

## **Bandleaders in the Idea Business**

### **In conversation with Lou Rosenfeld**

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*Lou Rosenfeld co-authored “Information Architecture for the World Wide Web”, the “polar bear book”, now “Information Architecture for the Web and Beyond”. A central figure in the field, Rosenfeld is one of the founders of the Asilomar Institute for Information Architecture, later the Information Architecture Institute, and the person who started the Information Architecture Summit (now the IA Conference). He now heads Rosenfeld Media, a company he started and which produces user experience books, conferences, and workshops.*



(Photo: M. J. Babic)

*Q: What better question to ask Lou Rosenfeld than how it all started?*

Usually, when people ask me this sort of question, I talk about going to library school in the late 1980s at the University of Michigan. In 1988 I was a year out of undergraduate school after a history degree, and I wasn't really sure what to do. I

waited tables, delivered Yellow Pages, worked in child care, sold sofas, did some landscaping. Fun jobs like that. I finally made up my mind to go back to graduate school—but where?

I had an idea for a business: an apartment listing service, something that I thought was badly needed in Ann Arbor, a college town. I didn't want to be a programmer or get a computer science degree and the local library school, which had just been renamed the School of Information, seemed just fine and proved to be a good choice, as it seemed that databases of books couldn't be all that different from databases of apartment listings. Little did I know.

My introduction to the information revolution was my online database searching class. We were using 2400 baud modems to dial into commercial databases at \$300 an hour. Online searching was brand new and, given the cost, very stressful, but things changed very quickly during my two years at the School of Information. Soon we were working with a revolutionary new technology, CD-ROMs, and we got our own computer lab, where I got a job.

As I was young and male, and happened to be technology savvy relative to many of the people there, including the faculty, it was assumed that I was pretty smart, and I was afforded a lot more opportunities while in the program. I graduated in 1990 and, after a summer as a Hypercard programmer—probably my favorite job ever, I was hired by our new dean to be the School of Information's in-house technologist. I also did some work for the university library system, and eventually got to work on an interesting project involving personalized filtering of Usenet postings.

During these years, I was exposed to HCI, a variety of early remote collaboration technologies, and ultimately much of the pre-Web Internet - stuff like FTP, Telnet, and WAIS. Soon I was a Gopher master for the University of Michigan libraries and a PhD student at the School of Information.

I started teaching courses there on how to use those early Internet tools to find information on and, ultimately, create topical guides to the Internet. This was pre-Yahoo and it's how I met Peter Morville: he was one of my students.

And while I'd given up my idea for an apartment listing service, my entrepreneurial streak was intact. I started a company with a professor at the School, Joe Janes, as something of a hobby. We'd teach teachers and librarians workshops on how to find information on the internet. They were blown away by how much information was stuffed into their computers.

As the Web took off, we brought Peter into the company full-time. And things just kept getting busier. I really hated academia at that point; I'd been there forever. I

didn't want to be a professor, so when I had to choose between staying in the PhD program or growing Argus, I obviously decided to do the latter.

We created a web design collaboration with a group of local tech companies that had complimentary skills. Argus took on information architecture, project and client management, and the others tackled the programming and graphic design. This was in 1995. At that time, I told Peter that by 1997 we should be out of that stressful, crazy collaborative arrangement, because information architecture as a stand-alone service was going to boom. I was spot on, and by 2000 Argus was a forty-person consulting firm, with most of the staff with library and information science backgrounds. It got probably a bit weird for them early on, since they found themselves to be consultants all of a sudden, making good money and being treated well.

We worked with big clients. We almost helped the Borders' Group create the world's first online bookstore before Amazon got there, but Borders just didn't get the Web. We had more success with such companies as AT&T and Ford. Peter and I also decided to write about the work we were doing. I had been a regular columnist for a few magazines at that point, including an O'Reilly publication called Web Review. That relationship led to the "polar bear" book, which was written in 1996-97 and came out in its first edition in 1998.

When we wrote that first edition, Peter and I felt like we had a couple of chips on our collective shoulders. One was that we wanted to prove to the world that library science had critical value in the information revolution. The other was proving to the library world that there was much-needed value in their work outside of libraries. In some respects, I think we had actually more success with the former than the latter, which is shocking. I'm still kind of sad about that.

*Q: Argus Associates closes its offices in 2001:*

Argus hit the wall in 2001. We went from forty people to shutting down operations in six months. It was terrible. Projects disappeared and we just couldn't go on. We went our separate ways and I became an independent consultant for a good ten years, doing information architecture work for large organizations. Peter and I wrote the second edition of the "polar bear", which kept selling great but was definitely changing and becoming a totally different book: the first edition had

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<sup>1</sup> Borders was a book and music retailer based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, operating more than 600 stores in the US in the early 2000s. It went bankrupt in 2011 and parts of its assets were acquired by Barnes & Nobles.

<sup>2</sup> Higgins, R. W. (2001). Argus Associates, Inc. closes shop. Information Today.  
<http://newsbreaks.infotoday.com/NewsBreaks/Argus-Associates-Inc-Closes-Shop-17629.asp>.

been designed for people creating websites; the second edition was for all those people who saw their websites becoming bloated garbage that just kept expanding.

My work at the time was mostly helping organizations such as PayPal, Caterpillar, the CDC, with their information architecture challenges. What I was seeing was that half the reason I was being hired was psychological: we bring in a consultant and the more we pay him the better we feel about ourselves. I started feeling like an information therapist: these people, these organizations, were just venting about their information challenges, and these were often organizational challenges and problems of silos, fragmentation, and so forth.

On most days, I felt like I wasn't doing anything significant: I was getting paid but I was not having an impact. And I'm not necessarily the right person, or have the right personality, to be that type of consultant. I'm interested in what I'm doing, I'm a little narcissistic that way. Around 2004 I got consumed by the idea of starting a publishing house because I felt O'Reilly, New Riders and Wiley were all only dipping their toes into publishing titles that appealed and were useful to our community. I briefly considered working as an acquisition editor, talked to a bunch of these publishers, but the whole system seemed insane and I'm an entrepreneur: I'd already started one successful business, so I said alright, I'll do it myself.

I had a conversation with Tim O'Reilly, one of my heroes, who congratulated me for going into publishing and told me that what I probably didn't realize was that most publishers are frustrated authors. I'm not sure about others, but I sure was. Even at O'Reilly, which is a great company, the approach was that books are a commodity: publish as many as you possibly can and know already that only one out of some very large number really succeeds. It's like throwing a bunch of ideas up against the wall to see which one sticks: you don't market your books, you hope the authors will; you don't really develop them, you just hope the authors can write; and sometimes you don't even edit the final copy, you just print it and send it to the stores. And I hate that model and wanted to do something different, I wanted to put to practice some of the principles I was learning, and that meant going my way.

Since one thing I'm good at is knowing a lot of people and, for the most part, not having them hate my guts, enough prospective writers signed up with me even though I had no idea what I was doing as a publisher. We went on to publish our first book, Indi Young's "Mental Models", and I slowly started building Rosenfeld Media from a hobby to a company that could not only pay me but pay other people's salaries.

At the time, a lot of work went into the creation of design systems for how we laid out each book, into the covers, into actual usability tests and studies of how people would interact with both the digital version, a PDF at the time, and the paper

version. We had color prototypes printed with Lulu, which was very expensive at the time but was worth every dollar because it allowed us to actually study how the book worked.

Still, my philosophy for publishing was that I wasn't in the book business: I was in the idea business. So, the natural follow-up step was to figure out how we could use the company as an infrastructure to bring the growing network of experts I was working with to the organizations that needed to hear their ideas. We kept working on refining their points using iterative processes, moving their ideas from a kernel into well-polished books, presentations, or workshops, and finally conferences.

*Q: When the Roundtable was started in 2013, there was a conscious effort on our side to push the envelope and move the conversation beyond the polar bear book. The intent was to acknowledge the ongoing social and technical changes, from smartphones to the internet of things, but especially give those many within the community who were working more with digital / physical experiences, organizational change, app-based or multi-device strategies than with just websites, a platform for discussion. A vast part of the community, and an even larger part of those outside the community, seemed to be stuck in a diminutive frame of mind in which information architecture was only labels, navigation, and a website's taxonomy. And hence small.*

When we did the fourth edition of the polar bear book – Jorge Arango, Peter Morville, and I – O'Reilly suggested to subtitle it “for the web and beyond”. We actually resisted the idea initially, but in hindsight it was the right thing to do. You have been telling me this for years and I'm just slow to catch on sometimes, what can I say. I was starting to believe that maybe information architecture was somehow a done thing. My own mental model was forged in the Web era. I wrote two books on information architecture, one was about new websites and one was about bloated websites, but they were both about websites. I was myopic in how I was framing information architecture. It took me years to realize that everything I do is actually information architecture because I work with information all the time.

I work with my authors and they're brilliant and they can write, but they are terrible at structuring books, they're absolutely awful, and I have to do that for them. Same thing with presentations and conference programs and their narrative structures, with structuring a business, with figuring out how people interact with virtual conference content. I don't honestly know why it took me so long to figure all this out. I might just be a creature of habit, but I think that's what you Roundtable people have probably been getting at for a long time: we can apply information architecture everywhere, not just to the Web.

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<sup>3</sup> The fourth edition of the book was published September 2015.

*Q: I would most certainly not call you slow. I would also posit we're all creatures of habit and that people with baggage, metaphorical or not, will move slower, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. But what you said about your own "mental model" resonates with my reflections at the time of the first Roundtable in 2013. My argument was that any reflection on the history of information architecture needed to take into account that the Web was Argus' niche of opportunity. It makes perfect sense that you, Peter, and the others who were there in the early days centered your expertise on the Web and made it the object of design. In hindsight, though, it is possible to go back, observe the larger picture, reflect, and discern slower patterns, both good and bad. The big bad one was clearly the absolute identification of information architecture with "solving websites" that took hold in the early 2000s, which to me sounds as reasonable as identifying carpentry with making chairs by hand. Chairs, and websites, are incidental. Carpentry would still exist even if we could snap our fingers and magically erase chairs from human history. What I can say is that we now have a very different environment from that of the mid 1990s when you started Argus: digital information has become a pervasive, integral part of the fabric of reality in a way that was not even imaginable back then. The obvious next statement would be that the role of information architecture is even more crucial today than it was ten or twenty years ago.*

I may come off as I'm self-flagellating about this, but what I am is just happy. I'm happy to be late to the game, as well as happy there's a game.

*Q: If this seems like such an obvious statement for you and me, and for others at the Roundtable, why is it not obvious for everyone? What is the problem then? Is it semantics, or is it something deeper than that?*

The word we use to name what we do is important, but I think there's an argument to be made against staying too still. I wrote an article last year on moment prisons, probably a bad term itself, arguing that we get way too locked into our own terminology and the metaphors that the terminology is good for. I've always felt like what we call something, for example "information architecture", is not really important. That's a problem I've had with our community, that people get so wrapped up in the terminology. And I know we're supposed to be thinking language and controlled vocabularies and so forth, but this seems to turn too often into the incapacity to accept that our work is, by definition, constantly degrading and will get stale and will have to be revisited. Information therapy as a way to explain what I do that resonates with me, but I'm in no way suggesting the rest of the world uses that term.

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<sup>4</sup> Resmini, A. (2013). Les architectures d'information. Études de communication (online). Vol. 41. <http://edc.revues.org/5380>. Also available at <https://andrearesmini.com/blog/the-architecture-of-information/>.

<sup>5</sup> Rosenfeld, L. (2019). Moment Prisons, and How to Escape Them. Medium. <https://medium.com/rosenfeld-media/moment-prisons-and-how-to-escape-them-b391100b2d43>

*Q: I certainly do agree with the fact that sometimes we tend to be too protective of our own private little gardens, or that we try to figure out ways to split something that is already small into even smaller parts so that we can call it our own (or profit from owning it). But there is an interesting tension here: on the one hand, the labels we use for our practice and what we call ourselves have to be refreshed now and then to be useful to the profession. After all, you want to stay relevant to your clients in a constantly shifting market, as you say; on the other hand, the more formal sides of the field, related to education and research, benefit from us being able to claim a history, an uninterrupted path, and that relies also on a continuity of language. That's what fields such as interaction design have done much more successfully than information architecture.*

That's true, and I can make two educated guesses as to why they were more successful. First of all, the timing was really good. It was perfect, just on the tail of a major shake-up in the market after the dotcom bust. Second, many of those folks came out of the information architecture community. They left because they were frustrated with us, and for good reasons, but they learned a lot from that frustrating experience. As a result, they were far better at creating a model for organizing professionally than we were. They deserve a lot of credit for that.

*Q: What good reasons do you think they had to be frustrated with the information architecture community?*

I think a lot of it had to do with scoping. The scope we had outlined in the polar bear book, which was the most influential scoping at the time, did not include interaction design, or a lot of what was considered interaction design back then. Here you have a community where we all share a lot of common history and where we're all collectively shaping a conversation centered on new and often intangible artifacts. Why would you care for a taxonomy or a pull-down menu if you're a business person? It seems entirely mundane, or pointless. We all share this misery of nobody understanding what we're really trying to say or do. But then, at a certain point, some, those who eventually left to call themselves interaction designers, felt like they weren't even being understood in their own home. That there was no room in the community for the practices that they cared about.

*Q: I should thank you and confess right away that you just made a part of the conversation I've always had a hard time with much clearer: scope and specialization as reasons for that momentous separation make a lot of sense in the context of maturing practices. It also explains why I would miss it entirely, as I grew up, professionally, in a very different environment. Even my training as an architect wasn't really concerned with specialization and was still by and large*

*following Rogers' idea of design as a practice encompassing everything "from the spoon to the city"*<sup>6</sup>.

I bet you a lot of architects are out of work now because they weren't trained that way. This said, disagreements in scope and specialization often result in people leaving, be it a company or a community. And interesting things happen when someone decides they had enough and goes off to start something else. We have so many examples of frustrated Young Turks packing up and leaving an established profession or discipline to go found another. Really, those new territories are where the most interesting stuff is happening.

What I feel bad about with that particular schism is that the interaction design folks were emotional. They felt uninvited, unheard. Information architecture folks felt emotional as well. They argued the other side was not really being fair, and was taking it too personal. They felt attacked. Thinking about it now, it was too much about personality. You can take different paths but that shouldn't mean you end up being enemies. Which is what happened, at least for a while<sup>7</sup>. Or maybe that's just the way I lived it and now remember it.

*Q: I do remember some of the conversation on the mailing lists around 2003–2005, and for what it is worth I think you are giving an accurate representation of what that whole moment looked like. At least from the perspective of someone who at the time didn't know any of the people involved in person. Everyone was bitter and a few specific exchanges carried a "going through a bad divorce" vibe you wouldn't expect in such conversations. This was clearly a relatively small group of people that knew each other well, had been sharing something for some time, had maybe become friends with one another, and now suddenly and unexpectedly felt betrayed, whatever the reason. Are you saying you would try to avoid that schism now, regardless of the fact that splits can be beneficial?*

In hindsight, yes, I probably would. But I'm not sure I'd be successful. Part of the issue has always been an issue of timing. Sometimes the conditions in the market are just about right. And part of the issue is linked to us being human beings and reacting to the tangible and concrete before to the intangible and systemic. You have the cosmetic aspects of the product, and you have the technological aspects

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<sup>6</sup> The original formulation we owe to German architect Hermann Muthesius who coined it circa 1916 when he was chairman of the Deutscher Werkbund. See Cecchetti, M. & Baker, S. (2011). For Sensitive Skin: On the Transformation of Architecture into Design. *Annali D'Italianistica*. Issue 29. Pp. 237-252. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24016425>. Rogers supposedly re-introduced the concept at the 1953 Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM) in Aix-en-Provence, France, that marked the definitive rejection of the "modified Functionalism" of the Charter of Athens and its understanding of the city through the categories of dwelling, work, recreation, and transportation. See Frampton, K. (1980). *Modern architecture*. Thames & Hudson. P. 269 onwards.

<sup>7</sup> See also Jesse James Garrett's "The Memphis Plenary" chapter in this same book.



of the product: those are tangible and immediately visible, and their tangibility is augmented by huge investments in marketing that play to our psychologies, press our buttons. Short term and immediate gratification is a big chunk of the larger picture and I don't think that's ever going to change.

*Q: We're back to information architecture being the invisible infrastructure, aren't we? The piping of your beautiful new house. You don't really care for the pipes until you need a tap in a place where there's none, or they spring a leak and you have water everywhere.*

Exactly, you care for the faucet, and how it looks and feels. Who wants to even think about the pipes? Until you don't have water or you have it all over the place and then it's a huge deal because you will have to spend ten times more than what you would have if you had dealt with replacing or repairing it five years earlier. That's the history of America's infrastructure right there.

*Q: I would argue that the pipes we are discussing are really broken all over. They're not just leaking: most of the network is structurally unsound. It was built for a different world and for different people. Everything that can be connected is being connected, even though we don't or can't really understand the consequences, and the resulting, sprawling pipework impacts all sorts of activities and social structures, including our politics. We have faucets that don't work and water flooding the living room, to keep with the analogy. We might not even have the full set of tools we'd need to address some of the problems we're facing. Does information architecture have a role in there?*

It's obviously a very challenging and difficult task for anyone. I think people who are comfortable with intangibles and systems are a little better off in terms of addressing challenges like the ones we are mentioning. We're all bad at it but maybe the people that are reading this are a little better than most. What we really need are better frameworks and better terminology, to have conversations that are interdisciplinary, and to get the blind men to see the elephant. This has been my experience with the polar bear book: I don't know if it was a very good book, but it was a very useful book. And I say that because at the time we wrote it there were many people from different disciplines, graphic design, usability, programming, business, who were struggling with information challenges that they did not have a framework or the language for. They couldn't have the powerful interdisciplinary conversations that were needed to solve information problems.

The way you solve new, difficult, intractable problems is by getting different and diverse brains to work on them together. In order to do that, those brains must have a Rosetta Stone. With the polar bear book, I feel like we came up with an imperfect but useful translation system that allowed us to make progress.

Now we have a similar but even larger issue, so get the behavioral economists in the room with the architects, the AI people and the humanists to solve these problems, because we still have the same siloes we had back then and people arguing their one toolkit is the right toolkit. How can anyone's individual perspective be the right perspective? I just don't know where that new Rosetta Stone is going to come from. Maybe it's here already.

*Q: Aren't you basically saying that we need an information architecture for the process? The need to structure a common vocabulary, to figure out differences and align definitions and concepts across different disciplines, isn't that an information architecture blueprint for collaboration?*

You and I probably would approach it that way because that's the toolkit we come with. I don't have a problem with that, but I would have a problem with saying that's the only way. That would strike me as particularly arrogant. I know I don't know enough to say that. Would a philosophy-based approach be better? I don't know.

*Q: I couldn't agree more.*

I know you know and you know what I'm saying. And I agree, information architecture is everywhere. Let me give you an example: we're setting up Salesforce for Rosenfeld Media, and we're just trying to do some most basic elementary stuff, what I thought Salesforce would do out of the box. Salesforce comes with a whole bunch of default nouns to describe content objects: what is a prospect, what is an opportunity, what is a contact. But these objects are all oddly named, there's a murky relationship between them, we can't understand the transition path from one object to another or which one is the parent element, which one is the children, and which ones are siblings. I have personally sold tens of millions of dollars in consulting, books, training, conferences: still, I couldn't tell you what Salesforce's content model is and, because of that, we can't figure out how to use it. I end up throwing my hands up in the air and saying we have a huge information architecture problem there. And this is not a just Salesforce problem: these are common old problems we still haven't solved.

*Q: Yes, they are. That's why continuity and consolidation have been such important parts of the whole discourse on reframing information architecture at the Roundtable from day one. The library and information science foundations of the polar bear book were needed then to help wrangle the Web into order. They are not being thrown away, they are being supplemented by contributions, theories, methods, tools, drawn from disciplines that deal with complexity and human space in a way that does not belong to library science. Cognitive science, architecture, systems thinking, behavioral economics. When you say "bring the economists into the room", when you insist on the importance of systemic collaboration and*

*interdisciplinarity, I nod emphatically. That is the way to enrich the purview of information architecture and prevent it from being shrunk. I'm not saying we solved the Salesforce of the world and that they do not matter anymore. We clearly didn't and they clearly do. I'm saying that information architecture plays an important role in problem spaces that were not a concern, and rightly so, twenty-five years ago.*

We should not shrink. We should be ambitious, as a community. But the right question is not how can we solve the world's problems, but rather how can we help solve the world's problems. "Plays a role", as you say, is different from "is the one thing that matters".

*Q: I'm still nodding emphatically in agreement. Let's get back to what you said earlier on, that you feel that information architecture and your upbringing are more related than you thought and that you often feel that what you really do is a form of information therapy. You tiptoed your way around that idea in your remarks during your closing keynote at the 2017 ASIS&T European Information Architecture Summit in Stockholm. Can you elaborate a little?*

I've been thinking about it a lot. As I said, I'm in therapy and this is the type of conversation you start with your therapist. I grew up in a very loving but very dysfunctional home. Chaos in a nutshell: I was the youngest of five boys and I was the one who was trying to get everyone to get along. I was the resident peacemaker from when I was five or six, and that's probably not a healthy thing for anyone that age to be tasked with. I think subduing chaos and harmonizing points of view was my way to cope, and I continue to do that as of this day. I don't know how related they are, I think they're related. I have always been more interested in harmonizing people than information. Maybe I should have become a conflict resolution professional or something like that. Therapy has also brought clarity to how my efforts are bound with time, something that information architecture hasn't discussed as nearly enough as we should have.

Did you ever see "The Commitments?" Out circa 1991, set in Dublin and based on Roddy Doyle's novel by the same name?

*Q. I haven't read the novel but I saw the movie. It was lovely.*

Then you'll remember that the protagonist assembles a band with these very talented but frankly often unpleasant people. He gets them together, and they fight all the time. He gets them to play a few historically great concerts and then they completely implode. And he shows us we should be counting our blessings. This is restorative. Things were great for a moment. For one moment in time, he managed to get the egos, the weirdness, the fights out of the picture and gifted us with great music. Harmony.

To expect anything beyond that one moment is to expect too much, I suppose. Things will spin out of control, like they did this early spring with the pandemic, and it's just the way things are. If I think about what I learned from that movie is that maybe my role as an information architect is to be that bandleader. Get people together, create a sum that's greater than the parts, but be perfectly aware that it's for that moment and that moment only.

Creating long-lasting order out of chaos, or trying to make other people be orderly when they can't, is an impossible task. Expectations have to be adjusted to the objective reality of the world. That's what we do as adults. If we accept these limitations, we can do something good and healthy, like organize an event, a wonderful little space for people to come and share their expertise or learn, but also only a moment in time. It is restorative, but then you're immediately confronted with the inertia of the system or the entropy of things spinning out of control.

*Q: You use the word "restored". Does that mean you believe there was some kind of preexisting order that needs to be reinstated?*

Not in the traditional conservative sense of some external status quo that we want in place of today's supposed chaos, no. "Restorative" does not imply we want the good old days or their social and political implications back. Restorative is the way we feel about these moments of harmony good design can create, like in the movie: they bring back feelings we have felt in the past against a different backdrop. Which also means that what restores us in 2020 may be a very different alignment or harmonizing than what restored us in 1990.

*Q: Is transient harmony then one of the traits you would say define your vision of information architecture? We've long come to terms with the idea that it's actually multiple orders we always deal with, but could it be that it's actually moment-sized, temporary ones? Orders that do not necessarily concern themselves with the world all the time, since, remember Rogers, we work from the spoon to the city, from the app to the ecosystem. You make a book that works. But on top of the book you create a successful company that makes books that work, and then the company becomes a network structure for dissemination, teaching, consulting. Are you harmonizing?*

I think I am. Constantly. Right now, we're facing the consequences of the pandemic and we're looking at dismantling some of the team for purely economic reasons. Those economic reasons are also going to push the company in a different direction. When we bounce back, assuming we'll have the opportunity, it won't be the same team and it won't be the same company. It seems that information therapy could actually be information harmonics. Musicians, let's do this.

*Q: Loss of control is one of the major consequences of a connected world: maintaining well-guarded borders gets complicated when everybody can share or remediate everything. Could we extend this to information architecture? Could we frame the discourse on information architecture as a field as one of moving from an idea of control, designing a finite artifact, the website, to one of transient unfinishedness? Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, are scaffoldings meant to influence someone's behavior, empty containers, and they are sure very different epistemologically from what we used to design in the 1990s. I'm purposefully painting it more black and white than it actually is, of course.*

To be fair, maybe we didn't have the right language at the time but while we were working on the second edition of the polar bear book, I was trying very hard, maybe not even realizing it, to write about information architecture for platforms, specifically in the chapter about Evolt. So sure, in the 1990s we were mainly reacting to absolute chaos by saying we had ways to control it and create value for users, especially, but I don't know that we were ever just working towards "finite artifacts". There's always a social aspect to information systems, no matter what: they have to be used by different people with different needs and so there has to be some flexibility. Anytime you have flexibility, you're basically acknowledging some degree of transiency.

*Q: Fair enough. One final question: you happened to drop by a couple of times while we were wrapping up this or that Roundtable, but were never directly involved, which is intriguing considering you have some responsibility in its creation. After a 2010 impromptu session Keith Instone and I ran at the Summit on bridging academia and the industry, I had a conversation with you, probably in 2011. You had the idea that it'd be great to bring in "a bunch of professors" at the Summit and have them work side-by-side with practitioners on some interesting real-world problem. I remember you commenting "it's a brilliant idea, and it'll never happen". How aware have you been of the Roundtable, of its goals, and of its results these years? Do you have any opinion on whether or not it has contributed to the maturation of the field at all?*

It would be easy for me to claim ignorance. I know of the Roundtable. And I know it's wrapped up with the academic publishing model. I have issues with that model in general, I'm sure you do as well, and I worry that less people than could potentially benefit from what we have to say will have the chance to. And I'm personally overwhelmed, all the time. I'm not reading much about information architecture these days unless it's something I'm publishing. But I thoroughly enjoyed this conversation, especially since you're so polite and let me ramble on, and while I honestly have to admit I still have no idea what the impact is expected to be, I just hope that some of this can be opened up later on, whatever the way. That it can bleed across media.

If I could make a wish, it'd be that these conversations reach the many academic communities out there that could benefit from hearing what advances are there in

information architecture. It could be worthwhile, already with this book or with other initiatives, to help them a little, especially from a curricular perspective. That wouldn't be bad at all.