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Module 2 — IA in the Wild and 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 artefactual, 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 *poiesis*—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 filled 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 artefactual 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 M07 (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.

Non-Claims, Caveats, and Boundaries

- Not all IAs 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.

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.

References & Citations

IAD / Field-Internal Sources

- Hobbs, J. (2021). *Applying Information Architecture in Design Thinking*.
- Hobbs, J. (2021). Dissertation: contrived ontology framing; minimal/maximal distinction.
- Hobbs & Fenn (2013, 2017). Golden thread and synthetic integrity.

External Sources

- Floridi, L. (2014, 2019). Informational structural realism and Levels of Abstraction.
 - Selected literature in HCI, Systemic Design, and Philosophy of Information.
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Linked / External Canon Artefacts

- Service blueprint examples
 - Recovery-Oriented Systems of Care diagrams
 - Constitutional design artefacts
 - Institutional formation case studies
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Status Note

This module clarifies the distinction between IA as condition (in the Wild) and IAD as compositional engagement (in Design), while introducing liminal release, ontological hinge, and the research horizon.

STATUS

Canonical Draft

25 January 2026