



THE INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE DESIGN CANON

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IAD Canon Version 1.0 (Developmental Release)

Volume I – Modules & Glossary

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Release Notes:

This publication constitutes the first public developmental release of the Information Architecture Design Canon, Volume 1 – Modules & Glossary.

Volume II – Auxiliary Notes, is planned for inclusion in the next Canon release.

While the principal body of theory presented here is considered complete in its current form, the Canon continues to undergo editorial refinement, publication development and expansion through supporting material. Readers may therefore encounter minor inconsistencies, editorial revisions and ongoing improvements in future releases.

This developmental release is intended to make the theory available for study, discussion, critique and practical application while the wider publication programme continues to mature.

Questions, comments and constructive critique are welcomed.

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PROVENANCE

Many concepts presented throughout the Canon first appeared in journal articles, conference papers, invited lectures and postgraduate research before being revised, extended and synthesised into their present form.

Particular significance is attached to the author's Master of Arts in Design dissertation (Applying Information Architecture in Design Thinking: Ideating Solutions to the Wicked Problem of Addiction, University of Johannesburg, 2021), within which many of the principal concepts of the Canon were first brought together. Throughout the Canon, "the dissertation" is referenced where it provides historical context, methodological detail, extended theoretical discussion or illustrative examples beyond the scope of the present publication.

The principal scholarly works underpinning the development of the Canon are listed in the **Textual Foundations** section at the end of this volume and may be read collectively as the primary textual foundations from which the present synthesis has emerged.

Readers wishing to trace the historical development of individual concepts are encouraged to consult these works alongside the Modules, Glossary and Auxiliary Notes.

TRAVERSING THE CANON

The IAD Canon is organised into three parts across two volumes:

Volume I contains **Part 1: Modules** and **Part 2: Glossary**.

Volume II contains **Part 3: Auxiliary Notes**

Volume II – Part 3: Auxiliary Notes, is planned for inclusion in the next IAD Canon release.

The principal body of theory in the Canon is presented through **Modules**. Modules progressively introduce the propositions, distinctions and theoretical constructs of the theory of IAD across 15 texts. The texts to be found in the **Glossary** and **Auxiliary Notes** exist in service to Modules and the overall comprehension and enrichment of the theory of IAD.

Given the inherent narrative form of Modules, and its density, it is presented separately to the Glossary and Auxiliary Notes. However, while the Glossary and Auxiliary Notes may be read in isolation of the Modules, comprehension of the theory as a whole is best gained through encountering the Glossary and Auxiliary Notes through Modules.

For this reason, the Canon would be best placed within a hypertext environment, as is the intent for the Canon v1.0 release on the www.iadframework.com domain.

DEVELOPMENTAL RELEASE

For such a reading to work in more linear formats, as the one before you, requires relations ordinarily realised through hypertext, to be exposed as *related terms*, *notes* and *modules* from their various individual perspectives. This developmental release contains no such articulated relations. The trade-off, as it were, for an early release of the core theory contained in Modules, is the relational logic which binds the Glossary and Auxiliary Notes to it.

The intended reading experience of the Canon will be fully realised through the Version 1.0 release.

Throughout this developmental release, readers will encounter **Development notes**. These identify material still under consideration for inclusion into the Canon Version 1.0 release.

HOW TO READ THE CANON

The Canon Modules are a synthesis of theoretical orientation, propositions and consequences, epistemological and ontological placements, design method, analytic instrument, heuristics, praxeological considerations and concerns, entailments for inquiry and field-level horizons.

The structure of the Modules from Module 0 to Module 9 makes sense of this synthesis for readers who may move through the texts sequentially. Such an engagement is recommended for those embarking on a first encounter with the Canon. However, there

is no single route through the Canon, and readers with concerns from a variety of different fields, practices and areas of interest may wish to traverse the Modules in a non-linear fashion.

Many concepts reveal their full significance only through their relationships with concepts developed elsewhere in the Canon. As a result, second and subsequent readings often differ substantially from the first.

Second or third passes of the Canon will likely find readers engaging more deeply with canonical definitions and framings of concepts in the Glossary, the relational nature of the concepts across the theory and between individual modules. Engagement with Auxiliary Notes, which relate to Modules at the individual module-level, will hopefully greatly enrich the core theory of the Modules and are equally suited to second or third readings once the broad strokes of the theory have settled in their comprehension.

The modules may therefore be read:

- sequentially, as a developing theoretical argument;
- selectively, according to interest; or
- recursively, by moving between individual modules and concepts, glossary entries and related auxiliary notes.

MODULES

Modules is organised into fifteen texts, with an additional six texts planned to expand upon Module 9 – Development Horizon. Each module addresses a distinct aspect of the theory of IAD while remaining connected to other modules.

Emergent from this synthesis is an inherent linear narrative structure which flows from Module 0 through to Module 9. Within this structure however, there is a recursive or circular movement from IA in Design towards IA in the Wild, and from IA in the Wild back into IA in Design. This latter conceptual structure is designated by and discussed in the two Ritornello Modules, 1 and 2, respectively.

MODULE 0 — ORIENTATION

Introduces the foundational orientation of the framework, the hyperhistoric condition, meaning formation, frame-scale, and the overall structure of the canon.

MODULE 1 — EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONING

Establishes the epistemological foundations of IAD, including relational intelligibility, compositional modelling, liminal reality, and the distinction between Information Architecture and its analytic representation.

MODULE 2 — IA IN THE WILD AND IA IN DESIGN

Defines the field through the distinction between Information Architecture as a condition encountered in the world and Information Architecture as a compositional activity undertaken through design.

RITORNELLO 1

Marks the first crossing from IA in the Wild to IA in Design, moving from formation to configuration. It establishes that composition must begin from what already holds: stabilised formations, operative meanings, tensions and consequences encountered in the world become context and material for intentional configuration.

MODULE 3 — THE IAD TRIAD

Introduces the central structural architecture of the theory through Structural Logic (SL), Semantic Formation (SF), and Contrived Ontology (CO).

MODULE 3A — STRUCTURAL LOGIC AND SEMANTIC FORMATION

Examines how meaning is composed through the coupling of relational structure and formed coherence.

MODULE 3B — CONTRIVED ONTOLOGY

Explores how internally composed meaning becomes socially operative through use, participation, and stabilisation in the world.

MODULE 3C — IA TYPES

Distinguishes Object-Level, Systems-Level, and Conceptual Information Architecture and clarifies their relationship to frame-scale.

MODULE 4 — SEMANTIC MECHANICS AND SOCIO-SEMANTIC MECHANICS

Introduces the mechanisms through which relational configurations are organised and the reflexive-discursive operations through which meaning is intentionally transformed during design.

RITORNELLO 2

Marks the return crossing from IA in Design to IA in the Wild, moving from configuration to formation. It establishes that composition must become answerable to consequence: designed configurations only become real when they stabilise through use and uptake sufficiently to operate in the world.

MODULE 5 — FRAME-SCALE

Presents the analytic instrument through which Information Architectures can be comprehended and coordinated across different spans of abstraction and consequence.

MODULE 6 — IA AS HEURISTICS

Explores Information Architecture as a practical orientation for inquiry and design through a set of heuristic lenses and guiding questions.

MODULE 7 — THE GOLDEN THREADS

Introduces visibility, traceability, accountability, and sustainability as mechanisms for design praxis maintaining continuity between design activity and social consequence, while designating responsibility for meaning-making in IAD.

MODULE 8 — CONTRIVED ONTOLOGY META-FRAMEWORK

Provides an explanatory framework through which the stabilisation of Information Architectures in social reality can be examined using different social-theoretical lenses.

MODULE 9 — DEVELOPMENT HORIZON

Addresses the future development of IAD as a field of inquiry, research programme, pedagogical structure, community of practice, and design-theoretic orientation.

GLOSSARY

The Glossary provides concise definitions of the principal concepts and terminology employed throughout the Canon. It is intended both as a reference work and as a companion to the Modules.

The developmental release of Canon Version 1.0 contains 20 glossary entries in total, organised alphabetically.

AUXILIARY NOTES

Supporting scholarship is presented separately through numerous texts collectively referred to as auxiliary notes, and provided in Volume 2, Part 3. Auxiliary Notes. These texts are further organised into Historical Notes, Philosophical Notes, and Supplementary Notes.

Auxiliary notes have emerged during the course of the writing of the Canon and were not anticipated at the outset of the project. Many began as candidate modules, but deemed to limited or not core as theoretical contributions in and of themselves. Others began as detail within modules and deemed of relevance and capable of standing alone, but outside of the canon core.

Auxiliary texts therefore do not form part the core theoretical progression, but rather orbit Modules as a whole, providing additional information, so as not to muddy articulation of the core theory. Reading the auxiliary notes is not a requirement for understanding the theory of IAD.

Each auxiliary text relates to and enriches one or more modules. Thus there is a bi-directional set of relationships that exist between individual modules and individual auxiliary notes which provides an enriching layer, or dimension, to the Canon as a whole.

These notes are not intended to be read end-to-end in isolation of Modules, neither are they sequential despite being numbered. These relations are discussed in the subsection “Placement within the canon” and listed under “Related Modules” in each auxiliary text.

This developmental release does not offer reference to related auxiliary notes from within Modules. Architecturally this fundamentally divorces the relationship between Modules and Auxiliary Notes. Indeed, the relational configuration between Modules and auxiliary notes is best served through offering the Canon in HTML and hyperlinking related modules and notes.

This is the rationale for the release of Canon Version 1.0 on the www.iadframework.com domain. In this way, readers will coherently encounter auxiliary texts through Modules, as they have been intended to be encountered.

PART I

MODULES

INTRODUCTION

The Information Architecture Design (IAD) Canon is a developing body of theory concerned with the relationship between information architecture, meaning-making, design, and the artificial realities humans create and inhabit.

While Information Architecture (IA) has traditionally been associated with the structuring of information in digital environments, IAD approaches IA more broadly as a phenomenon of meaning, formation, and consequence operating across concepts, artefacts, systems, institutions, and discourse.

The modules collected here represent the first public version of the theory. Together they establish a conceptual framework for understanding information architectures, for studying them in the world, and for intentionally designing them.

This collection should therefore be read not as a textbook or linear argument, but as a coherent body of interconnected propositions.

IA AND IAD

IAD is not presented as a replacement for IA. Rather, it is one particular school of IA.

IAD treats information architectures as structured configurations of meaning operating within artificial artefacts, systems, and assemblages.

From this perspective:

- IA is the phenomenon.
- IAD is a design-theoretic framework for understanding and working with that phenomenon.

In other words, IA is the subject of inquiry. IAD is one way of studying, explaining, and intentionally engaging with it.

This position embraces plurality within the wider field of IA and does not assume that alternative schools, traditions, or interpretations are invalid. Instead, IAD contributes an additional perspective rooted in design theory, constructionist pragmatism, meaning-making, and the consequences of human making in social reality.¹

¹ This commitment to plurality is consistent with earlier arguments made regarding the future development of the field of Information Architecture by the author in [Footnotes to “Re: The Future of Information Architecture”](#) in the Journal of Information Architecture.

MODULE 0

ORIENTATION

*In the theory of this canon, **Information Architecture** concerns the configurations through which meaning is structured and made operative across concepts, artefacts, systems, and social formations over time. **Information Architecture Design** concerns how such configurations are composed and stabilised to become formations of meaning in social reality.*

FOUNDATIONAL ORIENTATION

Human social reality is permeated by meaning. Meaning is not confined to communication, language, or symbol use, but is carried within artefacts, systems, institutions, and patterns of activity through which social reality and social life are organised and sustained. Nothing that is made enters a meaning-free world: all acts of making as regard the artificial, whether inventive, adaptive, or repetitive, take place within already meaningful conditions and participate in their sustaining or transformation, often tacitly and without explicit intent.

HYPERHISTORIC CONDITION

Information Architecture Design (IAD) is situated within a historically specific condition characterised by the increasing pervasiveness of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their role in structuring human experience. This condition has been described by Luciano Floridi as the Fourth Revolution wherein transition into a hyperhistoric period of human development, is defined not merely by our relationship to information communication technologies but by our dependence upon it.

Within this condition, the relationship between ontology and epistemology can no longer be treated as unidirectional. Instead, it becomes increasingly bi-directional and mediated by meaning. What exists (ontology) and what can be known (epistemology) are co-conditioned through structured configurations of meaning within the artificial domain.

IAD operates within this hyperhistoric condition by focusing on the relational configurations of the artificial as sites where meaning is structured, stabilised, and made operative. These configurations participate in shaping the conditions under which reality is encountered, understood, and acted upon.

MEANING FORMATION

Meaning becomes socially consequential when it holds as stabilised formations that persist beyond discrete moments of action or interaction. Such formations stabilise

relations, shape what can be understood or done, and exert force across time and context. Information Architecture attends to these formations as they emerge, endure, fragment, and reconfigure, without claiming to exhaust social reality or reduce it to a single coherent order of meaning. IA is therefore neither confined to discrete moments of use nor totalised across society.

Because meaning holds differently as its scope, persistence, and consequence change, IA must be understood across **frame-scales** rather than fixed layers or spatial hierarchies. Frame-scale tracks shifts in implication—how the same meaning formations condense, propagate, or destabilise across artefacts, systems, and social formations. As a field, Information Architecture therefore requires an epistemology in which such configurations can be examined, compared, and taught as enduring yet contested objects of inquiry, grounding a praxis concerned with how meaning comes to hold in the world over time.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- IAD does **not** claim jurisdiction over all ontology, existence, or social reality.
- IAD does **not** reduce reality, meaning, or social life to information, nor information to technical or digital systems.
- IAD does **not** propose a total explanatory framework for social, political, cultural, or epistemic life.
- IAD does **not** treat all formations as intentionally designed.
- IAD does **not** assume coherence, stability, harmony, or stabilisation; formations are often uneven, contested, fragile, and historically layered.
- IAD is concerned with how meaning is structured and made operative across artificial assemblages, **not** with the totality of social life.

- IAD remains bounded to artificial assemblages and human-made worlds.
- Frame-scale is **not** a spatial hierarchy or level model, but an analytic device for tracing shifts in scope, persistence, and consequence.

REFERENCES

IAD / FIELD-INTERNAL SOURCES

- Hobbs, J. (2021). Applying Information Architecture in Design Thinking: Ideating Solutions to the Wicked Problem of Addiction.
- Working papers and canonical notes related to Information Architecture Design (IAD), contrived ontology, semantic mechanics, and frame-scale.

EXTERNAL SOURCES

- Floridi, L. (2014). The Fourth Revolution.
- Selected literature in Information Architecture, Human–Computer Interaction, Design Research, and Philosophy of Information.

MODULE 1

EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONING

A substantial body of Interaction Design and Human–Computer Interaction theory is grounded in action, activity, and use. Within these traditions, meaning and ontology are understood to arise through situated practice: through what people do with artefacts in context. This emphasis has been both productive and necessary, foregrounding embodiment, contingency, and the dynamic nature of meaning in lived interaction.

IAD does not reject this action-centred account. It extends it.

Module 0 establishes that social reality is permeated by stabilised formations of meaning across frame-scales. From this perspective, the products of artificiality — artefacts, tools, systems, and environments — are not internally meaning-neutral resources awaiting interpretation; they already carry organised meaning that conditions interpretation, action, and consequence. Action occurs within pre-existing formations, even as it may contribute to their transformation.

The epistemic move of IAD begins here: **formations can be examined because relations are structurally intelligible.**

RELATIONAL MODELLING & COMPOSITIONAL MODELLING

The claim that formations can be examined presupposes that relational structure is intelligible. This places IAD in conversation with Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Information (PI), particularly its account of informational structural realism (ISR).

PI establishes that informational structures are real, that entities may be analysed at different Levels of Abstraction (LoA), and that agents operate within an infosphere constituted by informational relations. In this descriptive register, relations are modelled in order to account for what is the case.

IAD does not adopt PI as metaphysical doctrine. It remains bounded to artificial artefacts and artificial assemblages. However, it accepts the intelligibility of relational structure as a precondition for inquiry. From this shared premise, IAD proceeds differently.

Relations may be modelled descriptively, as in scientific abstraction or informational structural realism. They may also be modelled compositionally, where relational structure is intentionally configured through artificial making.

Descriptive modelling accounts for existing configurations. Compositional modelling configures relational structure for the purposes of meaning-making through artificial making.

If relational modelling is coherent, compositional modelling is possible. Where relations are composed, stabilisation may contingently occur. Where stabilisation occurs, formations emerge and consequence follows.

Stabilisation, however, is contingent and never guaranteed.

LIMINAL REALITY

Liminal Reality in IAD does not denote Floridi's *liminal realism* as a metaphysical thesis. Nor does it name a singular threshold moment.

It characterises the condition that socially stabilised formations are never ontologically final. Meaning-bearing configurations within artificial assemblages may sediment and appear naturalised as **doxa**. Yet they remain contingent and capable of deformation and reformation. Liminal Reality names this structural openness.

It is not a claim about ultimate ontology, nor an assertion that reality is fundamentally informational. It is a characterisation of the social domain insofar as it is structured through artificial human making.

Because formations are contingent, acts of compositional modelling participate in an ongoing liminal condition. Artificial configurations may stabilise, sustain or transform existing formations, or dissipate. Responsibility follows from this condition.

REPRESENTATION AND ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

The epistemology proposed here requires a distinction between the **existence of Information Architecture in the world** and the **analytic instruments used to study it**.

Information architectures, as artificial relational configurations, may become socially operative through processes as **contrived ontology** (see Module 3b: Contrived Ontology). In such cases they do not merely describe domains but actively structure and mediate social reality.

Analytic devices such as **frame-scale** provide a way to examine such architectures across spans of abstraction and consequence. Frame-scale does not contain or produce these formations. It functions as an epistemic instrument that renders them visible for inquiry, comparison, and design.

This distinction is important because Information Architecture has historically been treated within Information Science primarily as a modelling activity: the construction of descriptive ontologies of domains.

The present work instead investigates Information Architecture as a design-theoretic phenomenon whose artefacts may become operative in the world. Frame-scale therefore belongs to the **analytic apparatus of the field**, not to the ontological structure of reality itself.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- IAD does **not** assert that reality is reducible to information.
- IAD does **not** collapse metaphysics into design.
- IAD does **not** supersede informational structural realism; it operates in a different register.
- IAD does **not** deny action-centred accounts of meaning.
- IAD does **not** assume stabilisation; formations remain contingent.
- IAD does **not** claim total explanatory scope over social life.
- IAD concerns artificial artefacts and artificial assemblages; it does **not** extend to natural relational structures as such.

REFERENCES

- Dourish, P. (2001). Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Floridi, L. (2011). The Philosophy of Information. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MODULE 2

IA IN THE WILD & IA IN DESIGN

IA IN THE WILD

Information Architectures pervade socio-technical reality. They are not confined to digital systems or moments of interaction. **Meaning is structured and stabilised across artefacts, systems, institutions, and patterned practices.**

“IA in the Wild” names the condition that formations already exist prior to deliberate intervention. It draws on contemporary research movements in human–computer interaction and design research that shifted inquiry from controlled laboratory settings toward situated engagement in everyday life. Rather than isolating cognition or modelling abstract behaviour, this orientation recognises that **technologies and artefacts participate in ongoing social realities shaped by history, practice, and institutional sedimentation.**

IA in the Wild therefore refers not to uncontrolled chaos, but **to the already-structured condition of meaning in social reality.** It acknowledges that formations:

- Persist across time,
- Span frame-scales,
- Shape what can be understood, done, or contested,
- And exert consequence irrespective of intentional design.

Research at this level is not limited to analytic Levels of Abstraction. It may span **artifactual, systemic, and institutional formations, engaging sociological theory, practice-based inquiry, and empirical investigation.** The Wild is thus the domain in which formations are **encountered, examined, and traced across frame-scales.**

Not all such formations are intentionally designed. Yet all participate in structured meaning.

IA IN DESIGN

If IA in the Wild names condition, **IA in Design** names **compositional engagement.**

Design here is not restricted to interface optimisation, stylistic treatment, or tool-based method. It is grounded in the broader sense of **poeisis — human making of the artificial.** All human-made artefacts contain some degree of meaning-related configuration, **whether tacit, unintended, or explicit.** IA in Design concerns the intentional articulation of such configurations.

At the disciplinary level, this orientation aligns with traditions in design inquiry that treat design not as reductive science nor as purely systemic dialectic, but as **a form of creative and synthetic inquiry grounded in human making.** Within this frame, design is:

- Problem-led rather than form-prescriptive,
- Engaged with indeterminate situations,

- Concerned with transforming existing conditions into preferred ones,
- And characterised by synthesis across functional, material, formal, and purposive dimensions.

IA in Design therefore refers to **the deliberate compositional modelling of relational structure internal to artefacts, systems, or concepts prior to their release into the wild**. Relations are intentionally articulated through **Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF)**. These configurations enable meaning to pass from composition in design into social reality.

Design does not occur in a meaning-free condition. **Composed relations enter an already meaning full world where they may co-exist with, sustain, transform, or displace other formations.**

IAD does not assume that all Information Architectures are inherently designerly. Most formations emerge, sediment, and persist without deliberate architectural awareness. IAD names the explicit and reflective engagement with relational configuration as a matter of practice and inquiry. In this sense, it introduces **a normative stance**—not in prescribing outcomes, but **in foregrounding responsibility for the ontological consequences of intentional composition.**

IA IN THE WILD AND IA IN DESIGN AS DISCIPLINARY BRACKETING

The distinction between IA in the Wild and IA in Design is not decorative. It establishes the structural bracketing of the field.

- **IA in the Wild** provides the research orientation: formations are encountered, traced, analysed, and examined across frame-scales within lived social reality.
- **IA in Design** provides the compositional orientation: relational configurations are intentionally articulated through acts of making.

Together they define the scope of IAD as a field:

- It studies formations as they persist and exert consequence.
- It composes configurations that may enter and interact with those formations.

This bracketing situates IAD between established traditions in information architecture, contemporary design inquiry, and socio-technical research without collapsing into any single one. It avoids reducing design to Productive Science, avoiding also the totalising tendencies of holistic system monisms. Instead, **it treats IA as a structured condition of meaning and IAD as the deliberate engagement with that condition.**

All subsequent modules presuppose this dual orientation. Whether examining contrived ontology, liminal release, socio-semantic mechanics, or the Golden Threads, the backdrop remains constant:

- Formations exist in the Wild.
- Configurations are composed in Design.
- Their interaction produces ontological consequence.

CONTRIVED ONTOLOGY AS HINGE

Contrived Ontology (CO) functions as the hinge between IA in Design and IA in the Wild.

Meaning is relationally composed through SL and SF internal to artefacts and systems. In the use of artefacts and participation in systems, internal meaning transcends design and is realised in social reality as contrived ontology (CO). CO manifests along a scale from minimally weak or limited, to maximally present and capable of exerting force independent of artifactual origin.

Formations stabilise along this scale in the direction of max CO. Where maximal stabilisation occurs, consequence follows. Formations do not merely signify; they constrain, enable, and shape further possibility.

Ontology, in this sense, is not abstract metaphysics but existence-with-force.

LIMINAL RELEASE

While stabilisation is contingent and never guaranteed, the introduction of any artificiality into the world engages social reality in its liminal character: **a meaning-full condition always capable of transformation**. New artefacts and systems may sustain or transform existing meanings, knowingly or not.

This liminal condition is unavoidable. Nothing artificial enters a meaning-free environment; **every act of making participates in ongoing formation.**

Acts intentionally directed toward sustaining existing meaning are no less demanding of IA than transformational intents. **Sustaining is itself an act of meaning-making.** Equally, acts that **unknowingly sustain or transform meaning** are no less consequential for their lack of awareness.

Because stabilised formations bear consequence, IA cannot be treated as neutral arrangement alone. Once meaning holds in the wild, it participates in shaping social reality **whether intentionally or not.** This introduces a requirement for **judgement in practice:** not merely technical competence, but **reflective discernment regarding ontological effect.**

The operational treatment of ontological consequence—visibility, traceability, accountability, and sustainability—is developed further in **Module 7 (The Golden Threads).**

SCOPE OF IAD

IAD operates most immediately at the level of **lived formations:** cars, forms, maps, services, governance systems, institutional orders

Its underlying hinge is more general: **wherever relations can be modelled, they may be composed; wherever they are composed, they may stabilise; and wherever stabilisation occurs, formation and consequence follow.**

Whether this logic extends into biological or informational mediation remains an open research horizon. **IAD does not presume such jurisdiction**, but recognises the coherence of the question and invites exploration.

Development note:

The following section is retained in this developmental release because it captures an important line of theoretical reasoning. Its long-term home may ultimately be within the Supplementary Notes.

MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS

“Are compositional modelling (plus descriptive intelligibility) sufficient for...”

IA IN DESIGN: YES.

Because IA in design requires:

- The intelligibility of relational structure (descriptive grounding).
- The possibility of intentional configuration (compositional modelling).
- The possibility of stabilisation (formation).
- The contingency of stabilisation (liminal reality).

It’s a closed system.

IA IN THE WILD: YES.

IA in the wild requires:

1. That relational configurations persist beyond individual acts.
2. That they can be examined as formations.

3. That they are real in social reality.
4. That their contingency does not negate their consequence.

Compositional modelling establishes how they come into being. Descriptive modelling establishes how they can be analysed. Formation establishes persistence.

Ends.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- **Not** all IA are intentionally designed.
- Design does **not** exhaust formation.
- IAD does **not** totalise social reality.
- IAD does **not** assume coherence or stability.
- Stabilisation is contingent.
- IAD does **not** claim sole account of meaning-making in design.

REFERENCES

IAD / FIELD-INTERNAL SOURCES

- Hobbs, J., 2021. *Applying Information Architecture in Design Thinking: Ideating Solutions to the Wicked Problem of Addiction*. Master of Arts in Design Dissertation. University of Johannesburg.
- Hobbs, J, and Fenn, T., 2019. *The Design of Socially Sustainable Ontologies*. Philosophy & Technology, 32, pp. 745–767.

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- Floridi, L. (2011). The Philosophy of Information. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Floridi, L. (2014). The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Selected literature in HCI, Systemic Design, and Philosophy of Information.

RITORNELLO I

MOVEMENT 1. FROM FORMATION TO CONFIGURATION

DESCRIPTIVE → COMPOSITIONAL

Ritornello I marks the first crossing from IA in the Wild to IA in Design. It begins not with invention, but with formation.

Information architectures are encountered as already-operative configurations of meaning: formations that stabilise relations, condition understanding, and exert consequence within social reality.

They are not neutral. They are not awaiting design. They already hold.

The movement performed here is a reorientation: from observing relations, to composing with them; from recognising structure, to intentionally configuring structure; and from inherited meaning, to designed meaning.

What carries across is not the entirety of the formation, but traces of its intelligibility: structural patterns; points of stabilisation; breakdowns and tensions, trajectories of consequence. These become material for composition.

Ritornello I therefore establishes the first discipline of IAD: composition must begin from what already holds.

This **does not** imply preservation of incumbent meaning, structure, or relations. Rather, IAD begins from the premise that **meaningful intervention requires orientation within the semantic conditions already operative in the world**, whether explicit or tacit.

Development note:

The following observations draw on current design practice. They are retained in this developmental release because they help connect the theoretical movement described above with contemporary practice.

Practice notes – In design practice, these conditions are frequently absent from briefs and only partially surfaced through early-stage research activities. In more complex cases, the definition of a problem ecology — often emerging at the threshold between research and strategy — provides visibility into the incumbent semantic-frame through which the problem presently holds.

It is precisely this visibility that enables reframing, strategic reorientation, and the subsequent ideation of alternative solution ecologies.

At present, such movements are rarely modelled explicitly within contemporary design practice. They are more often inferred retrospectively, sensed tacitly, or identified only by practitioners attentive to the movement and stabilisation of meaning across systems, artefacts, institutions, and social formations.

Ends

Without this return to formation, IAD risks projection, abstraction, and composition detached from consequence. The ritornello recurs whenever design returns to the world in order to re-ground itself in formations already in motion.

PRINCIPLE OF OPERATIVE MEANING

Repeated in Ritornello II

The canon distinguishes between IA in the Wild (formations; descriptive domain), and IA in Design (configurations; compositional domain). This distinction introduces a central problem: How does meaning move between these domains?

More specifically, how do formations become available for composition? And how does composition become real in the world?

The **Principle of Operative Meaning** addresses this transition. Meaning becomes operative when relational configurations stabilise through use and uptake sufficiently to exert consequence within social reality.

This applies in both directions: formations becoming available for composition; and compositions becoming formations in the world.

The principle therefore functions as the hinge between:

- descriptive and compositional domains,
- formation and configuration,

- analysis and design,
- recognition and intervention.

Without this principle, the movement between IA in the Wild and IA in Design remains under-theorised.

MODULE 3

THE IAD TRIAD

Module 3 Part a. Structural Logic and Semantic Formation, and Module 3 Part b. Contrived Ontology, define the structural spine of IAD. Module 3 Part c. IAD Types presents a typology of IA that emerges by necessity in relation to frame-scale.

SL AND SF, AND THE PATH TO THE WILD THROUGH CO

All Information Architecture (IA), whether composed in Design or encountered in the Wild, is constituted by the coupling of:

- **Structural Logic (SL), and**
- **Semantic Formation (SF)**

Meaning is not composed by SL alone, nor SF. Meaning is composed in their synthesis. This synthesis operates as a gestalt and is achieved through synthetic cognition.

Once composed, a configured meaning in the Wild may stabilise, circulate, and exert consequence as a formation. The degree to which it does so is tracked as: **Contrived Ontology (CO)**

MODULE 3a – **STRUCTURAL LOGIC + SEMANTIC FORMATION**

SL specifies the relational constraint network. SF binds that network into a formed, encounterable coherence. SL concerns topology and structural integrity. SF mediates between:

1. Internal relational structure,
2. The host medium or system in which the IA resides,
3. An anticipated life in the Wild.

SL implies form. SF requires structural support.

Their coupling is the minimal condition for composed meaning within artificial assemblages.

MODULE 3b – **CONTRIVED ONTOLOGY**

CO names the degree to which the composed formation (SL + SF) becomes socially operative.

CO tracks:

- Persistence,
- Reproduction,
- Institutionalisation,

- Cross-frame-scale consequence.

CO does not produce meaning. CO marks the degree to which composed meaning holds. Making precedes being.

IA is first composed (SL + SF). Only thereafter may it stabilise (CO).

IA is the formal language of artificial relational configuration through which reality becomes semantically abstracted, composed, and institutionalised within artificial assemblages.

MODULE 3c – IA TYPES

Modules 3a and 3b define how IA is constituted and stabilised. It does not yet specify **what kinds of IA may exist**. All IA has SL + SF and may stabilise via CO. But IA appears at different layers of abstraction.

Within the canon as currently articulated, **three primary IA types** are distinguished: **Conceptual IA, Systems-level IA, and Object-level IA.**

These types correspond loosely to layers of abstraction found in Design and in the Wild. The typology is not taxonomic ornamentation. It is required to understand: how SL + SF

operate differently across abstraction layers, how CO manifests differently at each layer, and how these types operate independently and/or in concert to form cross-frame-scale IA.

The logic of this mapping is developed in **Module 3c**.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- SL does **not** independently compose meaning.
- SF is **not** subjective interpretation.
- CO is **not** metaphysical ontology.
- The triad does **not** totalise meaning.
- IA remains bounded to artificial relational configuration.
- Typology (Module 3c) does **not** imply hierarchy or determinism.

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MODULE 3a

STRUCTURAL LOGIC & SEMANTIC FORMATION

STRUCTURE, FORM, AND THE WORK OF SCAFFOLDING

Information Architecture operates within design as a theory of how meaning is made. Making precedes being. Meaning in the wild is subsequent to meaning composed. Within this compositional domain, IA is constituted by the coupling of Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF).

These are distinct but mutually inclusive dimensions of any artificial assemblage. They do not perform the same work.

STRUCTURAL LOGIC (SL)

Structural Logic is the internal relational constraint network of an artificial configuration. It specifies: distinctions, identities, dependencies, boundaries, and permissible and impermissible relations.

SL is concerned with coherence at the level of topology. It must embed within the constraints of the host medium: a book, a website, a chair, a system, or even a concept.

Differences in structure imply differences in how form must cohere. SL implies form, but it does not itself render a configuration encounterable as a formed whole.

SEMANTIC FORMATION (SF)

Semantic Formation is the formed coherence by which SL becomes encounterable and transportable.

It is not naming. It is not labelling. It is the interface-layer that binds structure into a graspable whole. SF works in three directions:

1. **Inward** — it binds and stabilises SL as a coherent formation.
2. **Embedded outward** — it must cohere with the host object/system/concept in which it resides.
3. **Anticipatory outward** — it orients toward an anticipated life in the wild.

SF therefore mediates between internal relational structure, material/systemic embedding, and anticipated social uptake. **Form must cohere with structure. Structure must support form toward shared aims. Where they fail to cohere, resilience is compromised.**

SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding is the labour of harmonising SL and SF. Harmony here means synthetic resolution.

Scaffolding mediates structural and formal requirements, resolves tension by appeal to higher-order aims, produces a whole in which structure supports form, and form realises structure toward shared ends.

Where structure and form do not cohere meaning becomes arbitrary, resilience weakens, shallow readings dominate, or the thing fails to fit within larger configurations.

Resilience requires structural support for form.

SYNTHETIC COGNITION

SL and SF do not operate sequentially. They function as a gestalt achieved through synthetic cognition and at the point of synthetic resolution. Their coupling produces composed meaning. SL alone does not compose meaning, nor does SF. Meaning is composed in their synthesis. Stabilisation of that meaning is addressed in M03b (Contrived Ontology).

CANONICAL ILLUSTRATION: THE HOLY TRINITY

- **Structural Logic:**
 - Father, Son and Holy Ghost relations (“is not”)
 - Father, Son, Holy Ghost and God relations (respectively) (“is”)
- **Semantic Formation:**
 - The Holy Trinity

- **Contrived Ontology:**
 - The Christian concept of God

This illustration demonstrates how Structural Logic and Semantic Formation couple to produce a coherent conceptual Information Architecture. The stabilisation of that architecture as Contrived Ontology is examined in Module 3b.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- SL does **not** independently compose meaning.
- SF is **not** subjective interpretation.
- This module does **not** treat stabilisation (see M03b).
- This module does **not** claim that all form is IA; only formed relational configuration within artificial assemblages.
- Harmony is structural synthesis, **not** aesthetic judgement.

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IAD / FIELD-INTERNAL REFERENCES

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MODULE 3b

CONTRIVED ONTOLOGY (MINIMAL AND MAXIMAL)

FROM INTERNAL MEANING TO EXTERNAL (SOCIAL) REALISATION

Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF) constitute the internal architecture of any IA, where meaning is composed in their synthesis.

Contrived Ontology (CO) names what happens when composed meaning transcends its internal condition to become socially operative.

CO is not part of the compositional coupling. It is not a third internal component. It is the world-side condition of a relational configuration once it has crossed into use to become a formation. Making precedes being. CO concerns being-in-the-wild.

THE TRIGGER EVENT: USE

Transcendence from internal meaning to external realisation requires a trigger. That trigger is use. An IA as a relational configuration remains internally composed (SL + SF) until it is enacted, instantiated, deployed, performed, circulated, or otherwise used.

Use is the condition under which internal meaning becomes externally consequential.
Without use, there is no CO.

GRADIENT OF CO

CO manifests along a gradient.

1. **Conceptual condition (pre-CO)**
 - IA composed internally (SL + SF), but not yet used.
2. **Minimal CO**
 - Formation instantiated or inscribed in an artefact or system.
3. **Maximal CO**
 - Formation becomes socially operative; it exerts force across agents, practices, or institutions.

Minimal and maximal CO are not a binary switch but a contingent gradient. However, the threshold between internal composition and external realisation is marked by use.

CANONICAL EXAMPLE: THE JOKE

“Why do elephants drink? To forget.”

0. INTERNAL COMPOSITION (PRE-CO)

- SL: The mash-up (relational configuration) of two idioms
 - An elephant never forgets
 - The alcoholic drinks to forget
- SF: A play on words in an archetypal joke-form: Question? Answer.
- Gestalt: the making of a joke

If this configuration exists only in the comedian's mind, it remains a conceptual IA.
No CO has occurred.

1. MINIMAL CO

When the comedian writes the joke in her notebook: the IA is instantiated and it becomes minimally contrived ontology. It exists beyond cognition, but it has not yet become socially operative as humour.

2. MAXIMAL CO

When the comedian performs the joke, its use towards making the audience laugh, triggers **transcendence**: The relational configuration enters social reality as a joke. Performance alone however is insufficient. If the audience does not laugh, the joke has failed to achieve maximal CO as humour.²

CO is contingent.

² Or better put, the intention towards making a joke has succeeded as a bad or un-funny joke. It depends on how tough the audience is.

When in its performance, the joke is found funny, at the moment of laughter, **the IA configuration becomes socially realised as humour.**

It is in this sense that an artificial object of making achieves a contrived ontological status by virtue of meaning internal to the object having been made to transcend into social reality.

Note. The gestalt (the making of the joke) is an act of meaning-making by IA, achieved by synthetic resolution whereby sense can be made of an absurdity when understood as humour. In the first instance and last instance, a joke is made, not sensed.

CONTINGENCY

The path from minimal to maximal CO is neither guaranteed in the synthetic resolution of a relational configuration in the abstract, nor automatic in its performance, in the broad sense of **performance as intended use.**

In the case of **the joke**, contrived ontology is dependent on the skill of the comedian in delivering jokes generally (a sense of timing, for instance), and is further mediated by context, audience disposition, shared idiomatic competence, and other contingent factors.

CO is therefore contingent and unstable.

Makers do not control maximal CO. They compose for it, as synthetic resolution also endeavours to extend to the world for which a meaning is destined.

CO is thus revisable, in principle, albeit conditionally so, and to greater or lesser extents.

CO AS TRANSCENDENCE

CO is marked by a transcendence of internal meaning into external social realisation triggered by the use of a host object, be that a concept, an artefact or participation in a system. CO is the structural condition under which meaning transcends its host and begins to operate among agents.

CO AND ANALYTIC REPRESENTATION

Contrived ontologies exist and operate within social reality. They may be instantiated through artefacts, coordinated through systems, and sustained through discourse and institutional practice.

Analytic instruments such as **Frame-Scale** do not contain these formations. Instead, they provide representational perspectives through which such architectures can be examined across spans of abstraction and consequence. **Frame-Scale therefore allows contrived ontologies to be studied as configurations of Information Architecture without implying that those architectures exist within the representation itself.**

In this sense, **Frame-Scale functions as an epistemic instrument** for making architectures visible across span, while CO names the condition under which those architectures become socially operative in the world.

CO AND RESPONSIBILITY

Because CO concerns social operation:

1. Consequence follows composition.
2. Stabilisation produces obligation.
3. Meaning exerts force.

CO does not imply moral virtue, but it renders responsibility unavoidable.

STRUCTURAL CLARIFICATIONS

- SL + SF compose meaning.
- Use triggers transcendence.
- CO tracks the degree of stabilised consequence.
- CO is not a mechanism; it is a condition achieved when mechanisms (Module 4) have operated sufficiently.
- CO remains bounded to artificial relational configuration.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- CO is neither metaphysical nor informational science ontology.
- CO does **not** imply permanence.
- CO does **not** guarantee uptake.
- Performance is necessary but **not** sufficient for maximal CO.
- Stabilisation does **not** imply truth.
- Stabilisation may constitute social truth.

- Designers cannot guarantee maximal CO.
- IA designers design towards maximal CO.

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MODULE 3c

IA TYPES

OBJECT-LEVEL, SYSTEMS-LEVEL, AND CONCEPTUAL INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

This module distinguishes three IA Types:

- Object-Level IA
- Systems-Level IA
- Conceptual IA (CIA)

These are not hierarchical stages or maturity levels. Neither are they stacked ontologies. They are distinctions of **what kind of artificial configuration is being constituted**. Each type consists of SL + SF. Each may stabilise as CO. Each may operate alone or in coordination with others.

IA Types describe the target of configuration. Frame-Scale describes the span at which configuration is specified and coordinated.

The two are related but not identical: IA Types describe **what is being constituted**; while Frame-Scale renders those configurations **analytically visible across spans of abstraction and information density**.

This distinction prevents IA Types from being mistaken for ontological layers of reality. Instead, they are analytic distinctions within the broader study of artificial relational configuration.

OBJECT-LEVEL IA

DEFINITION

An **Object-Level IA** is an artificial relational configuration that constitutes a bounded artefact as an intelligible and operable whole. Examples include: a website, a form, a customer journey map, a tool, a prototype, an artificial physical artefact, or a document.

Here information density is high, specificity matters, constraints are tight, and failure is concrete. Wheels must stay on cars. Buildings must not fall over. Interfaces must function.

Object-level IA operates close to lived reality. It is one step removed.

STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

- High granularity
- High constraint specificity

- Tight SL–SF coupling
- Limited tolerance for ambiguity
- Immediate usability consequence

Object-level IA embeds Conceptual IA even if unarticulated. Even the most concrete artefact contains implicit meaning.

SYSTEMS-LEVEL IA

DEFINITION

A **Systems-Level IA** is a relational configuration distributed across multiple artefacts, roles, processes, and practices. Here, the “object” is not a single artefact but a service ecosystem, an institutional workflow, a coordinated set of artefacts, a campaign spanning media, or a recovery management network.

Systems-level IA is two steps removed from immediate reality. Information density decreases as breadth increases. Remaining too close to reality at this span produces redundancy. **Abstraction becomes necessary.**

STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Distributed coherence
- Role coordination
- Cross-object dependencies
- Moderate granularity
- Pattern-level stabilisation

Systems-level IA frequently coordinates multiple Object-Level Information Architectures into coherent relational wholes.

Like Object-Level IA, Systems-Level IA also embeds Conceptual IA, even where that conceptual architecture remains unarticulated. Consequently, systems architectures are not merely collections of interacting objects; they also embody implicit meanings through the conceptual formations that organise and coordinate them.

CONCEPTUAL IA (CIA)

DEFINITION

A **Conceptual Information Architecture** configures categories, distinctions, framing principles and organising principles such that a domain becomes thinkable, actionable, and capable of coordination. CIA does not merely describe; it structures intelligibility.

It determines what counts as a problem, what counts as a solution, what roles exist, what values stabilise and what relations are foregrounded.

CIA may operate independently, or it may coordinate system- and object-level IA.

STRUCTURAL POSITION

Conceptual IA typically operates at the highest abstraction span. Here:

- Information density decreases
- Openness increases
- Constraint loosens
- Generativity increases

A CIA that is too specific collapses into system-level detail. A CIA that is too vague collapses into rhetoric. A strong CIA is structurally open enough to allow downstream IA to breathe.

This structural openness, not looseness, not metaphor, is what gives CIA its generative capacity.

For this reason, CIA often appears “poetic” in practice. This is not because CIA is metaphorical, but because it must maintain **structured openness**: a configuration of meaning that is sufficiently defined to organise understanding while remaining open enough to support multiple downstream architectures.

CIA therefore operates as a generative semantic architecture rather than a detailed system specification.

CIA AS GENERATIVE (WITHOUT BEING HIERARCHICAL)

CIA is not automatically dominant. It is one IA type among three. It is analytically distinct. And it is structurally capable of coordinating span. Under large frame-scale conditions, CIA may become generative — reorganising systems and objects. Under smaller spans, it may remain implicit.

Even when only object-level IA is produced, a CIA is either behind it, within it, or coincident with it. **The IA with span-expansive potential is typically CIA, but this is affordance, not hierarchy.**

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IA TYPES AND FRAME-SCALE

IA Types and Frame-Scale align structurally, but they are not identical. Frame-Scale describes vertical abstraction depth (low → high), shifts in information granularity (high → low), and time. IA Types describe what is being configured.

Object-level IA corresponds to low abstraction, high granularity spans. Systems-level IA corresponds to mid-span abstraction and distributed granularity. Conceptual IA corresponds to high abstraction, lower granularity, and greater openness.

This alignment exists because Frame-Scale was developed to make cross-span IA visible. However, Frame-Scale does not contain Information Architectures themselves. Instead, it **represents IA formations analytically across span**. The architectures being represented are those that stabilise in social reality as **contrived ontologies**. Frame-Scale therefore functions as an analytic and operational instrument through which such formations can be examined and coordinated.

STACKING AND NESTING

IA Types may operate independently, nest within one another and coordinate across spans.

Example:

- A brand (CIA)
- → Campaign architecture (systems-level IA)
- → → Individual adverts (object-level IA)

Equally, a single object-level IA may carry a CIA within it.

Stacking occurs in abstraction and not necessarily as discrete layers in reality.

DESIGN IMPLICATION

When working with a **narrow span**, object-level precision dominates. When working at a **medium span**, systems coordination dominates. When working at a **broad span**, conceptual coherence becomes decisive.

A sufficiently large frame-scale is required for CIA's structural role to become visible across frames. Without span, CIA appears abstract. With span, CIA becomes structurally consequential.

Design therefore moves continuously between spans:

- Conceptual framing
- → Systems coordination
- → → Object instantiation

This movement across spans is a core capability of Information Architecture Design.

Development Note:

The following examples are retained in this developmental release because they illustrate the application of IA Types across different domains. They remain under development and may ultimately be expanded, revised, or relocated to the Supplementary Notes as the Canon evolves.

CANONICAL EXAMPLES

MONEY

- Object: notes, coins, interfaces
- System: financial institutions
- Conceptual: value, debt, obligation

THE JOKE

- Object: utterance
- System: circulation pattern
- Conceptual: what counts as humour

ADDICTION (DISSERTATION CASE)

- Object: journey artefacts
- System: recovery ecosystem
- Conceptual: ethic of care vs justice

Ends.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- IA Types are **not** hierarchical.
- CIA is **not** ideological dominance.
- Types do **not** map one-to-one with Frame-Scale.
- Types are analytic distinctions.
- Boundaries may blur in practice.
- No metaphysical layering is asserted.

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MODULE 4

SEMANTIC MECHANICS & SOCIO-SEMANTIC MECHANICS

STRUCTURAL OPERATORS & DISCURSIVE REFLEXIVITY

This module introduces **Semantic Mechanics (SM)** and **Socio-Semantic Mechanics (SSM)**. Together they describe how Information Architecture operates during design.

- **Semantic Mechanics** are invariant structural operators by which artificial relational configurations cohere as intelligible formations.
- **Socio-Semantic Mechanics** are reflexive-discursive operations through which designers decode, recode, and encode meaning while composing IA.

SM govern how abstraction structurally functions. **SSM** govern how meaning is interpreted and intentionally reorganised within abstraction.

Both operate inside design. Neither should be confused with institutional or social processes that occur once IA stabilises in the world.

1. SEMANTIC MECHANICS (SM)

DEFINITION

Semantic Mechanics are **general structural operators** that enable information to be **organised into intelligible relational configurations**. They operate on information. They do not determine the meaning of that information. They determine **how information can be related, bounded, and stabilised**.

SM are **invariant, general, domain-independent, and operative in both descriptive and compositional relational modelling**. They **enable abstraction to function** and without them, information remains unstructured.

STRUCTURAL ROLE

Within IAD, semantic mechanics operate across SL (Structural Logic) and SF (Semantic Formation). They allow designers to differentiate information, relate elements, impose constraint, organise hierarchy and stabilise configurations.

SM do not create meaning by themselves. They create the **structural conditions under which meaning can stabilise**.

CORE SEMANTIC OPERATORS

The following operators are canonical examples of semantic mechanics.

OPERATOR	DESCRIPTION
Differentiation	Distinguishing elements as distinct
Grouping	Associating elements into sets or categories
Ordering	Arranging elements sequentially or hierarchically
Nesting	Placing structures within structures
Boundary-setting	Defining limits of a configuration
Relation	Establishing connections between elements
Constraint	Limiting permissible relations
Substitution	Replacing one element with another
Juxtaposition	Placing elements side-by-side for meaning contrast
Resolution	Stabilising a configuration as a coherent formation

These operators are **not exhaustive**, but illustrate the invariant mechanics through which IA composes relational structure.

EXAMPLE : THE JOKE

“Why do elephants drink? To forget.”

This operates through:

- Differentiation
- Juxtaposition
- Substitution
- Resolution

The mechanics remain identical regardless of the domain in which they appear.

2. SOCIO-SEMANTIC MECHANICS (SSM)

DEFINITION

Socio-Semantic Mechanics are **reflexive-discursive operations applied during design that modulate the use of semantic mechanics in light of anticipated social meaning and consequence.**

They operate **within abstraction during design.** They are not social processes themselves, but are rather are reflexive interventions made by designers.

Where SM provide structural operators, SSM introduce **discursive awareness and intentional meaning transformation.**

READING AND WRITING

SSM operate in two complementary modes: Reading (analytical) and Writing (compositional).

A. READING (ANALYTICAL)

Designers decode existing configurations. This includes identifying embedded assumptions, detecting discursive structures, recognising stabilised meanings, and analysing relational framing.

B. WRITING (COMPOSITIONAL)

Designers intentionally structure and restructure meaning. This includes recoding relational structures, reframing conceptual relations, encoding new semantic configurations, and reconstructing discursive formations.

Both modes operate through the **use of SM**. SSM do not replace semantic mechanics. They **modulate their application**.

CANONICAL SSM OPERATIONS

Examples include:

- Decoding
- Recoding
- Reframing
- Encoding
- Discursive sensitivity
- Ethical pivoting
- Conceptual repositioning

These operations occur before institutional stabilisation: they are **anticipatory**.

REALISING DISCOURSE

Within IAD, SSM are visible in moments where abstraction reveals and reorganises discursive structures. Two such moments were identified in an earlier design research case by the author examining addiction through Information Architecture Design.³

Realising Discourse 1

The discovery that the dominant meaning of “addiction” functioned as a constructed and limiting configuration.

Realising Discourse 2

The recoding of addiction recovery through an ethic of care, and its structural embedding within systems- and object-level IA.

These moments occur within abstraction during design. They are enabled by SM but guided by SSM.

³ This refers to the author’s doctoral dissertation, in which two moments of Realising Discourse were identified during the redesign of an addiction recovery system. See Section 6.4, Relevance Evaluation (pp. 236–242), and Conclusions 7–9 (pp. 259–261).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SM AND SSM

SM and SSM are complementary. SM make relational structure possible. SSM ensure that structure engages meaning responsibly and intentionally.

Semantic Mechanics	Socio-Semantic Mechanics
Structural operators	Reflexive-discursive modulation
Domain invariant	Context sensitive
Operate on information	Operate on meaning
Enable relational composition	Guide discursive transformation
Present in any abstraction	Present during reflexive design

CROSS-SCALE OPERATION

SM operate across all frame-scales. They function within object-level, systems-level and concept-level IA. SSM tend to become most visible at **higher frame-scales**, where abstraction intersects with identity, ethics, institutions, policy and social consequence.

However, SSM may occur at any scale where designers engage reflexively with meaning.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE: STRATEGIC PLANNING IN ADVERTISING

Strategic planning in advertising provides a practical illustration of cross-scale semantic operation.

- **Conceptual IA** — the brand concept
- **Systems IA** — campaign narrative across media
- **Object IA** — individual advert

Advertising practice assumes social uptake and discursive positioning. Campaign narratives decode existing meanings and encode new ones while coordinating artefacts across media. **This implicitly uses both SM and SSM, even when the mechanics remain unarticulated.**

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- SM do **not** determine social meaning
- SSM are **not** institutional forces
- SSM do **not** operate independently of SM
- **Not** all design must involve discursive transformation
- SM and SSM describe **mechanisms within design**, not societal dynamics themselves.

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RITORNELLO II

MOVEMENT 2: FROM CONFIGURATION TO FORMATION

COMPOSITIONAL → DESCRIPTIVE

Ritornello II marks the return crossing from IA in Design to IA in the Wild. It begins in composition, but does not end there.

Within IAD, relations are intentionally structured through Structural Logic and Semantic Formation. Configurations are proposed, articulated, and composed as possible realities. But composition alone is insufficient: **Meaning only becomes real when it stabilises beyond design intent and begins to exert consequence in the world.**

The movement performed here is therefore not deployment, but exposure: from internal coherence, to worldly consequence; from designed configuration, to operative formation; and from intention, to realised effect.

What carries across is not everything that was designed, but **what survives contact with reality**: what stabilises under use; what becomes socially accepted; what persists across time; and what begins to condition understanding, behaviour, or action.

These become indicators of operative meaning in the world.

Ritornello II therefore establishes the second discipline of IAD: composition must become answerable to consequence.

This does not imply that meaning can ever be fully controlled once realised within the world. Rather, IAD proceeds from the premise that designed meaning enters environments of interpretation, adaptation, resistance, and transformation beyond the boundaries of design itself.

Development Note:

The following observations are retained in this developmental release because they relate the theoretical movement described above to contemporary design practice. Their long-term home may ultimately be within the Supplementary Notes.

Practice notes: In contemporary design practice, these movements frequently occur without explicit recognition or systematic modelling. Designed configurations enter social reality through implementation, enactment, adoption, use, governance, maintenance, and institutionalisation, where meaning becomes operative through repeated interaction and tacit acceptance over time.

Such transformations are often only partially visible within existing design methods and organisational processes. IAD emerges, in part, as an attempt to provide conceptual and analytical visibility into how designed meaning stabilises, propagates, transforms, and exerts consequence across frame-scales.

It is precisely this exposure that allows the consequences of design to become visible, traceable, contestable, and accountable across frame-scales and over time.

Ends.

Without this return to formation, IAD risks formalism, simulation, and self-contained design detached from reality. The ritornello recurs whenever designed meaning re-enters the world and becomes subject to use, interpretation, resistance, adaptation, or failure.

PRINCIPLE OF OPERATIVE MEANING

Repeated in Ritornello I

The canon distinguishes between IA in the Wild (formations; descriptive domain), and IA in Design (configurations; compositional domain). This distinction introduces a central problem: How does meaning move between these domains?

More specifically, how do formations become available for composition? And how does composition become real in the world?

The **Principle of Operative Meaning** addresses this transition. Meaning becomes operative when relational configurations stabilise through use and uptake sufficiently to exert consequence within social reality.

This applies in both directions: formations becoming available for composition; and compositions becoming formations in the world.

The principle therefore functions as the hinge between:

- Descriptive and compositional domains,
- Formation and configuration,
- Analysis and design,
- Recognition and intervention.

Without this principle, the movement between IA in the Wild and IA in Design remains under-theorised.

MODULE 5

FRAME-SCALE

THE GEOMETRY OF MEANING ARCHITECTURE

Frame-scale provides the conceptual geometry through which Information Architectures can be observed, oriented, and reflected upon across different levels of abstraction in the artificial world.

It does not describe layers of reality, nor does it constitute a modelling environment in which architectures are designed. Instead, frame-scale functions as a **semantic-mechanical orientation instrument** that makes architectures of meaning intelligible across different spans of concern.

Through frame-scale, designers and researchers can locate Information Architectures relative to one another across gradients of abstraction, information density, and time. This allows architectures operating at conceptual, systemic, and object levels to be understood as related configurations rather than isolated phenomena.

Within Information Architecture Design (IAD), frame-scale therefore provides the geometric background against which the mechanics of meaning operate. It enables Information Architecture to be observed both in design activity and in the formations of the world itself.

Information Architecture Design operates primarily in abstraction. Rather than focusing solely on the construction of artefacts, IAD concerns the structuring of meaning relations that may manifest through objects, systems, discourses, institutions, and practices.

These architectures of meaning exist across very different levels of abstraction and consequence. A user interface, an organisational coordination system, a conceptual framing, or an institutional discourse may each contain Information Architecture, yet operate at different spans of concern.

Frame-scale provides the conceptual geometry through which these architectures can be located relative to one another.

Importantly, frame-scale does not function as a workspace in which architectures are designed. It is not analogous to modelling environments used in engineering or digital design tools. Instead, frame-scale functions as a reflective instrument that allows designers and researchers to orient themselves within complex relational environments.

By specifying the span at which architectures operate, frame-scale makes the relational structure of meaning architectures intelligible across the artificial world.

THE PROBLEM OF SCALE IN DESIGN

Design traditionally operates within relatively stable domains such as architecture, product design, or communication design. These disciplines implicitly stabilise the scale of the problems they address because the object of design is largely assumed.

However, when design proceeds in a problem-led and non-assumptive manner, the object of design is no longer predetermined. Instead of designing a known artefact, the designer begins with enquiry. The object of designerly making resultant from enquiry remains indeterminate. This shift introduces complexity.

Problems that appear local may be embedded within larger systems of meaning and coordination. Conversely, not all problems require systemic intervention; many are appropriately addressed at local scales.

Frame-scale resolves this tension by recognising that design problems exist along a continuum of span. Small and large problems are not mutually exclusive but occupy different positions within the broader architecture of concern.

Through frame-scale, designers can expand or contract the frame through which a problem is considered without invalidating the legitimacy of either local or systemic interventions.

DIMENSIONS OF FRAME-SCALE

Frame-scale makes architectures of meaning intelligible by introducing dimensions through which they can be situated relative to one another.

I. ABSTRACTION

Meaning architectures operate at different levels of abstraction. Some relate closely to concrete artefacts or interfaces, while others organise conceptual relations or discursive frames.

Movement across frame-scale therefore involves shifts in abstraction depth.

Higher spans involve broader conceptual relations, while lower spans involve more immediate operational instantiations.

II. INFORMATION DENSITY

Design and research processes also vary in informational granularity. At higher spans, architectures tend to compress complexity through abstraction, enabling generative conceptual structures. At lower spans, architectures require greater informational specificity and constraint to enable implementation. This produces an important dynamic:

Higher span

- lower information density
- greater generativity

Lower span

- higher information density
- greater constraint

This structural relationship explains why conceptual architectures must remain open while object architectures require precision.

III. TIME

Design inquiry unfolds over time. Research, synthesis, and composition occur sequentially, while the consequences of architectural decisions may propagate far beyond the moment of design intervention.

By introducing a temporal dimension, frame-scale allows design activity and architectural transformation to be situated within unfolding processes of inquiry and enactment.

Together these dimensions create a conceptual surface upon which architectures of meaning can be observed and related.

FRAME-SCALE AS ANALYTIC REFERENCE

Frame-scale first functions as an analytic reference for interpreting Information Architectures across span.

Architectures that appear unrelated at one span may be recognised as coordinated formations when interpreted relative to a broader span.

For example, a conceptual framing of addiction, a recovery ecosystem, or a set of patient journeys may initially appear as separate formations.

When interpreted across frame-scale, they can be recognised as coordinated architectures spanning conceptual, systemic, and object-level configurations.

Frame-scale therefore provides a disciplined way of describing how artificial relational configurations relate across spans of abstraction and consequence.

FRAME-SCALE IN DESIGN PRACTICE

Design activity frequently moves across spans of frame-scale. A design process may begin with conceptual framing, proceed through systems coordination, and eventually produce object-level instantiations.

- Conceptual framing
- → Systems coordination
- → → Object instantiation

Without a way of identifying these spans, designers may collapse conceptual and operational concerns, over specify abstraction, reproduce reality unnecessarily within models or fail to coordinate architectures across scales of concern.

Frame-scale provides a way of identifying the span at which design decisions are being made and how those decisions relate to architectures operating at other spans.

RELATIONSHIP TO IA TYPES

Frame-scale aligns structurally with IA Types but does not define them. IA Types - M03c, describe what kind of architecture is being constituted. Frame-scale specifies the span at which that architecture is articulated and coordinated.

Typical analytic correspondences include:

High abstraction span

→ Conceptual IA

Mid-span coordination

→ Systems-level IA

Low abstraction span

→ Object-level IA

These correspondences are analytic conveniences rather than rigid mappings. Frame-scale describes relational span, while IA Types describe the form of architecture itself.

FRAME-SCALE IN THE CANON

Within the IAD canon, frame-scale provides the geometric background against which the mechanics of meaning operate.

Semantic mechanics (Module 4) describe how meaning structures are formed and transformed. Frame-scale describes how those structures can be located and related across spans of abstraction and consequence.

Through this relationship, frame-scale allows Information Architecture to be examined both in design activity and in the formations of the world itself.

BRIDGE TO THE CONTRIVED ONTOLOGY META FRAMEWORK

While frame-scale specifies the span across which Information Architectures may be interpreted, it does not explain how those architectures stabilise in social reality.

That question is addressed in Module 8 — Contrived Ontology Meta-Framework, which examines how relational configurations become institutionalised, inhabited, and socially operative.

Frame-scale therefore prepares the ground for analysing how architectures articulated across span become Contrived Ontologies operating in the world.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- Reality itself is **not** layered according to Frame-Scale spans
- IA Types are **not** identical to frame-scale levels
- Abstraction does **not** necessarily increase importance
- Conceptual architectures do **not** dominate other architectural forms

Frame-scale specifies span. It does not impose ontology.

REFERENCES

IAD / FIELD-INTERNAL SOURCES

- Hobbs, J., 2021. Applying Information Architecture in Design Thinking: Ideating Solutions to the Wicked Problem of Addiction. Master of Arts in Design Dissertation. University of Johannesburg.

MODULE 6

IA AS HEURISTICS

While earlier modules establish the epistemological and structural foundations of Information Architecture Design (IAD), practice requires methods for navigating the indeterminate conditions of design.

IAD does not function only as structural composition. It also operates as a **heuristic instrument**: a set of guiding orientations that assist designers in identifying, interrogating, and composing relational configurations under conditions of uncertainty. IAD heuristics do not prescribe solutions. They guide attention and attention is oriented by concerns relating to IA in the Wild - configurations that have stabilised as formations in socio-technical realities, or IA in Design - iterating, amending or composing new configurations intended for placement in the Wild.

IAD heuristics assist designers in descriptively modelling existing formations in the Wild, or compositionally modelling new configurations in Design.

HEURISTICS IN DESIGN INQUIRY

Design situations are rarely fully specified at the outset. Problems are often ambiguous, multi-layered, and socially entangled. In such circumstances, heuristic reasoning becomes necessary.

Within IAD, heuristics function as **orientation devices** for:

- identifying relational configurations,
- navigating frame-scales,
- deconstructing and decoding discourse,
- diagnosing structural tensions,
- iterating or amending formations,
- and composing possible or new configurations.

Heuristics support inquiry without fixing outcomes.

CORE HEURISTIC ORIENTATIONS

The following five orientations recur throughout IAD practice.

1. CONFIGURATION RECOGNITION

Identify where relational structure already exists.

Questions include:

- What relations are stabilised, at what level of frame-scale?
- What formations persist across frame-scales?
- What discourse is realised?
- What meanings appear naturalised as doxa?

This orientation corresponds to **IA in the Wild**.

2. STRUCTURAL INTERROGATION

Examine the internal composition of formations.

Questions include:

- What relations are implied or suppressed?
- What structural logic governs the configuration?
- What semantic formations stabilise interpretation?

This orientation operates through **SL and SF**.

3. FRAME-SCALE NAVIGATION

Recognise that formations operate across spans.

Questions include:

- At what frame-scale is the problem situated?
- Which formations are object-level, systemic, or conceptual?
- Where are cross-scale tensions occurring?

Frame-Scale provides the analytic instrument for this navigation.

4. ONTOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCE

Consider the implications of stabilisation.

Questions include:

- What formations may become socially operative?
- What consequences may stabilise if this configuration persists?
- What alternative formations may be composed?

This orientation relates directly to **Contrived Ontology**.

5. SYNTHETIC RESOLUTION

Design involves composing configurations capable of resolving tension.

Questions include:

- What relational configuration resolves the situation?
- What formations enable coherent interpretation?
- What structure allows meaning to stabilise?

This orientation aligns with **semantic mechanics**.

HEURISTICS AS PRACTICE INFRASTRUCTURE

IA heuristics do not replace formal design methods such as service design, systems or systemic design, interaction design, or strategic design. Instead they provide **an underlying orientation toward the structural design of meaning** that can inform such methods.

In this sense, heuristics function as **cognitive infrastructure for design practice**.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- IA heuristics do **not** constitute a fixed design method
- IA heuristics do **not** prescribe solutions
- IA heuristics do **not** guarantee stabilisation
- IA heuristics assist practitioners in navigating relational complexity.

MODULE 7

THE GOLDEN THREADS

The Golden Threads concern the continuity, visibility, and traceability of meaning across design activity, levels of abstraction, and social reality.

Within IAD, meaning does not remain confined to discrete artefacts or isolated moments of interaction. Meaning operates across enquiry and ideation, between concept-, systems-, and object-levels of abstraction, and between IA in Design and IA in the Wild. The Golden Threads provide mechanisms through which these movements remain intelligible and traceable across transformation.

RATIONALE

As meaning becomes increasingly distributed across systems, institutions, infrastructures, and networked environments, the movement and stabilisation of meaning frequently becomes difficult to perceive directly. Designed meaning may propagate tacitly, stabilise through use and social acceptance, become embedded within formations, and exert consequence beyond the boundaries of design activity itself.

Under such conditions, visibility into how meaning is composed, transformed, operationalised, and sustained becomes increasingly important. The Golden Threads address this condition.

THE THREE GOLDEN THREADS

Three interrelated Golden Threads emerge within the development of IAD: Synthetic Integrity, Persistence across Frame-Scale, and the Movement between Design and the World.

GOLDEN THREAD 1: SYNTHETIC INTEGRITY

The first Golden Thread concerns visibility and traceability within design activity itself. This thread supports continuity across enquiry, reframing, ideation, prototyping, and implementation.⁴

It relates closely to scaffolding, synthetic integrity, and the preservation of relevance between research insights and resultant design configurations.

GOLDEN THREAD 2: PERSISTENCE ACROSS FRAME-SCALE

The second Golden Thread concerns the persistence and transformation of Conceptual IA across levels of abstraction.

⁴ Essentially, the Design Thinking process-method.

This thread addresses how conceptual formations may remain coherent and operative through movement between concept-level, systems-level, and object-level configurations.

It relates closely to: synthetic reach, synthetic resolution, the fulcrum and the pivot, and Contrived Ontology.⁵

GOLDEN THREAD 3: MOVEMENT BETWEEN DESIGN AND THE WORLD

The third Golden Thread concerns the movement of meaning between IA in Design and IA in the Wild.

This thread extends visibility and traceability from the beginning of a design process, into social reality, and back again through use, interpretation, consequence, and iteration.

Within the canon, this movement becomes formalised through:

- Ritornello I,
- Ritornello II,
- and the Principle of Operative Meaning.

⁵ See Section 6.2 Process Evaluation in the author's dissertation (2021, pp 215-226)

ONTOLOGICAL LEGIBILITY

The Golden Threads contribute to what IAD describes as ontological legibility within design. This refers to the capacity to perceive, trace, interrogate, and account for how meaning is structured, stabilises, transforms, and becomes consequential across frame-scales and over time.

Without such legibility transformations become difficult to trace, design intent becomes obscured, and accountability for consequential meaning becomes diffuse.

VISIBILITY, TRACEABILITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Within IAD, these conditions are understood as sequentially related (Hobbs & Fenn, 2019).

VISIBILITY

Visibility concerns the explicit articulation of structural logic, semantic formation, and transformations within design activity and social operation.

TRACEABILITY

Traceability emerges through visibility. It concerns the capacity to follow the movement and transformation of meaning across processes, abstractions, systems, and formations.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability emerges through visibility and traceability. It concerns the capacity to identify, interrogate, evaluate, and take responsibility for contrived ontology and consequential meaning, and its effects.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability emerges through all prior conditions. It concerns the capacity for meaning systems, institutions, and formations to persist responsibly across time and changing conditions without collapse, contradiction, or destructive consequence.⁶

GOLDEN THREADS AND OPERATIVE MEANING

Meaning is rarely declared in the transition from IA in Design to IA in the Wild. Instead, internal meaning transcends design into social reality through:

Use → Participation → Habituation → Procedural adoption → Infrastructural dependence.

Through these conditions, meaning stabilises socially as formations become operative within everyday life, institutions, systems, and environments. Hence, **tacit social**

⁶ Importantly, sustainability does not mean to suggest a fundamentally conservative or similar position towards some normative stance. Rather, its foregrounding, over transformation for instance, is awarded recognition because existing operative meaning exists as the default landscape through pre-existing formations. The reason why so many of the newly introduced artificial things made cohere so effortlessly in the Wild, is because such things mostly copy earlier formations.

acceptance is granted through participation in the operationalisation of meaning itself. Importantly, this occurs without explicit recognition, without ontological visibility, and without deliberate acceptance at the level of articulated belief.

Under such conditions, meaning may become socially consequential before its transformation is fully visible, interrogated, or contestable.⁷

The Golden Threads therefore contribute mechanisms through which operative meaning may remain legible, transformations may remain traceable, and consequential formations may remain accountable across design activity and social reality.

STRUCTURAL ALIGNMENT WITHIN THE CANON

Golden Thread	Primary Concern	Related Canon Areas
GT1	Continuity across design transformation	Scaffolding, Synthetic Integrity
GT2	Persistence across frame-scale	Conceptual IA, Contrived Ontology
GT3	Movement between design and the world	Ritornellos, Operative Meaning

⁷ And while sustained meanings ever more deeply entrench.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- The Golden Threads do **not** constitute a design method.
- The Golden Threads do **not** guarantee visibility, traceability, accountability, or sustainability.
- The Golden Threads do **not** determine how meaning stabilises or transforms.
- The Golden Threads make continuity across design and social reality more intelligible.
- The Golden Threads describe mechanisms of legibility, not mechanisms of causation.

REFERENCES

IAD / FIELD-INTERNAL REFERENCES

- Hobbs, J., 2021. Applying Information Architecture in Design Thinking: Ideating Solutions to the Wicked Problem of Addiction. Master of Arts in Design Dissertation. University of Johannesburg.
- Hobbs, J. & Fenn, T. (2019) 'The design of socially sustainable ontologies', *Philosophy & Technology*, 32(4), pp. 747–768. DOI: 10.1007/s13347-018-0338-y.

MODULE 8

CONTRIVED ONTOLOGY META-FRAMEWORK

Contrived Ontology (CO) describes the condition under which relational configurations composed through artificial making become socially operative.

The CO Meta-Framework provides a conceptual model for examining how such formations stabilise across social reality. It does not prescribe a single theory of society. Instead, it provides an analytic structure through which different social theories may interpret the stabilisation of contrived ontologies.

FROM COMPOSITION TO SOCIAL OPERATION

Earlier modules establish the structural pathway by which Information Architectures move from composition to social consequence. Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF) compose internal meaning within artefacts, systems, or conceptual architectures. Through use, this internally composed meaning may transcend design and enter social reality.

When such transcendence occurs and formations stabilise, they become contrived ontologies capable of exerting consequence beyond their artifactual origin. **The CO Meta-Framework concerns the examination of this stabilisation.**

FORMATION AND STABILISATION

When contrived ontologies stabilise they may participate in multiple structures within social reality. These include:

- Institutions
- Norms
- Infrastructures
- Discourses
- Organisational practices
- Cultural formations

Stabilisation occurs when relational configurations become sufficiently embedded that they exert consequence independent of the artefact or design activity that first composed them. In this condition, formations may persist across time and across frame-scales.

CONTRIVED ONTOLOGY AS STRUCTURAL CONDITION

Contrived Ontology does not propose a comprehensive metaphysical theory of reality. Rather, it advances a bounded metaphysical claim concerning Information Architecture

itself: that artificially composed relational configurations may legitimately be understood as existing Information Architectures when they become socially operative through stabilisation.

In this sense, ontology refers not merely to abstract existence, but to **existence-with-consequence**.

SOCIAL THEORETICAL INTERPRETATIONS

The CO Meta-Framework does not impose a single theory of social stabilisation. Instead it allows different social theoretical perspectives to interpret the same formations. Examples include:

- **Bourdieu** — stabilisation as habitus and field
- **Foucault** — stabilisation as discourse and power relations
- **Institutional theory** — stabilisation as organisational norms and structures
- **Pragmatism** — stabilisation through practice and consequence

Within IAD these interpretations operate as analytical lenses applied to formations whose relational structure can be examined through Information Architecture.

FRAME-SCALE REPRESENTATION

Frame-Scale provides the analytic instrument through which formations may be examined across spans of abstraction and consequence. Frame-Scale does not constitute

contrived ontologies. Instead it provides a representational perspective that allows formations to be analysed as Information Architectures across different spans.

Contrived ontologies exist within social reality; Frame-Scale renders them visible for inquiry.

CO AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCE

Once stabilised, contrived ontologies shape the conditions under which meaning and action occur. They influence:

- Perception
- Interpretation
- Institutional behaviour
- Cultural expectation
- Technological mediation

Through these mechanisms, formations enable certain possibilities while constraining others. This capacity gives Information Architecture its significance as a design-theoretic phenomenon.

RESEARCH HORIZON

The CO Meta-Framework opens several avenues for further inquiry. These include:

- Empirical study of formation stabilisation
- Comparative analysis of institutional architectures
- Normative design interventions across frame-scales
- Investigation of socio-semantic consequence

Such research allows IAD to connect design practice with broader social theory while retaining its focus on relational configuration.

NON-CLAIMS, GUARDRAILS & CAVEATS

- The CO Meta-Framework does **not** constitute a social theory.
- The CO Meta-Framework does **not** prescribe a single social-theoretical interpretation.
- Contrived Ontology is **not** equivalent to Frame-Scale.
- The CO Meta-Framework provides an analytic structure for interpreting socially operative Information Architectures.
- This module concerns the interpretation of stabilised formations, **not** their composition (see Module 3b).

REFERENCES

IAD / FIELD-INTERNAL REFERENCES

- Hobbs, J. (2026). A Meta-Architectural View of Contrived Ontology: Meaning-Making in the Wild. Theoretical Extension TE-002. Johannesburg: IAD Framework.

MODULE 9

DEVELOPMENT HORIZON

Module 9 addresses the conditions required for Information Architecture Design (IAD) to stabilise as a field of inquiry, a design-theoretic orientation, a research programme, a pedagogical structure and as a community of practice.

The preceding modules establish the core theoretical conditions of IAD. Module 9 addresses the conditions required for those theoretical conditions to become sustainable, transmissible, extensible, and institutionally operable.

This module therefore concerns the formation of the field itself.

PURPOSE

The earlier modules establish epistemological positioning, IA in the Wild and in Design, Structural Logic (SL), Semantic Formation (SF), Contrived Ontology (CO), Semantic and Socio-Semantic Mechanics, frame-scale, operative meaning, and the Golden Threads.

Together, these constitute the foundational conditions of IAD as a coherent theoretical system. However, theories do not stabilise through concepts alone. They also require articulation, pedagogy, discourse, practice structures, institutional support, disciplinary

positioning, and mechanisms for continuity and extension. Module 9 addresses these conditions.

INTERNAL FIELD SCAFFOLDING

Module 9 concerns what may be described as the internal scaffolding of the field. This includes how IAD is taught, how it is researched, how it is practiced, how it relates to adjacent disciplines, how its concepts are stabilised, and how coherence is maintained as the field develops

These concerns are distinct from future canon content. They do not primarily introduce new theoretical constructs. Rather, they establish the conditions through which the canon itself may remain coherent, extensible, transmissible and operational over time.

RELATION TO CANON GOVERNANCE

This module should not be confused with Canon Governance. Governance structures address future canon development, staging and versioning, roadmap planning, and the progression of canonical releases. As such, Module 9 operates alongside governance structures, but is not itself a governance mechanism.

ANTICIPATED MODULE AREAS

The following module areas are presently anticipated as part of this field-forming layer of the canon. These remain in active development.

Module 9A – AXIOMS

Concerns orienting principles and foundational commitments associated with IAD and a second intellectual culture Information Architecture. This area addresses foundational positions, orienting assumptions, and conditions of disciplinary coherence.

Module 9B – SCOPE

Concerns the scope and boundaries of IAD and the conditions under which its concepts may be applied appropriately. This area clarifies what falls within IAD, how it relates to adjacent disciplines, where its explanatory reach begins and ends, and the limits of its applicability. In doing so, it establishes the boundaries through which IAD may develop without losing theoretical coherence.

Module 9C – RESEARCH

Concerns the use of IAD within research contexts. This area explores how IAD supports the descriptive modelling of formations, compositional inquiry, and the analysis of Information Architecture in the Wild and in Design. Particular attention is given to ontological legibility, methods of inquiry, and the role of IAD as a design-theoretic research orientation.

Module 9D – PRACTICE

Concerns the operation of IAD within design activity and professional practice. This area examines how the concepts of the canon become operational through strategy, design inquiry, and the integration of Information Architecture into professional practice. It therefore addresses the relationship between theoretical understanding and situated acts of design.

Module 9E – PEDAGOGY

Concerns the teaching and transmission of IAD. This area explores curricular structures, educational approaches, learning models, and the role of Information Architecture Design within design education. Its purpose is to establish the conditions through which the theory may be communicated, learned, and progressively developed by others.

Module 9F – DISCIPLINE, COMMUNITY, AND INSTITUTIONALISATION

Concerns the broader stabilisation of IAD as a disciplinary formation. This area examines the conditions through which discourse, institutions, publication, interdisciplinary engagement, and communities of practice contribute to the long-term development of the field. It therefore addresses how IAD may become sustained as an enduring intellectual and professional tradition.

RELATION TO THE WIDER CANON

Module 9 operates in relation to:

- **Modules** — establishes conditions for continuity and extension
- **Glossary** — supports conceptual stability and disciplinary coherence
- **Auxiliary Notes** — situate and expand field-level discussions
- **Canonical Artefacts** — support transmission and operationalisation
- **Canon Governance** — manages development, staging, and versioning

PLACEMENT WITHIN THE CANON

Module 9 follows the foundational modules because field formation depends upon prior theoretical articulation. The module does not replace or supersede earlier modules. Rather, it addresses the conditions required for their sustained operation, transmission, and development.

Module 9 therefore marks a transition from the articulation of IAD as theory, toward the stabilisation of IAD as field condition.

PART 2

GLOSSARY

A1

Artificial

Artificial refers to configurations introduced, modified, or sustained through human making.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, the term artificial marks the immutable boundary of Information Architecture. IA concerns relational configurations of meaning within artefacts and artificial assemblages.

Artificial does not imply triviality or superficiality. Nor does it deny material or biological embedding. It denotes the presence of human-introduced structuring.

Natural relational structures fall outside the direct scope of IA unless intentionally reconfigured through artificial intervention.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Human-introduced
- Structurally configured
- Meaning-bearing
- Capable of stabilisation as formation

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Artificial:

- Does not imply separation from material reality.
- Does not deny hybrid socio-material entanglement.
- Does not extend IA into universal ontology.
- Functions solely to bound analytic scope.

Artificial Assemblage

An Artificial Assemblage is a coordinated arrangement of artificial artefacts, procedures, roles, and structures through which meaning is organised and made operative across frame-scales.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, Artificial Assemblage extends the analytic focus beyond single artefacts without dissolving into total systems theory. It refers specifically to configurations introduced, modified, or sustained through human making.

An artefact (e.g., a form, interface, tool, document) may carry relational configuration internally. When multiple artefacts, processes, and structured relations operate together in coordinated fashion — such as in a service system, governance framework, curriculum structure, or digital ecosystem — they constitute an Artificial Assemblage.

The term marks the immutable boundary of IA: its scope concerns artificial human-made configurations of meaning. It does not extend to natural relational structures as such, except where these are intentionally reconfigured through artificial intervention.

Artificial Assemblages may stabilise as formations when their configurations persist and exert consequence across time and context.

DISTINCTION FROM RELATED TERMS

- Artefact: A discrete artificial object carrying internal relational configuration.
- Artificial Assemblage: A coordinated arrangement of multiple artefacts and structured relations.
- System: A broader term that may include natural or hybrid processes; IAD restricts its analytic scope to artificial assemblages.
- Formation: A stabilised configuration of meaning across frame-scales; an assemblage may stabilise as a formation.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Artificial (human-introduced)
- Relationally configured
- Coordinated across components
- Frame-scale sensitive
- Capable of stabilisation as formation

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Artificial Assemblage:

- Does not claim jurisdiction over natural systems as such.
- Does not adopt Deleuzian assemblage ontology.
- Does not imply total systemic determinism.
- Does not erase human responsibility in artificial configuration.

Compositional Modelling

Compositional Modelling refers to the intentional configuration of relational structure for the purposes of meaning-making through artificial making.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Where descriptive modelling represents what is, compositional modelling configures what may come to hold.

In IAD, compositional modelling operates through the coordinated articulation of Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF). Such relational configurations may stabilise as formations across frame-scales (as max. CO) or may intentionally or unintentionally not (as min. CO).

Compositional modelling acknowledges the liminal condition of social reality: stabilisation is contingent and never guaranteed.

The “bananafrog” example illustrates the distinction. One may descriptively model an existing frog (or banana), but the possibility of inventing something new, such as a ‘bananafrog’, is not available within purely descriptive modelling. When one composes a

new relational configuration—whether conceptual, linguistic, institutional, or artifactual—one participates in the configuration of new meaning and its potential stabilisation as formation in social reality.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Intentional configuration
- SL/SF articulation
- Frame-scale sensitivity
- Capacity for stabilisation (min/max CO)

NOTES

The “bananafrog” example illustrates the distinction. One may descriptively model an existing frog (or banana), but the possibility of inventing something new, such as a ‘bananafrog’, is not available within purely descriptive modelling.

A more sobering example illustrates the stakes. When extremist propaganda in Rwanda repeatedly referred to Tutsis as “cockroaches,” or when Nazi discourse portrayed Jews as “rats,” this was not neutral description. It was compositional modelling in discourse: an intentional reconfiguration of relational meaning. The targeted group was repositioned within a new semantic formation - no longer as neighbours, citizens, or moral subjects, but as vermin.

Such modelling does not alter biological reality, but it can alter social ontology. When sustained across media, institutions, and coordinated artificial assemblages (radio broadcasts, print media, bureaucratic systems, legal shifts, military organisation), these configurations may stabilise as formations that reshape what actions are thinkable, permissible, or obligatory. Moral prohibitions that once held - such as “murder is wrong” - can be weakened or suspended within the reconfigured frame.

This is not to claim that language alone causes violence, but to show how discursive composition participates in the formation of social reality. The example demonstrates that modelling is not merely representational; under conditions of repetition, uptake, and institutional reinforcement, it can become world-shaping.

Contrived Ontology

Contrived Ontology (CO) refers to the condition under which composed meaning within an artificial relational configuration becomes socially operative in the world. CO tracks the degree to which a configuration composed through Structural Logic and Semantic Formation stabilises, circulates, and exerts consequence across agents, practices, and institutions.

It is an analytic term describing the stabilisation of meaning composed within artificial relational configuration.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Within Information Architecture Design (IAD), Contrived Ontology names the condition under which internally composed meaning becomes externally consequential.

Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF) constitute the internal architecture of Information Architecture. Through their synthesis, meaning is composed. Contrived Ontology concerns what occurs once that composed configuration enters the world through use. CO therefore does not produce meaning. It marks the degree to which composed meaning holds.

An Information Architecture may be internally composed without becoming socially operative. Only when it is instantiated, enacted, circulated, or otherwise used can it begin to stabilise as a formation within social reality. However, CO is contingent and revisable. Stabilisation may increase or diminish over time.

DISTINCTION FROM STRUCTURAL COMPOSITION

Structural Logic + Semantic Formation compose meaning internally. Contrived Ontology concerns the external stabilisation of that meaning. Composition precedes ontology. Meaning must first be composed before it can stabilise in the world.

KEY PROPERTIES

- World-side condition of IA
- Dependent on use or enactment
- Gradient rather than binary state
- Contingent and revisable
- Tracks stabilisation across frame-scales

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Contrived Ontology:

- Is not metaphysical ontology.
- Does not imply permanence.
- Does not guarantee social uptake.
- Does not independently generate meaning.

Descriptive Modelling

Descriptive Modelling refers to the representation of relational structure in order to account for what is the case.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Descriptive Modelling seeks to analyse, abstract, and represent existing configurations. It operates by identifying relations and structures as they are observed or inferred.

In philosophical and scientific contexts, descriptive modelling may align with informational structural realism or other forms of structural analysis. Its purpose is explanatory rather than compositional. In IAD, descriptive modelling is acknowledged but not sufficient. It establishes relational intelligibility but does not itself compose new configurations.

DISTINCTION FROM COMPOSITIONAL MODELLING

Descriptive Modelling: Accounts for existing relational structure.

Compositional Modelling: Intentionally configures relational structure.

Doxa

Doxa refers to stabilised formations of meaning that have become naturalised and taken-for-granted within social reality.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, formations describe stabilised configurations of meaning that persist across frame-scales. When such formations become sedimented to the point that their contingency is no longer visible, they function as doxa.

Doxa does not imply falsehood or error. Rather, it names the condition in which structured meaning appears inevitable, necessary, or ontologically given. In this state, relational configurations are no longer experienced as composed and contingent, but as natural features of reality.

The concept of doxa functions as a counterpoint to **Liminal Reality**. Where Liminal Reality names the structural contingency of formations, doxa names their sedimentation and apparent inevitability.

CONCEPTUAL LINEAGE

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The term *doxa* is drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory, where it refers to the realm of the self-evident — the beliefs, structures, and assumptions that go without saying within a given field. IAD adopts the term in a limited and specific sense. It refers to the naturalisation of stabilised formations of meaning. IAD does not import Bourdieu's broader theoretical apparatus (e.g., habitus, capital, field theory) unless explicitly stated elsewhere.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Naturalisation of formation
- Sedimentation across frame-scales
- Obscured contingency
- Apparent inevitability

Formation

A formation is a stabilised configuration of meaning that persists across frame-scale as Contrived Ontology.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, formations refer to the ways in which meaning comes to hold socially – not merely as interpreted content, but as enduring structures that shape what can be understood, done, or contested. Formations may exist at multiple frame-scales, from artifactual arrangements to institutionalised patterns and field-level orders.

The study of IA formations is foundational to IAD epistemology. Information Architecture, as a field, concerns how meaning comes to hold in the world as formation – that is, as Contrived Ontology. Formations are the primary objects through which IA can be examined, compared, and taught as enduring yet contested structures of meaning.

SCOPE & BOUNDARIES

Formation in IAD concerns the stabilisation of meaning across time and context, the persistence of meaning beyond discrete interaction, cross-frame implications of meaning (object → system → field), and how meaning exerts consequence socially.

Formation does **not** refer to temporary interpretive states, purely subjective meaning without stabilisation, totalised social systems, or static or immutable entities.

DISTINCTION FROM SEMANTIC FORMATION

Semantic Formation (SF) and Structural Logic (SL) are the two mutually constitutive aspects through which objects and systems manifest the capacity to hold internal meaning. A formation, by contrast, refers to the broader stabilisation of such meaning across time and context, including its persistence and consequence beyond artefacts, in social reality.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Persistence beyond momentary action
- Capacity to exert consequence
- Frame-scale variability
- Susceptibility to consolidation, sedimentation, fragmentation, and destabilisation
- Ontological holding (minimal to maximal)

NOTES

The term “formation” is used in IAD in a theory-neutral sense. While compatible with discussions in institutional theory, practice theory, or discourse theory, it does not presuppose any specific sociological framework. Its function is ontological and epistemological rather than disciplinary.

PEDAGOGICAL: EXAMPLES

OBJECT-LEVEL FORMATION: PASSPORT

A bounded artefact whose internal SL (fields, categories, security structures) and SF (identity, citizenship, legitimacy) manifest internal meaning that holds socially.

SYSTEM-LEVEL FORMATION: ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Structured procedures (registration, ballots, counting, representation) whose SL + SF stabilise political participation across time.

INSTITUTIONAL-LEVEL FORMATION: RULE OF LAW

A stabilised normative formation organising legitimacy, authority, adjudication, and accountability beyond any single artefact or procedure.

SPANNING EXAMPLE (CROSS FRAME-SCALE): DEMOCRACY

Conceptual IA (SL + SF):

- SL: representation, voting mechanisms, separation of powers, majority rule, rights frameworks
- SF: legitimacy, equality, participation, sovereignty of the people

Institutional Formation:

Democracy as a stabilised normative-political order.

System-Level Echo:

Electoral systems, parliamentary procedures, constitutional structures.

Object-Level Echo:

Ballot papers, voting booths, constitutions, civic forms.

Democracy demonstrably holds as formation across frame-scales and can be articulated as a structured Conceptual IA whose SL + SF propagate into systems and objects, and into institutional legitimacy.

Frame-Scale

Frame-Scale is a conceptual–analytic instrument used in IAD to specify, examine, and coordinate information architectures across spans of abstraction and consequence. It does not describe the size of an object but the span of relations within which an Information Architecture is interpreted or conceptualised.

Within the IAD canon, Frame-Scale provides the conceptual geometry that allows Information Architectures to be reasoned about consistently across objects, systems, institutions, and conceptual formations.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Frame-Scale is a disciplined conceptual instrument for reasoning about span and coordination in artificial composition. Expanding the frame-scale reveals additional relations, contexts, and consequences surrounding an Information Architecture. Narrowing the frame focuses attention on more local configurations.

Frame-Scale itself makes no ontological claims. It renders visible how Information Architectures are specified at different spans, how coordination occurs across those spans, and how consequences propagate across artificial assemblages. Frame-Scale does

not create Information Architecture. It reveals the span within which Information Architecture operates.

The same relational configuration may therefore be interpreted at different spans as a localised object, a coordinated system, or a conceptual formation. These spans are analytic perspectives rather than metaphysical layers of reality.

DISTINCTION FROM IA TYPES

Frame-Scale is not equivalent to Conceptual, Systems-level, or Object-level IA. IA Types describe kinds of relational configuration. Frame-Scale describes the span at which such configurations are interpreted, specified, or coordinated.

DISTINCTION FROM LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION (LOA)

Frame-Scale does not duplicate Floridi's Levels of Abstraction.⁸ It does not specify informational filters or ontological commitments. Instead, it concerns coordination-span within artificial composition and interpretation.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Conceptual–analytic instrument
- Span-sensitive
- Cross-frame coordination capable

⁸ See Chapter 3 in Floridi, L. (2011). *The Philosophy of Information*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Non-ontological
- Operates across low/high abstraction, low/high information density, and time.
- Supports both IA in Design and IA in the Wild

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Frame-Scale:

- Is not an ontological doctrine
- Is not a metaphysical layer of reality
- Does not itself explain institutional stabilisation of IA
- Does not duplicate IA Types
- Does not function as metaphor or rhetorical device

Golden Thread

A Golden Thread refers to a traceable continuity of meaning, relation, and transformation maintained across design activity, levels of abstraction, and/or the movement between design and social reality.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Within IAD, Golden Threads provide continuity across processes of enquiry, synthesis, transformation, composition, and realisation.

The concept originates from early work exploring indeterminacy, transdisciplinary practise, and the transformation of information through complex design processes. Over time, the concept expanded to address broader questions of visibility, traceability, accountability, and sustainability / transformation in relation to meaning-making and Contrived Ontology.

Golden Threads do not refer merely to procedural continuity or project management alignment. Rather, they concern the maintenance of intelligible relations across transformation.

In this sense, Golden Threads make it possible to trace the movement of meaning, preserve coherence across abstraction, and maintain visibility into how designed meaning becomes socially operative.

THREE GOLDEN THREADS

Three interrelated Golden Threads feature in the theory of IAD.

Golden Thread 1 concerns synthetic integrity: the continuity of meaning throughout the design process. **Golden Thread 2** concerns conceptual persistence across Frame-Scale: the continuity and transformation of Conceptual IA across levels of abstraction. **Golden Thread 3** concerns movement between design and the world: the continuity of meaning between IA in Design and IA in the Wild through use, consequence and reinterpretation.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Traceable
- Transformational
- Cross-scalar
- Relational
- Consequential
- Operative across time and process

Information Architecture

Information Architecture (IA) concerns the configurations through which meaning is structured, stabilised, and made operative across artefacts, systems, and social formations over time.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Meaning is not introduced into a neutral world, but is always already present within human-made environments. IA attends to how such meaning is organised, persists beyond moments of action, and conditions understanding, behaviour, and consequence.

IA is neither confined to discrete interactions nor totalised across social reality, but operates across frame-scales, tracking how meaning holds differently as its scope and implications change.

IA does not treat meaning as added after the fact through interpretation alone. Rather, artefacts and assemblages carry organised meaning internally through their structural logic and semantic formation. When such configurations stabilise across frame-scales, they may function as formations, exerting consequence beyond immediate interaction.

Information Architecture studies relational configurations of meaning within artificial artefacts and artificial assemblages. These configurations may be discrete (e.g., within a single artefact) or distributed (e.g., across coordinated artefacts and procedures), but in each case they structure what can be understood, done, or contested.

As a field, IA provides the analytic vocabulary through which such configurations can be examined, compared, and taught without presuming that they exhaust social reality or determine all forms of meaning.

SCOPE & BOUNDARIES

IA concerns:

- Relational configurations of meaning in artificial artefacts
- Coordinated configurations within artificial assemblages
- The persistence and stabilisation of meaning across frame-scales
- How structured meaning conditions interpretation, action, and consequence

IA does not concern:

- Natural relational structures independent of human making
- All forms of social, political, or cultural causation
- Momentary interaction detached from structured configuration
- A total explanatory account of social reality

KEY PROPERTIES

- Meaning-bearing configuration
- Structural intelligibility
- Persistence across frame-scales
- Capacity for stabilisation as formation
- Sensitivity to scope, consequence, and context

NOTES

In Library and Information Science (LIS), IA often refers to classification systems, taxonomies, and organisational structures of information resources. In UX and HCI contexts, IA commonly denotes navigation systems, labelling, and content structure within digital interfaces.

IAD retains these usages as instances of IA but extends the scope beyond digital navigation to include relational configurations of meaning across artefacts and artificial assemblages more broadly.

Information Architecture Design

Information Architecture Design (IAD) is the design-theoretic articulation of Information Architecture. It concerns the intentional composition and transformation of meaning through Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF) across frame-scales, such that meaning may come to hold minimally or maximally as Contrived Ontology.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Where Information Architecture (IA) studies the configurations and formations through which meaning is structured and stabilised over time, Information Architecture Design (IAD) concerns the deliberate engagement with those structures in acts of making.

IAD provides the conceptual and methodological vocabulary for composing, analysing, and transforming the architectures through which meaning becomes socially consequential.

IAD operates through the coordinated articulation of Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF), recognising that meaning is not added to neutral structures but emerges through their composition. Through this composition, meanings may stabilise as

formations that persist beyond discrete acts of interaction, exerting consequence across artefacts, systems, and institutional orders. IAD therefore functions both as a design capability and as a mode of inquiry. It enables practitioners to trace how meaning propagates across frame-scales and to intervene in ways that make such propagation visible, accountable, and extensible.

SCOPE & BOUNDARIES

IAD concerns the intentional composition of meaning in artefacts, systems and as concepts, the coordination of SL and SF in design, minimal and maximal Contrived Ontology, cross-frame implications of design decisions, the sustaining and transformation of existing formations, the realisation of discourse in design and social reality, and the praxis of meaning-making.

IAD does not claim to exhaust social, political, or cultural explanation, claim sole account of meaning-making by Design, reduce design to interface or interaction optimisation, assume coherence or stability as design outcomes, nor operate independently of existing formations.

KEY PROPERTIES

- SL/SF dyadic composition
- Frame-scale sensitivity
- Ontological consequence (minimal ↔ maximal CO)
- Visibility and traceability of meaning
- Capacity for sustaining and transforming formations

NOTES

IAD differs from mainstream “IA in UX” in that it is not limited to ‘digital’ or content structure. It differs from Systemic Design in that it retains object-level specification while tracing cross-frame propagation of meaning.

While in this theory all artificial human made things are considered to contain some degree of IA, irrespective of an awareness of such by their makers, IAD still does not presume that all design activity is IAD. Rather, IAD names the explicit engagement with the architectural conditions through which meaning comes to hold.

Liminal Reality

Liminal Reality names the condition that socially stabilised formations of meaning are never ontologically final. It characterises social reality as structurally contingent, revisable, and open to deformation and reformation.

Liminal Reality is intentionally framed as a condition and a state, rather than an event. While it may describe threshold moments of release or transformation, its primary function in IAD is to prevent the reification of formations as ontologically fixed.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, formations describe stabilised configurations of meaning that persist across frame-scales. Liminal Reality serves as their counterpoint. It does not deny stabilisation, but reminds that such stabilisation is contingent rather than inevitable.

Liminal Reality is not a metaphysical claim about the ultimate nature of existence. It is a characterisation of the social domain insofar as it is structured through artificial human making. Meaning-bearing configurations, once stabilised, may sediment into doxa and

appear natural or necessary. Liminal Reality names the ever-present possibility that such formations could be otherwise.

The term draws selectively on anthropological understandings of liminality as structured transition and managed passage. In this sense, artificial acts of composition participate in a socially consequential process: the release, monitoring, and potential transformation of formations. Design, understood through IAD, operates within this liminal condition and carries responsibility accordingly.

DISTINCTION FROM FORMATION

Formation refers to stabilised configurations of meaning that persist. Liminal Reality refers to the condition that such formations remain contingent and transformable. Formation names what holds. Liminal Reality names the fact that what holds could be otherwise.

DISTINCTION FROM FLORIDI'S LIMINAL REALISM

Luciano Floridi's liminal realism concerns the ontological status of relational informational structures within informational structural realism.⁹ Liminal Reality in IAD does not make a metaphysical claim about relational ontology. It concerns the contingency of socially stabilised meaning within the domain of artificial assemblages.

⁹ See Chapter 15, Section 15.2.2 in Floridi, L. (2011). *The Philosophy of Information*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Structural contingency
- Transformational openness
- Counterpoint to doxa
- Ethical implication for artificial composition
- Frame-scale sensitivity

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Liminal Reality:

- Does not function as a metaphysical doctrine about the nature of existence.
- Does not refer only to momentary thresholds or singular transformative events.
- Does not duplicate or replace the concept of Formation.
- Does not collapse into Floridi's liminal realism or informational structural realism.
- Does not rely on unexamined anthropological metaphor.
- Does not serve as poetic ornamentation.

Its function is disciplined and analytic: to prevent the reification of stabilised formations as necessary, natural, or ontologically final.

Operative Meaning

Operative Meaning refers to meaning that has become real through stabilised relational configuration and exerts consequence in use within artificial assemblages.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, not all meaning is considered operative. Meaning may be proposed (in composition), interpreted (in cognition), or expressed (in form). However, meaning becomes operative only where it is structured through relational configuration, stabilises across time and frame-scale, and enters into use and consequence.

Operative Meaning therefore names the condition in which meaning holds, persists and begins to organise action and outcome within social reality. This condition is observable through formations, where structured configurations of relation persist and exert consequence beyond their initial composition.

Operative Meaning is not assumed to be universal or foundational. It is contingent and bounded: not all composed meaning stabilises, not all interpreted meaning becomes consequential, and not all configurations achieve persistence.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Structured (relationally configured)
- Stabilised (across time and frame-scale)
- Consequential (operative in use)
- Contingent (not guaranteed)
- Bounded to artificial relational configuration

NOTES

Operative Meaning distinguishes meaning that merely exists in interpretation or expression from meaning that becomes real in its effects.

A joke written in a notebook may carry meaning in a minimal sense, but only becomes operative when told, received, and enacted as humour. Similarly, institutional constructs such as money, law, or roles become operative when stabilised through shared use and consequence.

The concept helps avoid two common reductions: that meaning is purely interpretive (subjective) and that meaning is automatically real once expressed.

In IAD, meaning is only in scope in social reality where it becomes operative through structured, stabilised, and consequential configuration.

Principle of Operative Meaning

The Principle of Operative Meaning states that meaning becomes real, in the sense relevant to IAD, only when it is structured through relational configuration, stabilised across time and frame-scale, and rendered operative through use and consequence.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

The Principle of Operative Meaning establishes the condition under which meaning becomes operative.

It resolves a critical gap between the composition of meaning (IAD) and the formation of meaning in the world (IA in the Wild), by specifying that meaning does not become real simply by being expressed, being interpreted or being composed. Instead, meaning becomes real where it is structurally configured (SL + SF), stabilises across frame-scale, and enters into use and consequence.

The principle therefore governs the transition from configuration to formation, the movement between descriptive and compositional domains, and the condition under which Contrived Ontology (CO) is realised.

It applies equally to composed meaning (design) and emergent meaning (the wild) without collapsing the distinction between IA and IAD.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Conditional (not automatic)
- Bidirectional (applies across domains)
- Governs transition (composition ↔ formation)
- Grounds Contrived Ontology (CO)
- Operates across frame-scale

NOTES

The principle emerged to address an implicit gap in the canon: while IA accounts for stabilised formations and IAD accounts for the composition of meaning, the condition under which meaning becomes real was not explicitly stated.

It is operationalised within the canon through the Ritornello movements:

- Ritornello I: formation → composition
- Ritornello II: composition → formation

These movements enact the principle by ensuring that composition remains grounded in existing formations, and composed configurations are returned to conditions of use and consequence.

The principle is not a metaphysical claim about reality as such. It operates within the bounded epistemology of artificial relational configuration, where meaning is understood as structured, stabilised, and consequential within human-made assemblages.

R1

Ritornello

Ritornello refers to a recurring structural transition within the IAD canon that enables movement between descriptive (formation) and compositional (configuration) domains under the Principle of Operative Meaning.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Ritornello names the structured movement through which meaning passes between IA in the Wild (formation; descriptive domain), and IA in Design (configuration; compositional domain), and back again.

Two ritornellos operate within the canon:

- Ritornello I: Formation → Configuration
- Ritornello II: Configuration → Formation

These movements are not linear steps but recurring transitions that enable entry into composition from existing formations and return composed configurations to conditions of use, consequence, and stabilisation.

Ritornellos are governed by the Principle of Operative Meaning, which establishes that meaning becomes real when it is structured, stabilised, and operative. As such, they do not introduce new concepts but regulate the conditions under which meaning is encountered, is structured, becomes real, and stabilises across frame-scale.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Bidirectional (formation ↔ composition)
- Recurring (non-linear, re-entrant)
- Governed by operative conditions (structure, stabilisation, consequence)
- Positioned at canonical transition boundaries
- Enables coordination across Canon modules

NOTES

The term *ritornello* is drawn from Baroque musical composition (Italian: "little return"), where it refers to a recurring passage that returns between contrasting sections, providing structural coherence across variation.

In the work of Antonio Vivaldi—for example, *The Four Seasons* (*Le Quattro Stagioni*), particularly *Spring* (*La Primavera*)—the ritornello is not a simple repetition but a structured return that re-establishes orientation while accommodating transformation. A comparable structure appears in modal jazz—for example, Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, where composed "head" sections recur between improvisational passages, maintaining coherence across variation.

The use of the term in IAD is structural rather than metaphorical. In both musical composition and the Canon, a structured return enables movement across difference, coherence is maintained without suppressing variation, and the system holds together through recurrence under changing conditions.

Within the Canon, ritornellos are positioned at key transition points between modules concerned with the compositional modelling of Information Architectures (*IA in Design*) and modules concerned with Information Architectures as artificial assemblages in the world (*IA in the Wild*). Specifically, *Ritornello I* appears between *Module 2 – IA in the Wild and IA in Design* and *Module 3 – The IAD Triad*, while *Ritornello II* appears between *Module 4 – Semantic and Socio-Semantic Mechanics* and *Module 5 – Frame-Scale*.

These structured returns ensure that configuration remains grounded in formation, formation holds and exerts meaning, design remains accountable to consequence, and the Canon operates as a coherent whole rather than a linear sequence.

This makes explicit that the Canon is not only descriptive of Information Architecture, but is itself a structured configuration of meaning. As such, it functions both as an instance of Information Architecture and as a design-theoretic artefact whose structure performs the principles it articulates.

Semantic Formation

Semantic Formation (SF) refers to the formed coherence through which Structural Logic becomes encounterable and transportable as meaning within an artefact or artificial assemblage. SF binds relational structure into a graspable configuration that can be encountered, interpreted, and enacted.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Within IAD, Semantic Formation names the condition through which structured relations become encounterable as a meaningful whole. Where Structural Logic (SL) specifies the relational arrangement of elements, Semantic Formation articulates that arrangement as a coherent formation capable of being encountered by agents.

SF is therefore not labelling or naming. It is the formed interface through which a configuration becomes intelligible and transportable.

Semantic Formation operates in three directions simultaneously:

- **Inward** — it binds Structural Logic into a coherent formation.
- **Embedded outward** — it must cohere with the host object, system, or concept in which the IA resides.
- **Anticipatory outward** — it orients toward an anticipated life in the wild.

Through this mediation, Semantic Formation allows relational structure to appear as meaningful configuration.

DISTINCTION FROM STRUCTURAL LOGIC

Structural Logic (SL) concerns the relational organisation of elements. Semantic Formation (SF) concerns the formed coherence through which that organisation becomes encounterable. SL structures configuration. SF articulates configuration as meaningful form.

Neither operates independently. Meaning is composed in their synthesis.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Formed coherence
- Interface between structure and meaning
- Directional mediation (inward / embedded / anticipatory)
- Dependent on structural support
- Present within artefacts and artificial assemblages
- Operates across frame-scales

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Semantic Formation:

- Is not subjective interpretation.
- Is not naming or labelling.
- Does not operate independently of Structural Logic.
- Does not claim metaphysical status.

Its role is structural–semantic: to bind relational configuration into encounterable form.

Semantic Mechanics

Semantic Mechanics (SM) name the invariant structural operators by which artificial relational configurations cohere as intelligible formations. They govern how information, once selected and bounded, is structurally related and stabilised as meaning.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, Semantic Mechanics refer to the general operators through which abstraction functions. They do not determine what content is selected, nor what meaning ought to hold. They operate on information. SM govern how information is differentiated, related, constrained, nested, sequenced, bounded, resolved, and stabilised internally as a coherent configuration.¹⁰

Semantic Mechanics are general rather than particular. They recur across domains: mathematics, taxonomy, legal structuring, brand architecture, interface design, policy modelling, and conceptual composition. What differs is not the mechanics themselves, but the information upon which they operate and the configurations they produce.

¹⁰ This list is not exhaustive. It names recurrent structural operations rather than a closed taxonomy.

SM are features of both descriptive and compositional relational modelling: In descriptive modelling, they organise existing relational information; while in compositional modelling, they configure new relational formations.

They enable abstraction to function as structure. They do not determine ethical, political, or institutional consequence.

DISTINCTION FROM INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE (IA)

Information Architecture (IA) refers to a particular relational configuration. Semantic Mechanics (SM) refer to the operators by which such configurations are composed. IA are particular and indefinitely variable. SM are general and recurrent.

Semantic Mechanics are invariant in operation, but their instantiations vary indefinitely. No two Information Architectures need share content to share mechanics.

DISTINCTION FROM SOCIO-SEMANTIC MECHANICS (SSM)

SM concern structural coherence. They do not in themselves register discursive sensitivity or anticipated social consequence. That reflexive modulation belongs to SSM.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Invariant across frame-scale
- Operative in abstraction
- Domain-general
- Non-normative in themselves
- Necessary for intelligibility of artificial configuration

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Semantic Mechanics:

- Do not constitute a metaphysical ontology.
- Do not determine content.
- Do not guarantee ethical orientation.
- Do not explain institutional stabilisation.
- Do not exhaust the vocabulary of structural analysis.

They name the operative layer of abstraction within artificial relational configuration.

Socio-Semantic Mechanics

Socio-Semantic Mechanics (SSM) name the reflexive-discursive operators applied within abstraction that modulate the use of Semantic Mechanics in light of anticipated social meaning and consequence. They operate in Design. They are not Wild-side enforcement mechanisms.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Where Semantic Mechanics concern the structural composition of meaning, Socio-Semantic Mechanics (SSM) concern the reflexive composition and interrogation of meaning in anticipation of its social consequence. They do not replace SM, but modulate their application by introducing discursive, ethical and social awareness into design activity.

Analytically, SSM support the reading of existing relational configurations by identifying embedded assumptions, norms and consequences. Compositionally, they support the writing of alternative configurations through the reframing, recoding and reconstruction of meaning in anticipation of its becoming operative in the world. SSM therefore operate within design while remaining oriented toward Contrived Ontology and social consequence.

DISTINCTION FROM INSTITUTIONAL STABILISATION

SSM are not codification, enforcement, legal embedding, or infrastructural reproduction. Those dynamics belong to the domain of Contrived Ontology and Wild-side stabilisation, not to SSM as defined here.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Reflexive rather than structural
- Operative within abstraction
- Anticipatory in orientation
- Sensitive to discourse
- Most visible at higher frame-scales of design

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Socio-Semantic Mechanics:

- Do not function as a metaphysical doctrine.
- Do not duplicate Semantic Mechanics.
- Do not describe Wild-side institutional processes.
- Do not guarantee moral correctness.
- Do not collapse into general critical theory.

They name a disciplined reflexive orientation toward abstraction in design.

Structural Logic

Structural Logic (SL) refers to the relational arrangement of elements within an artefact or artificial assemblage that enables information to cohere as structured configuration. SL specifies how elements are differentiated, related, and organised so that a configuration becomes intelligible as a structured whole.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, Structural Logic names the relational organisation through which information is structured as a concept, or inside an artefact or artificial assemblage. It concerns how elements of an abstract configuration are differentiated, related, sequenced, nested, constrained or bounded.

SL does not determine meaning on its own. Rather, it provides the structured configuration through which meaning may be articulated. Structural Logic therefore operates in mutual coordination with Semantic Formation (SF). Together they constitute the internal configuration through which artefacts and assemblages carry organised meaning.

An artefact's internal configuration may be analysed by examining the relations among its structural components. These relations form the Structural Logic through which the configuration becomes intelligible and operable.

DISTINCTION FROM SEMANTIC FORMATION

Structural Logic (SL) concerns the relational organisation of elements. Semantic Formation (SF) concerns the meaningful articulation that arises through that organisation. SL structures the configuration. SF articulates the meaning that the configuration holds. They are mutually constitutive.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Relational organisation of elements
- Structural intelligibility
- Information-bearing configuration
- Necessary but not sufficient for meaning
- Present within artefacts and artificial assemblages
- Operates across frame-scales

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Structural Logic:

- Does not determine meaning independently.
- Does not function as semantic interpretation.
- Does not claim metaphysical status.
- Does not exist apart from relational configuration.

Its primary function is compositional; analytic use is secondary.

Transcendence

Transcendence refers to the transition through which internally configured meaning (Structural Logic and Semantic Formation) becomes externally operative meaning through use.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

In IAD, concepts, artefacts and artificial assemblages carry internally organised meaning through the coordinated articulation of Structural Logic (SL) and Semantic Formation (SF). This internal meaning does not automatically function socially.

Transcendence names the moment or process by which such internal configuration becomes externally operative through enactment in use. The concept draws selectively on Paul Dourish's argument that ontology is enacted in use. IAD adopts this insight in a limited sense: internally configured relational structure becomes socially real insofar as it is enacted and then sustained.

Transcendence does not guarantee stabilisation. Externalised meaning may dissipate, remain minimal (minimal Contrived Ontology), or stabilise across frame-scales as formation (maximal Contrived Ontology).

DISTINCTION FROM FORMATION

Transcendence: The externalisation of internal configuration through use.

Formation: The stabilisation of externally operative meaning across frame-scales.

Transcendence is necessary but not sufficient for formation.

KEY PROPERTIES

- Enactment-dependent
- Contingent
- Frame-scale sensitive
- Precedes stabilisation
- Required for minimal and maximal CO

METHODOLOGICAL GUARDRAILS

Transcendence:

- Does not refer to mystical or spiritual elevation.
- Does not denote a metaphysical “beyond” of reality.
- Does not imply phenomenological excess or self-overcoming.
- Is not used in a Kantian sense of the transcendental as a condition of possibility.
- Does not name ontological creation ex nihilo.

TEXTUAL FOUNDATIONS

SCHOLARLY WORKS

The IAD Canon represents the first intentional consolidation of a body of theory that has developed through almost three decades of professional practice, teaching, research and scholarly publication.

Many concepts presented throughout the Canon first appeared in journal articles, conference papers, invited lectures and postgraduate research before being revised, extended and synthesised into their present form. Consequently, the principal scholarly works contributing to the development of the Canon are not always cited individually within the Modules, Glossary or Auxiliary Notes.

The works listed below document the principal stages in the emergence of IAD and may therefore be read collectively as the primary textual foundations from which the Canon has developed.

DISSERTATION

Hobbs, J., 2021. *Applying Information Architecture in Design Thinking: Ideating Solutions to the Wicked Problem of Addiction*. Master of Arts in Design Dissertation. University of Johannesburg.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Hobbs, J., 2021. *Footnotes to “Re: The Future of Information Architecture”*. Journal of Information Architecture, 6(1), pp. 79–91.

Fenn, T. and Hobbs, J., 2019. *The Design of Socially Sustainable Ontologies*. Philosophy & Technology, 32, pp. 745–767.

Hobbs, J., Fenn, T. and Resmini, A., 2010. *Maturing a Practice*. Journal of Information Architecture, 2(1), pp. 41–62.

BOOK CHAPTER

Fenn, T. and Hobbs, J., 2014. The Information Architecture of Meaning Making. In: Resmini, A. (ed.) *Reframing Information Architecture*. Cham: Springer, pp. 11–30.

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Hobbs, J., 2021. *Realising Discourse: A Strategic Design Solution to the Problem of Addiction*. In: Proceedings of the Cumulus Conference, Rome.

Hobbs, J. and Fenn, T., 2015. *The Firma Model: A Meta-Framework for Design Research, Strategy and Critique*. In: Proceedings of the Cumulus Conference, Milan.

Hobbs, J. and Fenn, T., 2013. *Navigating Indeterminacy Through the Application of User Journeys*. In: Proceedings of the Design Development Research Conference.

Fenn, T. and Hobbs, J., 2012. *The Information Architecture of Transdisciplinary Design Practice: Rethinking Nathan Shedroff's Continuum of Understanding*. In: Proceedings of the Design Development Research Conference.

Hobbs, J. and Fenn, T., 2011. *A Role for Information Architecture in Design Education: Developing Innovation Through Structured Thinking*. In: Proceedings of the DEFSA Conference.

Fenn, T. and Hobbs, J., 2011. *A Role for Information Architecture in Design Education: Conceptualising Indeterminate Problems in Design Thinking*. In: Proceedings of the DEFSA Conference.

INVITED ACADEMIC LECTURES

University of Michigan, School of Information, 2025. **SI658 Information Architecture**.

Lecture 3. *Realising Discourse: On the Becoming of Meaning and the Mediation of Social Reality by Information Architecture in Use*. 20 March 2025.

Lecture 2. *Message-Content & Message-Form: On the Formal Composition and Encoding of Meaning by Discursive Design*. 7 March 2025.

Lecture 1. *Structural Logic & Semantic Formation: On the Formal Composition and Encoding of Meaning by Conceptual Information Architecture*. 20 February 2025.

INVITED KEYNOTES, PRESENTATION AND WORKSHOPS

Hobbs, J., 2026. *Axioms of a Second Intellectual Culture in Information Architecture*. 11th Information Architecture Academics & Practitioners Roundtable, IA Conference, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

Hobbs, J., 2018. *Postcards from the Edge*. Keynote Address. IA Summit, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Fenn, T. and Hobbs, J., 2016. *Designing Sustainable ~~Digital~~ Ontologies*. Information Architecture Meets the Philosophy of Information Workshop. Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford.

Hobbs, J., 2014. *The Design Behind the Design Behind the Design*. IA Summit, San Diego, California, USA.

Hobbs, J. and Fenn, T., 2013. *Reframe IA: The Information Architecture of Meaning Making*. IA Summit, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

Hobbs, J., Fenn, T. and Resmini, A., 2012. *Pervasive IA as Architectures of Meaning for Complex Cross-Channel Systems*. Pervasive 2012, Newcastle, England.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Hobbs, J., 2020. *The Lost Information Architecture*. ResearchGate.

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14131.04642

Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344730723_The_Lost_Information_Architecture)

344730723_The_Lost_Information_Architecture

The works presented here document the principal stages in the development of IAD from early investigations into the relationship between Information Architecture and Design through to the synthesis represented by the IAD Canon. Readers wishing to explore the historical development of individual concepts are encouraged to consult these works alongside the Modules, Glossary and Auxiliary Notes.

ON THE CREATION OF THE CANON

The theory of Information Architecture Design (IAD), as presented within this Canon, has developed across almost three decades of professional practice, teaching, research and scholarly publication. Throughout this period, many of the concepts, models, distinctions and propositions presented here emerged gradually through projects, lectures, conference papers, journal publications and sustained theoretical reflection. As the body of work expanded, recurring patterns of thought began to stabilise, demonstrate coherence across multiple contexts, and establish increasingly explicit relationships with one another.

The IAD Canon represents the first intentional consolidation of the principal concepts, terminology and propositions of IAD into a single organised body of theory.

The Canon exists to provide a stable reference point for the theory; to make relationships between concepts explicit; to support teaching, research and practice; to create a foundation for future extension and critique; and to preserve conceptual continuity as both the theory and the field continue to evolve. In this sense, the Canon is intended as an intellectual infrastructure rather than a final destination.

The development of the Canon has also benefited significantly from long-standing scholarly collaboration with Dr. Terence Fenn, whose partnership over many years contributed substantially to the clarification, testing and refinement of many of the ideas presented throughout this work.

The preparation of this developmental release additionally involved sustained dialogical engagement with a large language model (ChatGPT, OpenAI). The system was employed as a reflective writing and editorial partner to assist with conceptual clarification, editorial review, consistency checking, publication preparation and refinement of language. It did not originate the theory of IAD, nor did it introduce independent conceptual commitments, theoretical positions or arguments. Responsibility for the content of this publication rests solely with the author.

While this developmental release has been authored by Jason Hobbs, the IAD Canon is not conceived as a permanently closed body of work. As both IAD and the broader field of Information Architecture continue to mature, it is anticipated—and actively welcomed—that future editions may benefit from additional scholarship, critique, authorship and expansion by others engaged in the IAD Framework.

In this sense, the Canon is intended not only to document a body of theory, but also to provide a shared foundation upon which a scholarly community may continue to build.

