Chapter 9
Dutch Uncles, Ducks and Decorated Sheds— Notes on the Intertwingularity of Meaning and Structure in Information Architecture

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Abstract On what basis can and ought one assess the relative merits of a given work of information architecture? In 2009, Jesse James Garrett pointed to the non-existence of such a normative theory and the community of practice's consequent inability to indicate "what good means" as evidence that information architecture is not a proper discipline. Garrett's rallying cry was for a wholesale reframing of that community in terms of User Experience Design, with human engagement as its center. In this chapter, I draw from the work of architects Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi to counter-propose a co-occurring reframing of the mostly-digital sense- and place-making work of information architecture in the normative terms of architecture, where the appropriate interplay of meaning and structural form comprises the basis of what good means.

9.1   Dutch Uncles

Convenience stores and service stations where I live have recently introduced a change in the choreography of how one is meant to interact with the gas pumps. The new procedure requires keying-in one's 5-digit postal code as a pre-step to paying at the pump with a credit card.

I'm sure this additional step in what had previously been a more streamlined process has been proven (with math!) to be worth the implementation effort for the businesses who are taking the payments. But I doubt the designers and accountants behind these machinations have the data to explain the marked increase in delight I now experience in the prelude to paying for and then refilling my car's fuel tank.

4-9-4-2-6: the first number I ever memorized on purpose.

This weekly opportunity to reply to the blinking cursor on the gas pump's LCD display with the earliest of cognitive muscle memories fills me with toddler glee: for a moment I'm 4 years old again and a very good boy reciting my ZIP code when prompted for it.

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Today, as an adult, I once again reside in the place I grew up. Ten miles west is an "x" that marks the spot of the surrounding culture's literal wellspring and figurative ground zero—a city that's five or six times bigger than and marked with a code just a few digits off from mine: Holland.

Like the nearby villages and burghs within its cultural blast radius (e.g. Overisel, Drenthe, Vriesland, Zeeland), Holland got its name from the Dutch Calvinists who were compelled to emigrate here in the 1840s under the legendarily severe leadership of a preacher/entrepreneur by the name of Albertus van Raalte.

Each spring, thousands of visitors come to Holland to admire the tulips and attend daily parades where locals march themselves and their kids down the main street in old-timey Dutch costumes. Postcards and buttons spinning in wire-racked orbit on the countertops of the shops are a blur of windmills and flowers and *klompen* dancers, all of it begging the question: wooden shoe rather be Dutch?

Having been born-and-raised and now once again residing in such a place—a place where bumper stickers read "If You Ain't Dutch, You Ain't Much"—I was surprised recently to see a South African architect describe her professional role as being that of a "Dutch uncle" to younger colleagues in contemporary practice.

Dutch uncle? It was an appellation I'd never heard before. When all of one's uncles are Dutch, one never hears of a Dutch uncle.

After a quick bit of Googling to see what this architect might have meant, I found the explanation to ring true. Both in terms of the signifier as well as with regard to the signified. Dutch uncle: a person giving firm but benevolent advice.

The architect dispensing this firm-yet-benevolent advice is a personal hero: the inimitable Denise Scott Brown. Part of the purpose of the present essay is to posit Scott Brown's point of view and that of her partner Robert Venturi on the interplay of meaning and structure in architecture as quite relevant (if not essential) to contemporary information architecture practice. But first, before I make the case for information architects as Netherlandic nieces and nephews of Venturi and Scott Brown I need to spend a few words about the Dutch uncles we have already got.

9.2   The Memphis Plenary

March 22 2009, Memphis, Tennessee. Jesse James Garrett delivers the closing plenary address at the 10th-annual Information Architecture Summit. If ever there were an act of Dutch uncle-ing in the IA community, this is it, although one's ability to see the benevolence in Garrett's rhetorical tour de force is perhaps mutually occluded by the attention that has been paid to that part of the speech where he says "there's no such thing as information architects."

In the softer glow of hindsight, I read Mr. Garrett's declaration as a suspended sentence, not a summary judgment; as a purposeful piece of provocation—a preemptive move against the threat of stagnation in the inadequately-defined would-be discipline of information architecture. When viewed from the interpretive lens of the Dutch uncle, Garrett's grilling in Memphis can be understood as a sort of heuris-

tic checklist for determining the future conditions within which one could credibly say that there *are* such things as information architects:

> Do you know good IA when you see it? And can different people have different ideas about the qualities of a good solution or a bad one, based on their philosophical approach to their work?
> Will there ever be a controversial work of information architecture? Something we argue about the merits of? A work that has admirers and detractors alike?
> We don't have a language of critique. Until we have ways to describe the qualities of an information architecture, we won't be able to tell good IA from bad IA. All we'll ever be able to do is judge processes.

The existence of a language of critique presupposes the existence of an underlying—and from Garrett's point of view in 2009, non-existent—theory for differentiating good from bad information architecture.[1] And how does one establish a normative theory of information architecture in the absence of a straightforward definition of information architecture? As Resmini and Rosati (2011) noted,

> The debate on what information architecture is and how it should be defined properly is almost 20 years old and is beginning to rival the one still enveloping "information science" and dating back to the mid-1950s.

I was there, in the ballroom at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, when Mr. Garrett read out his suspended death sentence for information architecture, and my diverging point of view on the "missing" definition, normative theory, and language of critique for information architecture is that these pretexts to legitimacy (or to extend the judge-jury-and-executioner analogy, clemency) were not so much missing in 2009 as they were unevenly distributed.

As Mr. Garrett noted elsewhere in his Memphis plenary, the distinction between information architecture and interaction design lacked meaningful difference in 2009, and was being played out in the marketplace as a zero-sum game. Garrett's counter-proposal to mutually assured destruction: move the proverbial goalposts and fundamentally change the game:

> There are no information architects. There are no interaction designers. There are only, and only ever have been, user experience designers.

9.3 Bounded and Centered Sets

My preferred approach to explaining the particular genius of Mr. Garrett's Peabody polemic borrows from the teachings of a Quaker theologian named John Wimber, who in turn borrowed from the teachings of a branch of mathematics called *set theory* to model the dynamics of intentional communities.

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[1] Andrea Resmini explored Garrett's closing plenary in his own closing plenary at the ASIS&T European Information Architecture Summit in 2013, explicitly connecting the need of a language of critique to the evolution of a poetics of information architecture (Resmini 2013a).

In Wimber's formulation, an intentional community like that of the Dutch Calvinists of Holland, Michigan, is a *bounded set*. Membership in bounded sets is contingent upon acceptance of and demonstrated compliance with particular rules. Calvinism's definitional boundary has been sacrosanct for more than a hundred years, and reified in the Dutch-descended-yet-English-speaking community by way of a particularly relevant acronym: TULIP.[2]

Weighing-in on one of the information architecture community's seemingly-endless definitional boundary-battles on the Information Architecture Institute's email list in September of 2010, institute founder and bona fide Dutch Uncle Christina Wodtke replied to a stereotypically fractious thread with a characteristically incisive Youtube link[3] of a Monty Python clip from Life of Brian in which the rag-tag members of Judean People's Front rail against the People's Front of Judea for being "splitters".

The clip illustrated the problem eloquently. Bounded sets become dysfunctional in proportion to the ambiguity of their boundaries. Hilarity is always just a phoneme or fat-fingered acronym away.

In 2009, with interaction designers, information architects and user experience designers attending the same events, going after the same jobs and offering identically-named deliverables in their respective scopes-of-work, what Garrett proposed was not a repair job on the convoluted boundaries that had previously circumscribed these communities of practice. As I re-read and recollect that speech I do not see Garrett making an argument for conflating information architecture and interaction design within a rehabilitated bounded set called user experience design. What I see and hear him doing there is a wholesale reframing of the underlying set theory—positing an alternate structure for organizing the people in that ballroom and for explaining what that group is about along the lines of what Wimber would call a *centered set*. Wimber's teachings eventually became the basis for a movement within Christianity known as The Vineyard, and one of their congregations in Southeast Michigan explains centered sets especially well[4]:

> The centered set approach is like gathering cats rather than herding cattle. The center is the pail of milk that draws the cats.

With centered sets, there is no definitional boundary. And what's more, an individual's proximity to the center of the set does not matter all that much. What matters with a centered set is direction. Any cat that is pointed in the direction of the pail is considered to be a member of the set.

This is precisely what Mr. Garrett proposed in Memphis—that the people, processes and methodologies represented in that ballroom were all more-or-less pointing at the same thing. Mr. Garrett insists that what we do is not ultimately centered on users, information, architecture, interaction or design.

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[2] http://calvinistcorner.com/tulip.htm.

[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb_qHP7VaZE.

[4] Ann Arbor Vineyard Church (2014) http://annarborvineyard.org/about/what-we-believe/a-centered-set-church.

> Engagement is what it's all about. Our work exists to be engaged with. In some sense, if no
> one engages with our work it doesn't exist (Garrett 2009).

In other words, the milk in the pail at the center of the gathering of user experience
cats is human engagement.

I think the articulation of this argument was and is brilliant for a number of
reasons, and that regardless of Mr. Garrett's intentions for what would follow his
rhetorical *coup de grace*, recasting user experience as a practically boundless gal-
axy with engagement at its center had the benevolent effect of pre-empting further
internecine escalations and mutual exclusions in the wider universe of markets and
ideas. From Memphis forward, it was easier to just call all of this user experience
and not cause a fuss. But if user experience is recast as an engagement-centric gal-
axy then, perhaps inadvertently, it also begs the question of what *else* is in the
universe.

April 6 2013, Baltimore, USA. At the fourteenth ASIS&T IA Summit, as part
of a presentation titled "Links, Nodes and Order" (Arango 2013), Jorge Arango
delivers a tacit rejection of bounded-set framing for information architecture in the
course of proposing information architecture as the only community of practice
with the structural integrity of meaning as its unique concern and gravitational cen-
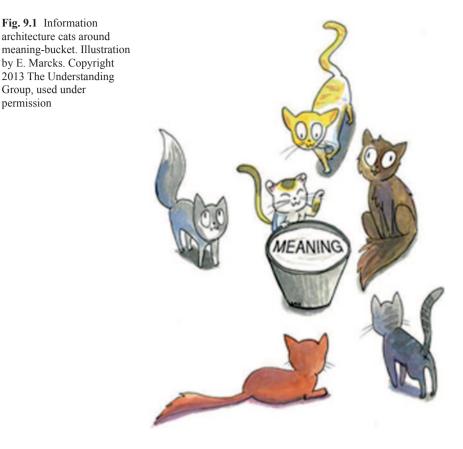ter (Fig. 9.1).

Information architecture as a community of practice with the structural integrity
of meaning at its center provides (at last) a highly serviceable base upon which
normative theories for information architecture may begin to build themselves. And
reframing information architecture as its own distinct galaxy with structure and
meaning at the center paves the desire lines that Wodtke, Resmini, Hinton, and
Arango (among others) have long been tracing into information architecture from
architecture.

Moreover, adjacent galaxies can and do overlap: focus on one of them does not
necessarily occlude visibility into or even presence within the other. In the physical
universe they form what astronomers call an occulting pair—two systems aligned
in ways that neither preclude nor require gravitational interaction.

9.4 Learning From Vitruvius and Las Vegas

Because architecture in the built environment is *all about* the interplay of structure
and meaning, and given the reframing around structure and meaning (Arango et al.
2011; Resmini 2013b), information architecture is correctly seen as situated within
the jurisdiction of normative theories of what makes "good" and "bad" architecture.
Or at least: within the jurisdiction of those theories of architecture explicitly set up
in terms of structure and meaning.

The question of how one ought to design structure with respect to meaning pro-
vides a through-line from "the discipline's most venerable theoretical foundation"
in the writings of the Roman architect Vitruvius (Costanzo 2012) in the first-century
C.E. to the work of some but not all architects in contemporary practice.

Fig. 9.1 Information
architecture cats around
meaning-bucket. Illustration
by E. Marcks. Copyright
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Group, used under
permission

Yale University Howard H. Newman Professor Karsten Harries connects the
philosophical dots across millennia from Vitruvius to our aforementioned Dutch
Uncles Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown while noting that their shared sym-
pathies begin with recognition of the basic function of architecture as that

> of interpreting the world as a meaningful order in which the individual can find his place in
> the midst of nature and in the midst of a community.

In the autumn of 1968 Scott Brown, Venturi and Steven Izenour undertook a now-
legendary examination of the interplay of meaning and architectural form in a re-
search project at the Yale School of Art and Architecture entitled "Learning from
Las Vegas". Part of the stated purpose of the project was "evolving the traditional
architectural 'studio' into a new tool for teaching architecture and finding graphic
means, more suitable than those used now by architects and planners, to describe
'urban sprawl' urbanism and particularly the commercial strip" (Venturi et al. 1972).

The work of the studio and the results of its research were published in book
form by MIT Press in 1972, and "Learning from Las Vegas" went on in multiple
re-printings to provide the theoretical foundation for much of what would soon be
labeled postmodernism. The studio's quest for more suitable means for describing

Fig. 9.2 The Duck and its "more modest companion" the Decorated Shed. (Venturi et al. 1972, p. 65)

the operative conditions that architects and planners confronted in contemporary culture resulted in a number of innovations in information visualization and visual analysis—many of which were elided, down- or up- scaled into illegibility or entirely absent in the second and subsequent printings.

What remains vivid, though, across all editions and printings—both in depiction as well as in rhetoric—is its framework of "Ducks" and "Decorated Sheds" as a normative theory for governing the congress of meaning and structure in architecture. As I have come to know them, I suspect that the teachings encoded in the various printings of *Learning From Las Vegas* and those of Vitruvius as rendered in his *Ten Books on Architecture* are prosaic, polemic and portentous enough to act as rhetorical centrifuge for enriching a critical mass of normative theory for information architecture.
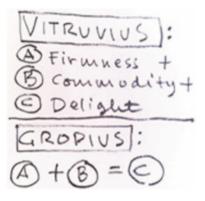
And while the rationale I've built thus far wants to spin off into a wholesale cross-appropriation of twenty centuries of architecture theory to the practice of information architecture, I'll show how the fissile duality of Ducks and Decorated Sheds lends itself especially well to weaponization with the Vitruvian triad of "firmness, commodity, and delight" in the specific context of structures and places made of information.

9.5 Ducks and Decorated Sheds

The dialectic of Ducks and Sheds proceeds from Scott Brown and Venturi's shared "witty and possibly reckless cultural pessimism" (Vinegar 2008), and might at first seem incongruous when compared to the imperial optimism and systematic sincerity in the *Ten Books on Architecture*. Nevertheless and with an uncharacteristic absence of irony, Venturi traces the conditions in architecture that the Ducks-and-Sheds model is meant to mediate directly back to Vitruvius (Fig. 9.2):

> Architecture is necessarily complex and contradictory in its very inclusion of the traditional Vitruvian elements (Venturi 1965).

The centrality of Vitruvian ethics to Venturi's work appears to have been amplified as his thinking, practice and personal life became conjoined with those of Scott Brown in the late 1960s. Together with Izenour in *LLV* they level a broad critique of the architectural "Ducks" resulting from Bauhaus and International Style

Fig. 9.3 Vitruvius vs
Gropius in Venturi and Scott
Brown's approach. Adapted
from Costanzo 2012

approaches to architecture, and call Walter Gropius up to the blackboard for a lesson
in balancing the Vitruvian equation (Fig. 9.3).

Gropius promised to heal the rift between beauty and reason" (Harries 1983), but
for the authors of "Learning from Las Vegas" the reductive math of high Modern-
ism does not actually add up. They commiserate with the modernist desire to design
architecture as a totality, but point to (while painting it) the contrast between the
"dead ducks" of pure clean Modernism and the "messy vitality" of the decorated
sheds along the Las Vegas strip as the poles of a duality for sussing out a postmod-
ern normative theory for architecture.

Because it restricts the range of what is permissible with architectural form to
only those modalities derived from working out the sum of firmness plus utility,
Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour argue that Modernism can only hatch Ducks.

A Duck is a building whose architectural systems of space, structure, and pro-
gram are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form; in other words, a
building-becoming-sculpture. In contrast, the Decorated Shed is a building whose
systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament
is applied independently of them.

> The Decorated Shed was intended as a return to the more complete understanding of archi-
> tectural function encapsulated in the Vitruvian triad (Costanzo 2012).

To grossly oversimplify, the immediate lesson of **"Learning From Las Vegas"** for
architects and planners in the built environment is: don't Duck.

A duck-shaped building that sells duck eggs is presented as emblematic of Mod-
ernist ideals regarding the interplay of order, meaning and structure in architecture
that are based on the dichotomy of either/or. Architects make selections from a
bounded set of formal considerations, and the boundary for what is in and out of
consideration is clean. Heroic, even: *form (ever) follows function.*

Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's Decorated Shed resists being read as an em-
blem of anything, supplying and relying upon external signage and applied surface
graphics to close the gap between the "boring" and "ordinary" nature of a shed and
what is meant by and for the realization of the project.

What is understood regarding the nature of order, meaning and structure in the work of Venturi and Scott Brown is non dual, parrying the Modernist's either/or with a Vitruvian *yet*. Or as Scott Brown has said variously: *form follows forces*.

From this postmodern viewpoint, architects make selections from a more loosely regulated set of formal considerations where complexity and contradiction are to be expected—even embraced:

> When Robert Venturi writes of 'contradiction' in architecture, he is not supposing that a building can actually assert a self-contradictory sentence, but is speaking of exemplification by a building of forms that give rise when juxtaposed to expectations that contravene each other (Goodman 1985).

Elsewhere in the book the authors pair the analogy of gloves and mittens with that of Ducks and Decorated Sheds in enumerating the relative virtues of a loose coupling between structural form and functional requirements:

> The forms of building do not fit, like a glove on a hand, over the complex, unpredictable and sometimes intangible elements of realistic programs.

The reason Ducks are usually less good than Decorated Sheds is because, as Venturi says, "more is not less" (Venturi 1965). The plenitude of unpredictable and intangible requirements that project owners and end-users will realistically express, and the overlapping contexts those needs are smeared across means that one reliable way to differentiate good and less good approaches to architecture is in terms of how much or little complexity and contradiction they afford.

In other words: when the "fingers" of the program to be accommodated in the act of building promise to wiggle around and change in number and in orientation relative to each other on an ongoing basis, what is good is to build mittens not gloves. Sheds, not Ducks. Architectures with as little articulation of the under-girding structures as possible.

And in situations where the affect of what is meant by and through the realization of the project is flattened by the ordinariness of un-articulated shed-like structural forms, Venturi and Scott Brown propose animating and amplifying these meanings through the application of graphics, iconography and symbols to the surfaces of what is being built. This way, when what is meant and understood by the built project changes, the tactics and materials arrayed most closely to that meaning are easily and inexpensively updated.

9.6   Very Good Is Less than Good

In his 1966 introduction to the first edition of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Vincent Scully waxes disapproving of the then-contemporary assessment of Venturi's work:

> It is no wonder Venturi's buildings have not found ready acceptance; they have been both too new and, for all their "accommodation" of complexity, too truly simple and unassuming for this affluent decade.

Venturi and Scott Brown's architecture is, in their own words, "second glance architecture." "Boring," even. Architecture where all three members of the Vitruvian triad are accounted for and appropriately balanced with regard to the project's situatedness along a continuum between the Duck and the Decorated Shed. What is good architecture like? As far as Denise Scott Brown is concerned:

> Accommodating rather than constricting. Revelatory rather than reductive (Venturi and Scott Brown 2004).

What are good buildings like then? She continues:

> Accommodate multiple options over generations rather than meet functional mandates for the first generation only; Face hard problems, rather than ignore them to fit into a desired form; Enter into a discernable and ongoing discussion with context; Allow many interpretations rather than one truth; Reveal rather than demonstrate.

This to me is a sensibility for what good means in architecture that is aligned quite closely with and in deep ethical agreement with what Louis Kahn meant when he said "very good is less than good" (Wurman 1986).

With regard to the intertwingularity of meaning and structural form in information architecture, what does good mean? The same thing it means in regular-old architecture.

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