Chapter VIII

Information Architecture and Navigation Design for Web Sites

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ABSTRACT

Information architecture concerns how to structure the content of an information space. Information architects design information spaces. Staying with the notion of information space leads us to the realisation that people need to be able to both conceptualise an information space and find their way through that information space to where they want to go. People need to be able to navigate information space. In this chapter we explore two key issues of Web site design: information architecture and the design of navigation support. In order to do this we draw upon theories of information spaces and theories of navigation in urban spaces. From these theories a number of practical features of Web sites are described.

INTRODUCTION

Information architecture has had a relatively short history. Although the term was coined by Richard Saul Wurman in 1975 his interests lie more in the effective presentation of information than in its structure (Wurman, 2001). He has published some excellent books and his Web site is full of great examples. However the term information design would probably be a better moniker. In this chapter we have little to say about information design, important though it is (see Jacobson, 2000).
Peter Morville in his introduction to *Information Architecture* (Gilchrist & Mahon, 2004) traces the term back to his efforts, with Louis Rosenfeld that culminated in their 2002 book *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* (Rosenfeld & Morville, 2002). Information architecture is a growing area of study and, as a result, it changes fast. It is not just the property of Web designers, however. Think of the menu structure on a mobile phone, the layout of the content on a DVD, and even the arrangement of functions on a digital camera — you are thinking about information architecture. Information architecture concerns how to structure the content of an information space. Information architects design information spaces. Indeed many of the ideas presented in this chapter appear in Morville’s (2005) recent book *Ambient Findability*.

Staying with the notion of information space leads us to the realisation that people need to be able to both conceptualise an information space and to find their way through that information space to where they want to go. A clean and crisp architecture will aid conceptualisation just as a well-designed city is easier to understand than a rambling place that has evolved over the years (though it may not be so pretty or engaging, something we return to later). The other key feature of a well-designed, geographical space is that there are signposts, maps, and landmarks to help you find your way around. The design of systems to support navigation in geographical spaces such as cities, airports, motorways, and so on can be a useful source of inspiration for Web site designers.

In this chapter we bring together two theoretical positions to provide sound advice on designing for human interaction with Web sites. On the one side is the theory of information spaces (Benyon, 2005) and on the other is the theory of human computer interaction (HCI) as navigation of information spaces (Benyon, 1998; Benyon 2001). Together they enable us to bring much of the knowledge of spatial design gained from the design of cities and other physical spaces to the design of Web sites. First we consider information architecture in general and information architecture in Web site design. We then look briefly at navigation in the geographical world and how some of these ideas can be applied to navigation of information spaces, particularly Web sites. In the conclusion we pull these ideas together to provide clear advice for Web site designers. However, just as architects cannot generally pull standard solutions “out of a hat” for architectural problems, neither can information architects. Information architecture is a design discipline: Information architects need to think hard about their clients and customers’ needs, goals, and desires.

### INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

An information space is a combination of things — objects, displays, people, signs, icons, sounds, and so on — that is used by someone to provide information. Information spaces allow people to plan, manage, and control their activities. A Web site is the archetypal information space.

Information architecture is concerned with the design of information spaces. Information architects have to abstract some aspect of a domain and choose how this should be presented to people. The first thing they must do, then, is to decide how to conceptualise the activity they are aiming to support. This is known as defining an ontology (Benyon, Turner, & Turner, 2005). The ontology — the chosen conceptualisation of some activity — is critical and will affect all the other characteristics of the information space. For example, we can consider the Web to be populated by objects such as Web sites, Web pages, links, GIF
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