

# design matters



April '01

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## What's in a name?

For this issue, *Design Matters* contacted several people by email and asked them to reply to questions regarding the differences between information design and information architecture (see editor's column for more). Participants were asked to respond to these questions informally; responses received follow in alphabetical order.

In addition, responses were forwarded to Karen Schriver, ID SIG member and author of *Topics in Document Design*, Lou Rosenfeld, author of *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*, and Richard Saul Wurman, author of *Information Architects*, for commentary. Their responses follow those of the participants.

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### Saul Carliner

Assistant Professor, Information Design  
Bentley College, Waltham, Massachusetts

Wurman and Rosenfeld each see part of the picture of information design; no doubt, each is influenced by the world surrounding him.

Rather than looking to information-related work for the complete view of information design, we need to look beyond. What makes a complete building architect? Certainly, there are some who are more competent at structuring buildings and others who are more competent at preparing an effective presentation of the space, but the best architects are the ones who can do both — and design the interior as well. For example, consider Frank Lloyd Wright, who not only designed beautiful buildings, but redefined the way people approached the functional space or structure of a building (he invented the carport if memory serves me correctly). Wright also designed furniture and other decorative accessories for his buildings.

Rosenfeld is correct that traditional views of information architecture don't scale well in the age of complex systems. But systems-only thinking doesn't scale well either: so many of the modern views ignore print, stand-alone video, and live events. These media each have a role to play in making performance happen, and need not be overlooked because they're been around longer than 10 years.

Similarly, so much of information architecture and information design is focused on e-commerce, but when we reach the really thorny issues of workplace information that's read post-sale or for internal use, the term that comes into play is performance support. To be honest, we all have the same goal: effective information.

And in the end, it doesn't really matter whether a designer's incoming strength is in structure or in presentation, just as it doesn't matter whether an incoming technical communicator's strength is in technology or communication. At some point, people must master the other to effectively communicate information.

Note: Readers may want to see my article in the 2nd quarter 2001 issue of *Technical Communication*, in which I argue that a truly effective information designer has a mastery of several areas, including business strategy and industry intelligence. ♦

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### Andrew Dillon

Associate Professor of Information Science & Informatics, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN

Presentation or structure? It's both and then some....

The emerging field of IA has been overly concerned with definition and self-scoping since birth. However, much as I love reading Wurman and Rosenfeld, I cannot help but think that both positions are inadequate when it comes to explaining IA. I think both are right in one sense: Richard when he says that there is a need to bridge several fields; Lou when he talks of the importance of scaling up. But I would not be happy with the fields listed (technology, graphic design and writing) even if we

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The newsletter  
of the STC  
Information  
Design SIG

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## What's in a name?

by Beth Mazur

What's in a name indeed? Here's a bit of the call that went out:

In an interview with *Design Matters*, Richard Saul Wurman said that information architecture was the merging of three fields: technology, graphic design, and writing/journalism. This reflects his vision, published in 1996 in *Information Architecture*, that the information architect is "the individual who organizes the patterns in data, making the complex clear."

In a subsequent issue, Lou Rosenfeld spoke of the influence of the Internet and the WWW on the field: "... Wurman's definition of information architecture doesn't really scale well in the age of more complex information systems like web sites. Like any designer, Wurman's definition is shaped by his contemporary medium—print."

What do you think? Are there two information architectures? One influenced by presentation and one influenced by structure? Is the presentation-based IA better served by the name "information design?" Does the medium really matter? Is print IA/ID different from web-based IA/ID in meaningful ways?

The responses that came back (printed in this newsletter) remind me a bit of the old joke: there are two groups of people in the world—those that divide the world into two groups and those that don't. Our respondents are definitely of two schools: those who believe that names matter and those who believe that the work matters.

As usual, I find myself most strongly aligned with Karen Schriver. I think that names, or labels, do matter (and can you really imagine finding an info architect or info designer who wouldn't say so in the course of their work?). I simply go back to the parable of the six blind men and the elephant mentioned in this column previously. There is something bigger here that we're missing in our individual attempts to describe our experience. Thus I do think the discussion is worth the effort. If you have comments, please email me and I'll print a selection next issue.

**Mea Culpa!** I want to apologize to SIG members for the delay between the last issue (October 2000) and this one. Between a new job and finishing up my master's thesis, it was hard to get everything done. I'll get back to our regular three-times-a-year schedule for this next year and consider moving that up to four issues each year. But that depends on you. If you're interested in helping out, please let me know by emailing me or by stopping by at our business meeting in Chicago. Speaking of which, please stop by either at the biz meeting (Wednesday, 12:30—see your final program for room details) or at the SIG networking lunch. Phylise and I look forward to talking with you!

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*Beth Mazur is Manager of Web Development at AARP and newsletter editor for the ID SIG. She can be reached at [mazur@pobox.com](mailto:mazur@pobox.com).*

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### Assistant Manager, Managing Editor

Beth Mazur  
2525 N. 10th St.  
Arlington, VA 22201  
202-434-3675  
[mazur@pobox.com](mailto:mazur@pobox.com)

### SIG Manager

Phylise Banner  
[banner@skidmore.edu](mailto:banner@skidmore.edu)

### Immediate Past Manager

Cheri Taylor  
[taylorcw@compuserve.com](mailto:taylorcw@compuserve.com)

### Membership Coordinator

Michael Albers  
[malbers@memphis.edu](mailto:malbers@memphis.edu)

## Submissions

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901 N. Stuart St., Suite 904  
Arlington, VA 22203-1854  
(703) 522-4114

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could scale them up appropriately. Where is the user here? Where is the emotion? the passion? the discomfort or the empowerment that real human beings experience in their interactions?

Architects must concern themselves with the experiences people have in the spaces architects design for them. Information architecture is no different. Certainly structure is important, as is presentation, but there is more at work here. Information architecture actually seems to face an extended set of concerns. I cannot see current models of technology, graphic design, or writing offering sufficient guidance for interaction design, we need psychology, sociology, and learning theory at a minimum. This is why I am much more comfortable with the idea of IA as a process, not a person.

In the end, presentation and structure are somewhat inseparable in the minds of users, both combine to provide a shape to their experience. IA is about shaping the experiences of multiple stakeholders, no more, no less. It is a problem set as much as a discipline, and existing fields can help but not provide all the answers. Interesting times..... ♦

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## Jesse James Garrett

Partner

Adaptive Path, San Francisco, CA

The trouble is that everybody has their own definitions for information architecture and information design. When Richard Saul Wurman refers to “information architecture,” he’s usually talking about what most of us know as information design; whereas when Nathan Shedroff talks about “information design,” he’s probably referring to what is commonly called information architecture.

One thing I tried to accomplish with “The Elements of User Experience” was to nail down my own definitions for these terms to better understand my own thinking about the field. The conclusion I came to as a result of that exercise was that information architecture and information design are indeed quite different.

**Different concerns:** Information architecture is primarily about cognition — how people process information and construe relationships between different pieces of information. Information design is primarily about perception — how people translate what they see and hear into knowledge.

**Different skills:** Information architects come from a variety of backgrounds, but I sense that a majority

of them display an orientation toward language (the original toolkit for “architecting information”). Information designers, on the other hand, tend to be oriented toward the visual arts. As a result, the majority of information designers come from exactly one discipline: graphic design.

**Different milieus:** Information architecture belongs to the realm of the abstract, concerning itself more with the structures in the mind than the structures on the page or screen. Information design, however, couldn’t be more concrete, with considerations such as color and shape fundamental to the information designer’s process.

While we are all thankful to Richard Saul Wurman for bringing the notion and the term information architecture to the world’s attention, I think it’s time we acknowledged that the field has matured and been refined beyond Wurman’s initial conception and definition of it. ♦

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## Thom Haller

Principal

Info.Design, Washington, DC

As a teacher of both information architecture and information design, I’ve had many opportunities to reflect on the differences between these labels (and among the other zillion terms we use to categorize people who structure information).

As we know, labels matter. I recall my own label-searching seven years ago. At the time, I was a technical writer/instructional designer with an interest in cognitive science/visual communication. By the early nineties, I’d spent ten years in professional communication, working as a “research associate,” “senior scientist,” “corporate communicator” and “documentation specialist.”

“Perhaps I’m a data stylist,” I recall thinking about the time I discovered Richard Saul Wurman and reclassified myself as an information architect. I believed, like Wurman, we could learn strategies for making information more understandable. I believed

we could re-educate others to see the “hidden” value in information for improving organizational performance. Did my belief in structure, process, and performance make me an information architect? I intended to find out.

Before too long, I had an opportunity to teach a course in “Document and Information Design.” Armed with Karen Schriver’s *Dynamics in Document Design* and Donald Norman’s *The Design of Everyday*

*Those of us who have chosen to make the complex clear, to create meaning and understanding, should do our work without concern for occupational titles.*

— Richard Saul Wurman

*Things*, my university students explored ways we could envision the reader as an active participant and major stakeholder in the design/development of documents. Did they care if they were document designers or information designers? Not really. Did they consider themselves budding information architects? Probably not.

Six months later, my colleague and I launched a course, "Information Architecture," to adult learners. Although we found the label interesting, it didn't matter as much as the necessity to deal with the increasing onslaught of online information.

By the time we developed the course structure for a 2-day IA class, we were able to use Rosenfeld/Morville's text *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* to complement the class. Their perspectives were useful, as my students had shifted once more — from communication/information professionals to web site builders.

These students had a job to do. They were captivated by the research only to the extent that it helped them build communication products in which their users could find information, use it, and appreciate the experience. As web-builders, they wanted strategies for "real world" IA — developing communication products in the context of people, politics, pitfalls, and possibilities.

This remains true today. Not surprisingly, my information design students want this context as well. Few care if they are called information designers. But all want to find ways to present information with the user in mind.

So do these labels matter? I offer a resounding, "sort of." A new label supported me as I began to differentiate my work from that of a traditional "writer." But labels can thwart us as well. For example, I've worked with web writers who were not willing to think visually (after all, they were "writers" - they believed they should attend to words only). Will they be able to help their users? Probably not.

The label Information Architect carries with it real-world implications. As information architects we must help users see the untapped potential of information structure. We must strategize, plan, render, manage, build, and measure so we can help organizations improve performance, boost productivity, and increase profitability. Users need results, not labels. ♦

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## Bob Jacobson

Editor, *Information Design*

Experience Design takes us to the next quantum level of design: information design is only a subset, and a razor-thin one at that, of experience design.

Wurman's definition of information architecture isn't non-scalable, as Lou contends. It's passe. Experience design paradigmatically trumps information architecture.

Information design, of course, was invented by form designers to give their profession a unique disciplinary edge. It pertains to the organization of information generally, in any medium, to achieve the information's efficient and effective dissemination. In its original form, information design only roughly accommodated interactionist methodologies. Information design vied with information architecture — a term lifted from computer science, where it still means the structure of information processed by a CPU or database — for supremacy as a way of describing the new professional activities associated with interactive technologies.

Information architecture, largely through Wurman's influence (and press engine), triumphed.

But information architecture did not become enlarged in the process. It remained a limited and inadequate framework for analyzing the design of experience.

There was a time when information architecture may have referred in a general way to the structuring of learning environments. Its use subsequently shrunk to signify only interactive informational environments; and then it shrank once more, to mean only interactive informational environments represented by Web artifacts (like web pages). At this point, IA became irrelevant to everyone except web designers/IAs and heavy users of the web. This may not sit well with Lou, but in fact I believe that what Argus does is bigger than IA, more like ED as I define it.

ED is about the systematic design and construction of multidimensional learning environments which, on a timeline, make possible the catalyzing of experiences. Experiences so designed are intended to change the participants' beliefs, understanding, actions, or all four. They are multi-platform, in the broadest sense: the physical, haptic experience is as

*Our concerns are reasonable for names do matter. Names are catalysts for the imagination. ... As members of a growing but relatively unknown field, we need to pay attention to the resonances of the name we choose for some names enable communication better than others.*

— Karen Schriver

important — some would say, more important — than ephemeral, virtual experience. The former, in many cases, is irresistible: a taste, a scent, a blow to the head; bright lights, darkness, motion, stasis. The virtual experience, as my healer partner likes to say, is “all in the head.” This may not be true in an immersive 3D environment in a virtual-reality Cave, but it certainly is sitting in front of my computer (even a powerful one) with a tiny monitor that subtends only 40 degrees of the visual field, inadequate support of streaming video, and sound quality on a par with my Radio Shack portable radio.

Then there are experiences which are unintentional as well as non-digital, powerful nonetheless. These are the synergetic result of participants interacting with designs in unanticipated ways due to personal histories, psychical and physiological idiosyncrasies, and so forth. Not surprisingly, these constitute the majority of experiences since no design can encompass all possible variations in terms of participant perceptions and reactions. Gradually we may winnow down the possibilities, more accurately prescribing what produces experiences and gaining great power in the process. Jeremy Rifkin, in *The Age of Access* (Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), fears our power will become Promethean, dooming free choice and turning every human experience into a managed affair. I hope not.

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## Whitney Quesenbery

User-Centered Information/Interaction/Usability Architect/Designer  
Cognetics Corporation, Princeton, NJ

What’s in a name, indeed? User Experience v. User Interaction v. User Interface v. Information Architecture v. Information Design v. Human Factors v. User-Centered Design v. Performance Centered Design v. ... As far as I can tell, a choice of title says more about “where you got on the bus” than any real distinction of goals or often even of results (assuming two equally good designers are being compared). In other words, it says something about your background, and perhaps your skill set. It might also say something about your approach to design.

Perhaps we can all agree on this: To create a successful web site, application or virtually any product you must know something about your users — who they are, what they are trying to accomplish,

and they way they think about the task.

But, perhaps not. Definitions of an information architect as “the individual who organizes patterns in data, making the complex clear” focus on the person and their design process. Contrast this with the definition of usability in ISO 9241 — “The extent to which a product can be used by specified users to

achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use” — and its focus on the results of the design work. Does information architecture start from the information, while usability or user-centered design starts from the person and the context of use?

After that, specific skills solve different problems: indexing and information retrieval organize large collections of information; ergonomics informs the design of physical interaction; ethnography and psychology provide research techniques; usability and user-centered design help

*To design today's heterogeneous, high-stakes information systems, a new applied field is emerging. It ultimately will weave together the tools, techniques, and experience of any existing discipline that acknowledges information as important and valuable stuff in and of itself.*

— Lou Rosenfeld

people work effectively.

In defining a field, each person seems to look at the world and place themselves in the center of the circle, giving their specialty top billing as the summation of all the others. What exactly is gained by this political one-upmanship? In the face of this inflation, I find myself pulling back to the simplest craft title I can find. Or avoiding titles altogether. Sometimes it’s easier to simply say that for any project I take on, I start from the people who will use the product and try to figure out what I need to do to make it usable for them.

Efficient, effective, satisfying.

Let’s concentrate on doing the work. ♦

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## Nathan Shedroff

Author, *Experience Design*  
San Francisco, CA

There has always been a difference between presentation and organization, though in my experience, this is a difficult distinction for many people. All information architecture (or design, if you will) focuses first on the organization of data in order to transform it into information. It is this act that builds context and understanding. The design of the presentation is a separate act that can’t be done well until the organization (or, structure) is first completed. Presentation can take many forms and there are definitely serious decisions to make, but mostly

designers take this opportunity to decorate instead of inform.

Presentation is simply presentation, it's close to graphic design but, by no means is it information design. Much of information design has been perverted into "prettified" charts and graphs but this is no more than traditional graphic design. Of course, this isn't to say that information design (or architecture) can't be beautiful, but that its focus is on the function or communication and not the form of presentation.

Personally, I see no difference between the terms "information design" and "information architecture" and I find the hoopla around the terms to be not only a distraction but a waste of time. While we're splitting hairs over definitions, there's still so much work to do to communicate and teach what information design/architecture is in the first place.

Since information design/architecture is primarily conceptual, the medium doesn't matter at all. There are always differences between media that will bear on the solution, but all of the important decisions are still media-independent because they bear on the experience and the understanding of it by the audience. The only difference between print/IA and any other kind of IA are the limits imposed by the medium on the presentation of the solution. ♦

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## David Sless

Visiting Research Fellow, Coventry University  
Director, Communication Research Institute  
of Australia

I considered myself greatly privileged when I was invited by the late Ron Easterby to attend the first information design conference in the Netherlands in 1978. It was an occasion that gave rise to a great deal. The formation of the *Information Design Journal*, the Information Design Association in the UK, the eventual publication of many papers from the conference [Easterby, R. and Zwaga, H (1984) *Information Design*. London: Wiley.], and a great deal more by way of lasting friendships and associations.

Of the many things that we all argued about and discussed at the conference, there was one thing on which I don't recall any argument, and that was the central thing that had brought us all together — designing information for people. I don't recall anyone arguing whether designing forms, signposts, symbols, maps, text, instrument panels, or whole systems of these things were legitimate concerns of information design. Nor do I think we were in any disagreement about the central purpose of information design, which was to help make information in all its many forms more easily usable by people. We did, of course, argue about how to go about such a

purpose, and we still do.

I mention this event, its consequences, and my recollections of it simply to say that I have not felt any discomfort with the term 'information design' or my association with it, nor have I ever felt a need to reinvent myself as a graphic designer, technical writer, or information architect. Nor have I felt slighted by people who think information design is anathema to the free creative spirit of design, a pretense, or a tool of dark capitalist forces.

But I do feel a certain antipathy towards the term information architects. Let me explain why. I first came across the term in a flier from Graphis Press announcing a book of that title that Richard Saul Wurman had put together. Two thoughts struck me. First, Graphis Press has a well deserved reputation for putting together books that celebrate the flair and creative expression of individual graphic designers, and indeed there is much to celebrate in the world of graphic design. Was this going to be another celebration? Much as I enjoyed such celebrations, they always struck me as superficial. Because the central purpose seemed to be to valorise individual talent — turning people into heroes — the celebrations were always a little light on critical thinking or analysis. I always wanted to know more-about techniques, methods, difficulties, what the wonderful work had achieved in the world, and how did we know these things. I also wanted to know what it was like to read these wonderful works, use them to do practical things etc. Framed as they were on a beautiful page, these works of great designers remained mute on that subject, as did the accompanying text.

Was *Information Architects* going to be yet another puff piece from Graphis?

The second thought that struck me was based on what I knew from my research into architectural design methods and my first hand experience of architectural education, architects, and architecture. In my view, the last century was not a good one for architecture generally. This is not to say that there were not individual works of great genius. Every century throws up a few. But there were far too many architectural works that were and remain difficult to find ones way around in, unpleasant to work and live in — which seem to insult our humanity rather than providing us with spaces in which to enjoy our lives — and yet which received architectural awards. Moreover, the accompanying rationale and grandiose claims seem to have more in common with the flimsy justifications used for megalomania than a serious and sensitive engagement with humanity. Was *Information Architects* going to offer such grandiose claims?

I awaited its publication with interest. Sadly, it met my expectations.

Now it may be that the next work on information

architects will be different. But until then, I shall carry on calling myself an information designer. ♦

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## Christina Wodtke

Information Architect  
Carbon IQ, San Francisco, CA

Information architecture is not about what medium we work in, it's not about what title we are called; it's about making complex information and difficult tasks manageable for human beings.

When I was in art school, we were expected to choose a department — the equivalent to a college's major. I was perplexed at the thought of choosing between Painting, Sculpture, Ceramics or Photography. I was being asked to select the medium I would work in for the next three years, which seemed very odd. I wanted to use my art to reveal how people remember their lives, but I didn't know if this was a clay problem or a paint problem. Three years later, I graduated with the realization that I wasn't a painter or a sculptor, but an artist.

Now I see a similar division occurring in the web community. We are starting to be able to name the different aspects of a web design process: Information Architecture, Interaction Design, Identity Design, Information Design, Interface Design. And as we name the aspects, it seems perfectly logical to also assign unique people to each role:

"To build the new Bank of the City site, we'll need to hire an information architect and a interaction designer. What, we need an infographic? Okay, let's put an information designer in the budget too." the Project Manager might say.

But people aren't components. There isn't a tidy one-to-one relationship of roles and people. Instead the Project Manager says something like this:

"To build the new Bank of the City site, we'll need Information Architecture, Interface Design, Interaction Design and a couple of infographics. So — Joe's great at IA and he makes a mean infographic, and Sarah's amazing at interaction design. Joe and Sarah it is."

Maybe Joe's title is IA, and Sarah's is graphic designer, but this doesn't matter. A smart company will look at their people and build a team in which the members support each other. A dumb company won't look beyond the org chart, and will start hiring people for the skills they already have.

When I first read Richard Saul Wurman's *Information Architects*, I was taken aback. I don't make subway maps or diagrams of weather systems. Then — as I worked my way through the book, lingering on the descriptions of the problems these Information Architects were solving — I started to realize the medium didn't matter much. There is something

unique in the way an IA thinks that allows them to act as a translator of complex data to facilitate understanding.

So who is an Information Architect? I am. My partners at Carbon IQ are. One was a designer before he was an IA and one was an editor. I used to write HTML. Despite the fact that we have come from three very different mediums, we've all chosen Information Architecture as our art. In the end, it doesn't much matter to the companies who hire us if we are called Interaction Designers or Information Designers. What matters is that we help their customer understand complex information and accomplish difficult tasks without pain. We're all Information Architects. ♦

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## Karen Schriver

President, KSA Document Design & Research  
Pittsburgh, PA

The question, "What's in a name?" provoked a number of interesting answers. Most addressed whether the field of information design should be renamed information architecture in one of two incarnations — one focusing on presentation suggested by Richard Saul Wurman and the other focusing on structure by Lou Rosenfeld. Other respondents, such as Bob Jacobson, suggested that using the name information architecture was passe and that experience design was more fitting for the field. Still others, such as David Sless, felt that information design already suits the field quite well.

In my mind, the name we choose should resonate deeply with those inside the field as well as with the field's many stakeholders. Several years ago, I employed the term "document design" to describe the field broadly concerned with integrating words and pictures in ways that helped people carry out their goals for engaging with content (see *Dynamics in Document Design*, 1997: Wiley). Although document design fit the situation at the time, a more inclusive term would better capture what is going on today. Recent debate over whether information design is that more inclusive term has left some people uneasy about what the field should be called and about what they should call themselves.

Our concerns are reasonable for names do matter. Names are catalysts for the imagination. They trigger associations, memories, feelings. As members of a growing but relatively unknown field, we need to pay attention to the resonances of the name we choose for some names enable communication better than others. We need to listen to how the name we identify with identifies us.

An important question in choosing a name for the field is: "What resonance will it have?" And in the

context of our discussion here, the question is: "Is the resonance of information design better or worse, more or less accurate, and more or less inclusive than information architecture or experience design?"

I'd like to suggest that the name of the field be chosen on how well it meets the following criteria.

First, most people in the field should identify with the name. They should be able to say to themselves, "that's me" or at least "that's the group that's most like what I do or how I think (even if that's not what I do right now)."

Second, the name of the field should be broad enough to include everything its members engage in, yet specific enough to exclude things members do not do. In other words, it should evoke the key activities of the field, but distinguish them from activities that are not part of the field.

Third, and quite important, the name should generate positive resonance. Upon hearing the name of the field, a potential stakeholder should say something like, "That sounds interesting." Such a positive reaction opens the door for defining the field in ways that are sensitive to the context.

Fourth, the name should have vision. It should cover most activity as it is currently carried out but also be extensible enough to accommodate changes in activities.

Because neither information architecture nor experience design meets these four criteria, I do not favor these names over information design. Wurman's characterization of information architecture seems to ignore the rhetoric of invention — imagining, representing, drafting visual and verbal content. He seems to suggest that the architect's job is one of displaying already meaningful content so that it is understandable. We never learn whether the design projects he reifies in *Information Architects* work for anyone other than the designer. The consideration of stakeholders appears to be little more than lip service, lacking serious treatment of how one learns about what stakeholders need, want, and would get excited about. Current formulations of information architecture not only seem to ignore invention, but they also say little about revision and how one goes about getting good ideas for integrating word and image. Moreover, Wurman's presentation of information architecture seems to overvalue the designer's personal gift for communicating things that people will understand and undervalue the dynamic interplay between designer and stakeholders in the communication development process. Our field is not well served by outdated romantic visions of information architect as demi-god.

Experience design intrigues me because it takes us beyond traditional user-centered design (UCD). In the traditional model of UCD, the main concern was helping people understand. People were considered

in terms of their thinking and performance. In contrast, newer models such as experience design recognize the need to consider people's thoughts and feelings, that is, the interaction between cognition and affect. But the activities that comprise "designing experiences for people" do not need the label "experience design" to identify them. Information design (broadly construed) already covers the types of work he describes. The example Jacobson offers, building multidimensional learning environments, is being done by many people in information design. And while insinuating good design into the development of cutting-edge technologies and haptic experiences is very cool, these activities do not capture the heart of the field. It seems to me that experience design invites incorrect and unfortunate interpretations of the field. For example, my hairdresser believes that his hairstyles allow men and women to experience themselves in new ways; is he an experience designer? I guess I want to know who is not an experience designer? One thing though, experience design rings well on criteria four; it has the vision thing. But I'm still not convinced it is the best vision.

I'll stick with information design...at least for now. Yes, these are interesting times. ♦

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## Lou Rosenfeld

Author, *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*

Now that it's safe to share it, let me let you in on a dirty little secret: I'm not really an information architect (nor, for that matter, an information designer).

As someone who helped "define" the field of information architecture, I am guilty of the crime that Whitney Quesenbery so aptly describes: "In defining a field, each person seems to look at the world and place themselves in the center of the circle, giving their specialty top billing as the summation of all the others." My early view of information architecture shared too much in common with librarianship and information science, the fields where I cut my academic teeth. Not that there was anything wrong with LIS; on the contrary, I was frustrated that other fields simply would not take us seriously, preferring to reinvent and relabel what we had been doing for centuries. Doubly frustrating when the Internet's explosion was going to make LIS an even more necessary skill set for addressing information overload.

Because few if any would hire librarians to consult on the design their sites, Peter Morville searched for a stealth label and came up with "information architecture" as both sufficiently flexible and accurate enough to describe our work.

Seven or eight years and much experience later, I

find myself in the same boat with many of the other commentators in this issue, grappling with issues of self-identity and disciplinary disconnectedness. Clearly the term “information architecture” is too focused on information and its structure, perhaps to the exclusion of user and contextual issues, even if in practice IA is much more inclusive. And describing oneself as an information architect (or any of the other terms mentioned) brings with it the risk of being unfairly pigeon-holed.

So I’ll duck the label and the debates it raises, and, like most of the other commentators, encourage the discussion to focus on what it is we actually do and why it matters. To that end, let’s explore an analogy: a century ago, revolutions in communications, transportation, and production technologies gave rise to the multi-national corporation. Existing ways of conducting business simply wouldn’t work in this new context; instead, the applied field of business rose to meet new challenges. Business drew from existing disciplines to weave together the tools and techniques of accounting, advertising, management, marketing and other areas into a coherent, understandable whole. New roles and methodologies arose around these practices, and the field ultimately solidified to the point where it could be supported by traditional academic institutions.

Now we’re dealing with similar revolutions: today’s information systems are simply too complicated to be designed by a person with a single disciplinary skillet and bias. In the pre-Web days, a computer scientist could design a passable information system; after all, it would only serve a small captive audience, contain fairly homogenous information, and be used in a limited context. This is simply no longer the case.

To design today’s heterogeneous, high-stakes information systems, a new applied field is emerging. It ultimately will weave together the tools, techniques, and experience of **any** existing discipline that acknowledges information as important and valuable stuff in and of itself. Whether you call this new field information architecture, information design, experience design, or knowledge management, it will eventually borrow from ethnography, linguistics, business strategy, journalism, data modeling, librarianship, HCI... you get the picture. This new field will likely follow the same developmental path as business, and will be at least as important to the planet’s future.

Let’s all agree that this is what’s happening, admit that none of us holds “the answer,” and sidestep the trap of self-centeredness as Whitney warns us. And if we must discuss labels, let’s avoid the grandiose and instead concern ourselves with agreeing on terms that are useful in the trenches (e.g., should we call it

a “blueprint” or a “site map”). After all, what field could succeed if its practitioners can’t have effective conversations about its nuts-and-bolts issues? ♦

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## Richard Saul Wurman

Author, *Information Architects*

In 1975 as national chairman I began preparing for a gathering of five thousand AIA architects in Philadelphia the following year. I called the meeting the Architecture of Information and began to call myself an Information Architect.

The role of the Information Architect is to make the complex clear. Most designers at that time and still today are trying to impress their peers with the look of their work rather than creating meaning or understanding.

I find it distractingly humorous that over the years so many people have either directly or indirectly asked me about the choice between various terms for the field that I have made my career — information design, information architecture, experience design, interactive design, and so on. I find these discussions academic and pointless. Everyone has better things to do.

I certainly agree with Thom Haller that users need results, not labels.

I take particular exception to Bob Jacobson’s snide comment about my press engine. He should check his facts about my relationship with the press. I do not give out press passes to my TED conferences and no review copies of *UNDERSTANDING USA* were sent out. Did he send out copies of *Information Design* to reviewers for comments?

Nathan Shedroff in his third paragraph states, “I find the hoopla around the terms to be not only a distraction but a waste of time.” Thank you Nathan.

Finally, thank you, Christina Wodtke for your insightful comments.

Louis Kahn said to me shortly before he died that an idea that does not happen is no idea at all. Late in his life, Mies van der Rohe told a student interviewing him about his work that the secret to his success was to “do good work.”

I think the combination of these two statements plus the title of the book Ralph Caplan, Ivan Chermayeff and I authored in 1970 — *Design Matters* — plus the passion that many of us have for the celebration of understanding, is enough. Those of us who have chosen to make the complex clear, to create meaning and understanding, should do our work without concern for occupational titles. ♦

# Information Design

The field of information design applies traditional and evolving design principles to the process of translating complex, unorganized, or unstructured data into valuable, meaningful information.

The practice of information design requires an interdisciplinary approach which combines skills in graphic design, writing and editing, instructional design, human performance technology, and human factors.

Although its reach extends far beyond traditional boundaries of technical communication, the essentials of information design profoundly affect our work. The products of information design occur in any domain in which clear communication is essential, from those familiar to technical communicators, such as reference manuals and online help systems, to those outside the traditional realm of our work, such as public signage in public buildings, insurance and tax forms, and user interface design.

# Our Mission

The mission of our SIG is to meet the professional development needs of our members and to act as a vital conduit between STC and information designers at large. Our objectives include:

- advancing awareness of information design among STC members;
- assisting members interested in acquiring information design skills;
- encouraging information design research and making available information design resources;
- examining the roles and practices of the information designer;
- and providing a forum for the discussion of relevant topics.

*Please visit the ID SIG website at <http://www.stc.org/id>*



**The Information Design SIG**  
c/o Beth Mazur  
2525 N. 10th St. #611  
Arlington, VA 22201

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