the IAI itself and the community of practice (COP) it represented were ultimately unable to mature at pace with other fields, such as user experience design or interaction design, occupying the same or new spaces of influence.

A thorough and transparent account of the period leading up to the Institute’s dissolution by unanimous board vote (Information Architecture Institute 2019) has not yet been made available [2]. It does appear that the financial implications of a matter of litigation, adding to long-standing structural issues, prompted a survey to be sent to the membership for guidance regarding how the organisation ought best to proceed [3]. Following the

survey, the board’s email communication documenting the decision to dissolve the Institute was communicated via email:

While there is a strong interest in saving the Institute (amongst responses from the survey), the resources that will be needed to do so are not abundant. The majority of responses to our survey favored that we either dissolve, reinvent, or merge with a related group. Our decision is to dissolve the IA Institute. Our plan addresses most of the concerns raised. We will not reinvent the IA Institute, however we will ensure World IA Day and the IA Conference have the support needed to continue to thrive. It is important to reaffirm, litigation is not the absolute cause of our decision. To blame our situation on a single reason or person would just not be accurate. There are many reasons we are faced with our decision today; the IA Institute has been struggling for a long time (Information Architecture Institute 2019).

Re: The Future of Information Architecture

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On the 17th of September 201 the Information Architecture Institute (IAI) communicated the board’s decision to dissolve the organisation. The communication was entitled: **0/17/201 – Decision – The future of the IAI**

The IAI was registered as a 501 c (6) nonprofit organization in the state of Michigan in the USA. Such entities are organised to support trade and commerce interests related to a profession or practice and are not-for-profit. It is important to note that the closing of the IAI is the closing of an entity which I believe many people, both within and beyond the practice, have come to consider as being representative of more than just trade and commerce related to the practice.

The dissolution of the Institute is by no means, nor should it imply, the dissolution of the practice (if that is even possible) or the field (which may be argued not to actually exist at this time or at least to be in its infancy). Nevertheless, a void now exists in a place that IA held in the world. Mature, transparent, representative and just consideration needs to be given to what could or should replace the IAI, if anything at all.

With all due respect to the founding mothers and fathers of the practice of Information Architecture as represented, by-and-large by the IA Institute, they happened upon something far greater in context, relevance, importance

and meaning than had initially been conceived.

The recognition that both the theory and practices of multiple disciplines are more or less tacitly at play and in evidence in the practice of IA is gaining momentum within the IA community and is supported by research-led efforts taking place within academic, educational and applied spaces by an increasing number of people from around the world.

We are at an inflection point in the development of a practice which stands more to benefit by expanding its current framing than not, despite real evidence and cogent argumentation that the frame of the practice is in truth broader, regardless of the opinions of the practice's community, their volume, reach or indeed their silence on the matter.

If we can rise above matters of community, there is a higher calling than the benefits to be gained by the practice.

The world is being swept forward uncontrollably into a future which in all likelihood will be heavily determined, in the main, by the values and interests of commerce and technology. IA, in its current framing, is contributing an extremely small part of what it could contribute to ensuring that our global, socio-technological futures are based in values and interests of a higher-order than those contained within commerce and technology. That is to say, human goodness. We are also at an inflection point in the development of humankind where commerce and technology, left to their own devices, could easily result in equivalent experiences as those which emerged from the last Industrial Revolution where some of the greatest atrocities in human history, including but not limited to colonisation, may be found.

A field can contain multiple types of practice based on multiple interpretations of the meaning of the field. In fact, it is not uncommon for multiple interpretations and practices to be at odds with one another within the same field. This adds credibility to a field, is a sign of its maturity and should be encouraged in the appropriate forums and formats with the appropriate protocols and controls.

Times such as these are precarious for young fields such as IA where power positions within the community of practice will inevitably be at play in the consideration of the future of the practice and field. Neither purposely hidden power agendas nor historical or cultural assumption should dictate future definitions of purpose, promise or value related to the practice of IA in the consideration of a replacement entity.

These issues should however not imply the need for consensus on one or an

other epistemological (disciplinary, theoretical or philosophical) position or underpinning. The same applies to matters of praxiology related to practice, profession and even the important issues related to markets, trade, commerce and people’s livelihoods. On the contrary, and in an effort to mature the field, a form of entity, related entities or invented entity is required which can singularly contain a multiplicity of positions and the inclusion of new positions which will inevitably emerge if we are successful.

In other words, we require an entity for the field and not the practice.

As applied here, the term ‘field’ should be understood to include:

- Discipline, practice and education
- The community of the field of which the community of practice is a part
- Spaces of and for the storing and growing of the various forms of value created by the field, not limited to practice or practitioners, for the field and the world in general.

‘Field’ should be understood as representing the interests, needs and values of all stakeholders (internal and external to the field as well as those directly or indirectly impacted by the field) rather than its ‘shareholders’.

At the level implied herein, ‘field’ should pursue an authentic agenda of global, cultural and social inclusion without fear or favour towards any majority, if it is to possess any integrity what’s so ever. To be precise: the purpose, promise and values of the field should not be a matter of numbers or place but rather one of just and fair futures where the wellbeing of the overall ecosystem should take centre stage.

It is my firm belief that a hundred years from now IA will be understood to have been a defining field of the 21st Century for its contribution to the betterment of life on earth. The field as it stands today is a very long way off achieving this purpose, nevertheless, it yet remains within our ability.

End note

The reasons for the dissolution of the IA Institute still need to be understood both broadly and deeply, its lessons, meaning and cautions for the future documented for reasons of historical record and the value therein, for those who will live on while we have have passed on. This may require many years

of fact finding and reflection as it calls for the larger creation of a record of the field as a whole. Regardless, both must be done but at this moment the needs of the future should take priority.

Original article ends here

Commentary

The field of information architecture, as represented by the IAI, by and large expressed an applied library and information science (LIS) frame (Rosenfeld & Morville 1998) within a dominantly North American COP. In this context, the field's practice-led orientation (Hobbs et al 2010), itself a setup favoring action over reflection, appears to be an important factor accounting for a lack of substantive interest in supporting disciplinary development beyond a certain intellectual or cultural scope inherited from the domain of LIS and its disciplinary paradigms.

Examples of such efforts have included, but are of course not limited to: the Journal of Information Architecture; the various Academics and Practitioners Roundtable workshops held annually at the ASIS&T Information Architecture Summit between 2013 and 2019 and at the IA Conference afterwards, and the books "Reframing Information Architecture" (Resmini 2014) and "Advances in Information Architecture" (Resmini et al 2021); the annual research grants awarded by the IAI.

Given the centrality of LIS to the IAI and the community of practice it represented, it is not unreasonable to attribute the lukewarm support of original research into alternative disciplinary positionings, discourses and disciplinary modalities, even though it seemingly paints a picture of narrow-mindedness and a lack of curiosity. Indeed, it falls to those who seek new knowledge and practice to do the research, develop and validate the theory, and then educate and practice a different type of information architecture. Regardless though, is it not striking, and certainly characterizable as short-sighted, that a community of practice should be quite so disinterested in opening up possibilities for expanding the LIS IA frame beyond those foundational tenets established in the 1990s?

Recent shifts observable in Human Computer Interaction (HCI) provide an example of a well-established discipline operating in stark contrast to what we can observe here. Rogers (2012) describes a contemporary "third wave" in HCI constituted by four "turns": "to the wild"; "to embodiment"; "to

culture”; and “to design”. Hobbs and Fenn (2019, p. 755) note that Rogers’ third wave

can be understood as evolving or complementing the first two waves of HCI rather than necessarily negating them and together reflect a macro-trend within HCI towards the consideration of “human values” (Rogers 2012)

Hobbs and Fenn (2019) map Roger’s “four turns” to recent theory and reflections on the practice to be found in information architecture literature. “Pervasive Information Architecture” (Resmini & Rosati 2011b) is noted in relation to “the turn to the wild” (Hobbs & Fenn 2019, p. 758). The work of Hinton (2014) and Haverly (2017), expanded herein to include Lacerda (2015), Benyon and Resmini (2017), Resmini and Rosati (2009; 2011b), Resmini and Lindenfalk (2021), all are related to a turn to embodiment (Hobbs & Fenn 2019, p. 758); Lucas et al (2012), Klyn (2017), Resmini and Rosati (2011b), Resmini and Lindenfalk (2021), Hobbs and Fenn (2014), and Hobbs (in press) all emphasize, if not centrally locate, a turn to design in information architecture (Hobbs & Fenn 2019, p. 759); Hobbs and Fenn (2019), expanded herein to include Surla (2021), Zollman (2021), and Hobbs (in press), apply a “turn to culture” lens to offer a critique of how information architecture could profoundly help or hinder future socio-technological development (Hobbs & Fenn 2019, p 762–765).

While modest in comparison to the output of a discipline such as HCI, the question still remains: why is it the case that these advances in theory are failing to find meaningful integration into the field, alongside the incumbent, classic narratives and discourses in information architecture? A partial explanation may be found in a consideration of the history of the COP and the IAI as they relate to the development of the world’s socio-technological realities.

Resmini (2021) introduces a temporal distinction between a classical (1990–2008) and a contemporary (2008–) practice of information architecture. In the 1990s, LIS IA practitioners already had a discipline (LIS) that provided them with a foundational worldview, knowledge and theory, for example information theory and social epistemology (Floridi 2004), which in turn supported the teaching of “how to do information architecture”. For a period of time, which corresponds to Resmini’s bracketing of a classical period for the field, the COP could reasonably focus on the promotion of what was viewed as a relevant practice, well-situated within the scope of the socio-technological realities of its time, expressing, extending, and applying an existing field of studies in a different context. The need for a specific disciplinary identity for the field was yet to be fully realized. In the late 2000s, having remained largely static while the

boundaries of socio-technological norms expanded, information architecture so conceived increasingly found its relevance diminishing together with its scope. It is for this very reason that Resmini's classical-contemporary distinction carries meaning.

The IAI was established primarily as a professional board of trade [4], entrenching a practice-led culture for the field just a few years prior to the radical socio-technological shifts on which Resmini bases his classic-contemporary distinction. Arguably, and with the benefit of hindsight, these turns of events occurred at the least opportune moment for the young field, save for those few LIS IA practitioners best known in the field (including its leaders in the developed north) who were operating in markets large enough to sustain what had become a niche offering.

In contrast to the fate of classical information architecture, Rogers' account of the ongoing evolution of HCI (2012) demonstrates how a truly vast discipline and field can be capable of operating with the healthy ability to critically reflect upon its own development. It is in light of these shifts in society and technology that the response by the COP of information architecture,[5] can be described as containing two distinct intellectual cultures.

The first culture is the information architecture of applied LIS, primarily concerned with the web and the bounded information architecture objects, such as websites or mobile apps, to whose making it contributes. "Information Architecture for the World Wide Web" (Rosenfeld & Morville 1998) is arguably the text most closely associated with this type of information architecture. In North America, and to a large extent globally, this first culture exists as the incumbent, and constitutes the dominant conceptualisation of information architecture both within and beyond the COP.

The second culture is one which may be characterized as either being dissatisfied with the dominant first culture's understanding of information architecture, or as possessing a curiosity towards, or belief in, alternative disciplinary framings and alternative conceptualisations of what constitutes information architectures in the world. This second culture, which is significantly not a homogenized collective, tends towards views of information architectures as being artificial, human-made and emergent social phenomena, which have always existed and thus predate the web. In this alternative view, information architectures exist and operate tacitly, in their making and being, "hidden" as it were by other ways of seeing:

(w)herever and whenever humans have created associations to convey meaning, they have been practicing information architecture. It is present in every area

of intellectual endeavour, every activity of communications, governance, science, and technology. It provides the underpinnings for marketing, advertising, industrial design, graphic design, political propaganda, law, organizational theory, and many, many other fundamental aspects of human society and civilization. Behind every one of these acts, across the vast millennia of human existence, lies an act of information architecture (Garrett 2021, p. vii).

While this second culture expresses a variety of epistemological, disciplinary, and theoretical accounts, three assertions appear to be held in common: information architectures are existent phenomena in the world; these phenomena predate digital technology and the Internet; and information architectures are capable of affecting the human condition in terms far broader than those we associate with the first culture’s concern for discreet, bounded digital objects.

Whether implied or overtly stated, there seems to be consensus that framing, naming and doing information architecture is something which has travelled alongside human culture since the emergence of the species. Information architecture’s emergent disciplinarity at this moment in history is then viewed as a phenomenon of foregrounding. That is, a shift from being in the background of the concerns and domains which have previously preoccupied humanity which have come to be foregrounded now due to the particular characteristics of contemporary ICTs and their global presence in society, even if this presence is unequal in its distribution (Hobbs & Fenn 2019). This position coheres with that expressed in philosophy by Floridi in his conceptualization of the “infosphere”, the “hyperhistoric” and the “onlife” (2011; 2016; 2019), presented as equivalent exemplars of socio-ontological phenomena that are only now being realized historically.

A point of crucial technical difference exists between these two cultures with regards to how information architectures are theorized to exist in the world. LIS IA is inextricably bound to the internet and the web by its own definition and disciplinary relations. One cannot say that LIS IA dates back to or finds its precedent in examples such as, for instance, the Library of Alexandria. Librarianship and its multifaceted concerns date back to such references, but not LIS IA. Doing so would reduce LIS IA to merely being another form of applied LIS, in which case the “information architecture” of LIS IA would constitute nothing more than a semantic framing. Similarly, the example of the multiple ways that the information architecture of chess may be instantiated in the world [6], either as description-by-analogy or as an argument for how information architecture extends beyond the web, is simply invalid in the theoretical framework of LIS IA. On the contrary, it is a perfectly valid argument within the purview of the second culture [7].

Conclusions

“Re: The Future of Information Architecture” was written in 2019. At the time, continuing to develop second culture disciplinarity, theory and practice within the existing community of practice, as formerly represented by the IAI, seemed a possibility. As such, the article advocated for a broader and more substantively inclusive field of information architecture to be represented within the same community. Two years on, both of these positions can be legitimately challenged.

Despite a handful of critical writers and their research, LIS IA continues along a monolithic path, consolidating an in-community identity for information architecture, along with its practice-led organization. Ongoing reception of second culture efforts, as of the past decade, clearly signal that hopes of any new thinking finding a disciplinary foothold within the incumbent field, are naive at best. As authors of the dominant narrative of the field, the first culture appears simply to lack the motivation to critically self-reflect and (re)assess what constitutes the epistemology, or epistemologies, of the field in relation to today’s socio-technical realities.

Consequently, no vision, no overarching agenda, no concerted efforts exist beyond the marketing of individual practitioners and the field’s associated rhetoric. An overarching agenda for the domain of information architecture, inclusive of second culture paradigms, cannot be formulated within the incumbent COP if not by engaging with second culture discourses and debates.

Central to this necessary discourse and debate are the implications of the various second culture assertions of the materiality of information architectures being in the world. Information architectures can be affected by other forces and they can exert their own force affecting other objects in, and aspects of, the world in radically different ways to that understood by the first culture. Dealing with such a change in perspective requires a different or expanded epistemology, a different science, more and different tools and methods. Given the imbalanced emphasis on practice and disinterest in developing and extending disciplinarity beyond LIS, pursuing these aims will not find the kind of curious, supporting or nurturing environment desired and required by second culture content.

The current zeitgeist speaks of major, systemic global crises and of a structural collapse in western liberalism. It speaks of both individual accountability and collective care beyond the ongoing pandemic and amidst a profound, mass questioning and re-evaluation of meaning-in-life for many.

Understanding that information architectures are systems of meaning which pervade our social worlds desperately requires acknowledgement by the field of information architecture globally. Making information architectures, knowingly or not, in the absence of relevant and critically developed epistemics and theory is unaccountable practice and a liability in the world (Hobbs & Fenn 2019; Zollman 2021). The same applies to the making of information architectures, even as niche LIS IA offerings, when premised upon outdated epistemologies or loosely defined and applied theory and practice.

In the contemporary western milieu, practice-led fields which exist outside of, or disconnected from, responsible and responsive institutional and disciplinary systems leave society in what may be described as the shark infested waters of marketplace. Any harm that our information architectures may inflict, or safety they may compromise, cannot be understood, assessed or predicted within the existing frameworks for the discipline and practice. The impact of information architectures cannot be measured, their existence cannot be managed, and neither their making nor their meaning in the world can be regulated as the field stands today.

It would appear that the field of information architecture has arrived at a crucial fork in the road in a consideration of its future. Neither the IAI nor its dissolution stand as the prime reasons for why we find ourselves at such a juncture. Rather, it would appear that the dissolution has instead provided the unintended opportunity of having created the pause and space for a long overdue critical reflection upon the field.

Clearly there is no going back for the second culture. And thankfully this culture is one which from the beginning has been inclusive and plural in its approach to and conception of a discipline of information architecture. Here we can already see the existence of at least two different epistemological cultures within the larger worldwide COP, interpreted as a sign of vitality and evidenced by the healthy, organic multiplying of diverse types of information architecture and information architecting. This is the path of an *information architecture* capable of being greater than the sum of its parts.

The alternative path at this fork in the road reveals a future landscape of at best ever increasing fragmentation, siloes and duplicated effort. At worst, we would see competitiveness become hostility, hostility becoming marginalisation and ultimately, the dissolution not of an entity—such as the IAI—but of information architecture itself.

Acknowledgments

I would like to offer my gratitude to the Journal of Information Architecture for identifying what value may be found within the article republished here. For the additional, and I imagine infrequent, opportunity of retrospectively offering comment on one's own writing, thanks are given to the Journal of Information Architecture and its Editorial board who were in service May–July 2021. Critical feedback provided during the writing of this article by Bogdan Stanciu, Terence Fenn, and Dan Klyn is gratefully acknowledged.

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Footnotes

[1] The AIfIA first and the IAI afterwards frequently used the terms “field”, “practice” and “discipline” loosely if not interchangeably. Those aspects of disciplinarity which the Institute may have aspired towards, such as supporting or publishing scientifically validated research, providing the platforms for critical discursive debate, institutional education and knowledge storage were all efforts which failed to be sustained or “advanced” with any continuity over the various tenures of its boards.

[2] A request for the data gathered from the survey was filed by the author, directed to the board's then president. While the board was co-operative at the time, this data has yet to be made available. As such, a thorough and factual account of the process of dissolution, for the purposes of maintaining the historic record of the field, has yet to materialize.

[3] Three separate messages were sent by the board to members leading up to dissolution (September 5 2019 to January 15 2020) which provide further information regarding the reasoning of the directors and the process they followed. <https://us1.campaign-archive.com/home/?u=fc57fa0bc131f42aa1b0a2495&id=2d19bc684d>.

[4] A more appropriate organizational design could be found in learned societies which take advantage of contemporary technology and actively work to bridge between theory and practice. For example, Benade (2016) uses this approach in the field of the philosophy of education. A further useful example from the praxis can be found on the E-International Relations website describing the organization's

operating model. <https://www.e-ir.info/about/>.

[5] Notwithstanding the conceptualization of information architecture as institutionalized in other domains such as information technology and systems, and information design. See also Resmini and Rosati (2011a).

[6] The example was first provided by Jorge Arango on the Interaction Design Mailing List in 2009. It has then been extended, expanded, and formalized in a number of conference talks and lectures by Hinton and by Resmini, among others. See Arango (2021) for a detailed explanation.

[7] Pervasive information architecture (PIA), formalized between 2007 and 2011 (Resmini & Rosati 2011b; Resmini 2021), falls within this second culture and is unquestionably the most distinct and fully formed alternative conceptualization of information architecture published to date, post Wurman (1970–2000) and LIS IA (1990–2000). PIA ushers in the “contemporary information architecture” discussed earlier, providing amongst other things, a renewed relevance for the field in line with socio-technological advancements evident since the mid-to-late 2000’s. For examples, see Rosati’s information architecture analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington (Rosati 2020) or Pescatore and Innocenti’s discussion of contemporary television series (2012).

Cite as

Hobbs, J. (2021) Footnotes to “Re: The Future of Information Architecture”. *Journal of Information Architecture*. Vol. 06. Iss. 01. Pp. 79–91. <http://journalofia.org/volume6/issue1/05-hobbs/>.

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