

# INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

## How We Create Meaning: Introduction

by Laura S. Creekmore, guest editor

## How We Create Meaning

### EDITOR'S SUMMARY

The *Bulletin's* special section on information architecture explores three noteworthy aspects of creating meaning and designing information. Kate Garklavs explains voice and tone in writing, discussing how consistently conveying personality and values can enhance the user experience in information architecture. Victor Yocco and Ashley Pulli explore social math as a method to inform through a visual story, making complex data understandable, meaningful and compelling. Dan Klyn analyzes two disparate works to demonstrate how internal comparison can shed light on the evolution and information architecture of a piece. The articles of the special section offer intriguing new insights into information architecture.

### KEYWORDS

information architecture  
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 information content  
 user experience  
 organizational communication  
 visual information display

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Each year the *Bulletin* focuses one special section on information architecture. This year we take a look at three different ways we create meaning when we design information: via physical and organizational structure, through voice and tone, and in the choices we make in data presentation.

The three pieces in this special issue go beyond what a casual industry observer might consider when thinking of information architecture. We can certainly all agree that categorization, organization and navigation in digital spaces are part of information architecture. But quite a few pieces of work in our field in recent years have explored the other facets (see what I did there?) of IA work. This issue takes on some of those.

When I first started talking to **Kate Garklavs** about contributing to this issue, we had some great back-and-forth about the ways that content and information architecture intersect. Every content strategist doesn't do information architecture work, and every information architect doesn't do content work, but we all have to understand these related disciplines even if we stay well within our own areas. However, many of us today are, like me, focusing specifically on the intersection of the two fields.

I'm pleased to share Garklavs' "**Voice and Tone as Information Architecture**" with you for two reasons:

- Garklavs takes on a topic that many would assume has little impact on information architecture and shows us a new way of thinking about it.
- Her thinking showcases some of the top-notch work at 18F, which is part of the new United States Digital Service, where some of the top practitioners in the field, including Garklavs, are working on U.S. government projects to make the "citizen experience" easier for us to navigate.

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**Victor Yocco** and **Ashley Pulli** just presented a workshop at the IA Summit on the topic of social math. When I saw it on the Summit calendar back in the winter, I knew it would make a great piece for you here. Many of us are challenged daily to find better ways to help our audiences quickly make meaning from complicated data.

Over the past few years, we have seen the *infographic* rise (as many of us latched on to the great potential in visually representing data in a new way) and fall (as millions of “info”graphics have been created without much thought or intent, such that the word *information* really shouldn’t be associated with them at all).

In “**Social Math: A Method to Make Complex Data Meaningful**,” Yocco and Pulli walk us through their thoughtful process for using social math – to create visual representations of data that have a clear goal for the audience. I have no doubt that their thinking will make it easier for you to define the objective and the strategy the next time you need to share data with your audience for quick understanding and action.

As long as I have known **Dan Klyn**, I’ve known about his continuing scholarship related to Richard Saul Wurman and his works. I am delighted to have a really interesting piece from Klyn in this issue, “**A Comparison in Pursuit of ‘The Masterworks of Information Architecture’: Learning from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Richard Saul Wurman’s *The City, Form and Intent***,” which compares the information structures of the two works.

I hardly know where to begin to describe this piece to you. I could start

by telling you that you’re likely to learn some interesting history about the publication of *Ulysses* or the fascinating thought and physical process that Wurman put into his city maps, designed to teach architecture students in the early 1960s. But this piece has so many other fascinating jumping off points for you, as well.

Klyn is a wonderful storyteller (in person, if you ever get the opportunity, as well as in print), and the piece reflects his own synthesis of these two seminal works from different fields, along with his experiences and scholarship. You’ll have to keep reading to learn how bike repair fits into the big picture, but Klyn’s observations there continue to resonate with me today, weeks after I first read them in a draft of this piece.

This issue has given me so many new perspectives on my work in information architecture, and I hope it will give you insights, as well. When I set out to put it together, I wasn’t at all sure how these pieces would relate to one another – I just knew that each one felt like something important for the field today.

As I look at them together now, I am delighted with – perhaps I should call it – the serendipity of their presence here together. I have learned some things, planned some action steps and re-oriented my thinking as I’ve read these three pieces. I hope they provide you with similar insights and useful takeaways.

How can we take our understanding of IA beyond navigation and classification? Consider these three pieces as you look for more ways to create and communicate meaning to your audiences. ■