

Everyone's an Architect

Architects are fed up with people in the technology field using their title, styling themselves “software architects,” “enterprise architects,” and “information architects,” to name a few. It can’t be stopped—but more often than not, it’s the sincerest form of flattery.

By [AMANDA KOLSON HURLEY](#)



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What’s the first thing you do if you’re an architect looking for a new job (as so many are, these days)? You polish off your résumé and portfolio—and then, most likely, you hit the online job boards. Let’s say you live in New York City. You visit the website [indeed.com](#) and type in the search terms “architect” and “New York.” So far, so good: There were 3,710 results when I tried this experiment one day in late June. But look closer: Not every listing is for a job at an architecture firm, or even in the AEC industry.

On page five of my search results, I came across an ad for the position “Architect Lead.” Sounds promising—until you read the job description and discover that this “architect” is in fact an asset manager at a global financial services firm (and will report, naturally, to “the Asset Management (AM) Chief Architect”). Ten pages into the search results, only two out of 10 ads are for AEC jobs; most of the rest are in information technology (IT).

Searches using other major job websites produced similar, or worse, results. When I typed “architect” and “Seattle, WA” into [monster.com](#), it returned 65 jobs—only one of them architectural, in the strict sense of the word.

The embrace of the words “architect” and “architecture” by IT professionals isn’t new, and neither is the indignation felt by “real” (i.e., building) architects at what they see as the hijacking of a title they worked hard to earn and feel ought to be protected, or at least more tightly restricted. The down economy has only sharpened their displeasure, as thousands of un- and underemployed architects sift through job listings for software architects, systems architects, data architects, and information architects: in short, every kind of “architect” except their own kind.

In the architect group on the networking site LinkedIn, a recent discussion on the topic (“Title of ‘Architect’ used by IT Technogeeks”) attracted more than 250 comments. These ranged from expressions of frustration (“I find this really annoying!”) to calls for the AIA and the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) to protect the title. “I really think the AIA should double or even triple dues to fight the menace of IT,” said one architect. Some commenters maintained that protection of the title was down to state licensing boards; others claimed that the dictionary definition of “architect” is broad enough that its use can’t be confined to a single profession. To this argument came the response, “The dictionary definition is irrelevant. We’re discussing a title that is legally defined and legally protected.”

In fact, the dictionary definition *is* relevant, according to the AIA. That organization “supports protecting the public by reserving the use of the term ‘architect’ and its derivative forms to those individuals licensed as architects,” in the words of an official position statement. But “reserving” the term is not the same as protecting it. Any attempt to do so, said AIA spokesman Matthew Tinder, “would require a costly and protracted legal battle with very limited prospects of success.” In a test case, the National Society of Professional Engineers lost its legal action against the software company Novell over the designation “Certified Novell Engineer.”



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The AIA's stance is that it's "usually impossible for a professional society to assert an enforceable proprietary interest" in a title, and Tinder cites, among other reasons, the second definition of the word in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: "a person who designs and guides a plan or undertaking (e.g. the architect of American foreign policy)." NCARB also views enforcement as impossible. "'Software architects' or even 'personnel architects' (once seen used by a temporary employment firm) can use the term ... without fear of legal entanglement," says Lenore Lucey, the executive vice president of NCARB. "No U.S. jurisdictional licensing board could pursue such a use of the term." So, architects, the upshot is: Learn to live with other professions adopting your title. And try to take it as a compliment. Leaders in the field of information architecture say they're genuinely inspired by building architecture. Which is not surprising, given that information architecture—a sliver of the IT industry that is concerned with structuring complex systems like libraries and databases, and with designing user interaction—can trace its ancestry back to its brick-and-mortar namesake.

In 1976, well before the birth of the Internet, the phrase "information architecture" was coined by Richard Saul Wurman—a trained architect who studied under Louis Kahn. (That same year, Wurman gave the keynote at the AIA National Convention.) Two decades later, the migration of architecture grads to Web jobs in the first tech boom was a major factor behind the terms "architect" and "architecture" becoming more widely used. (That, and Bill Gates' decision to dub himself "Chief Software Architect" of Microsoft.)

Jorge Arango is a past president of the Information Architecture Institute (IAI) and a user-experience design consultant in Panama. He has a B.A. in architecture from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and sees meaningful overlap between his field of study and his profession, as different as they may appear. Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when he was in architecture school, Arango remembers, many conversations were inspired by poststructuralism and other strains of theory: "The field was questioning the relationship between space and language, and how architects convey the experience of navigating through space."

Then he graduated from college and the Web broke out. "My thinking at the time was [that the Web was] a very natural extension of that line of thinking. People would be experiencing these mental spaces—which is how I saw a website—and there should be someone in charge of making sure that the design program behind those spaces got executed in a coherent way. Conceptually, there seemed to be a relationship between the two fields."

Arango is not an outlier in his industry: Andrea Resmini, a current IAI board member, holds a master's degree in architecture and industrial design. Andrew Hinton—an information architect who has no architectural training—published a paper last year in the *Journal of Information Architecture* that draws parallels between our navigation through Web spaces and how we experience the physical environment. Hinton sees information architecture as a new kind of architecture: "the name ... is not merely metaphorical," he contends in the paper, and it has "an honest intellectual origin."

"I feel very strongly that the label is apt, and useful," Arango says. "It helps explain what we do to folks who are not aware of the profession, [by tying] it to a field that already exists. I tell people, 'I do for large websites what architects do for buildings.'?"

What about the other self-described architects: of software, systems, and more? The International Association of Software Architects (IASA) is a nonprofit founded in 2003 to advance the still-fledgling IT architecture profession, and it now counts 8,000 members worldwide. Its website is rife with unqualified references to "architects" and "architecture." In an ironic touch, the IASA borrows liberally from the organizational structure of—you guessed it—the AIA. It is happy to admit the debt. "The IASA adapted Knowledge Communities from ... the AIA," reads the text on the group's "Knowledge Communities" page. "Although the AIA is for building architects, the IASA knows a brilliant idea when we see it."

The CEO and founder of the association, Paul Preiss, says his objective is to reduce the "pain points" of being an IT architect. These include, he says, a lack of strong community and a lack of consistent training or standards. "If you want to become a building architect, there's not any question about what the process is," he says. "You go to school, get your certification, get your job. For IT architects,

planning a career is pretty much next to impossible.” To that end, the association has launched two certification programs and established more than 40 chapters.

Preiss is accustomed to accusations of not being “a real architect,” and doesn’t apologize for using the term. “Nobody owns words,” he says. “We’re not taking anything away from them [building architects]. Nobody’s going to call us when they’re looking for someone to design a house or office building.”

Bryan Reichert, a senior sourcing recruiter for Amazon.com in Seattle, has a long track record in IT recruiting (for Microsoft, Expedia, and other companies), and is baffled by the resentment among building architects at the morphing of the title. As he sees it, the title isn’t bandied about loosely within his industry—if anything, its comparative rarity connotes a high level of respect for the holder. IT architects are senior-level professionals, he explains.

“When I think of ‘architect,’ or we open up an architect role, it’s a senior-level person. It’s not like you open up a software engineer role, and we need 20 of those guys; we need one or two [architects],” Reichert says. “It’s very targeted.” Typically, he adds, a software architect is higher up the food chain than a software engineer. (Building architects: Take note.)

In pockets of the building design community, at least, acceptance of “title creep” may be growing. Fred Scharmen, who works for [Ziger/Snead Architects](#) in Baltimore, recently wrote an essay in the journal *Crit* urging his fellow designers to “move beyond their annoyance” at the appropriation of the title and reclaim it in its new, expanded sense, “to the benefit of our discipline.”

“People working in software and interactivity realize that the best models for making things at a certain scale and complexity are found within architecture,” Scharmen writes. “We can cede the use of the word to describe a general method of working and making, as long as we make sure that method stays true to the values and techniques that have made our own best work so impactful.” If architects do this, it will be a step toward “taking better control over our agency as political actors,” Scharmen believes.

There is a chance, however, that the whole debate will prove moot—that the appeal of “architect” will fade as other, more novel titles gain traction in Silicon Valley (and elsewhere). According to a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal*, the new hot job title, especially among computer programmers and software engineers, is “ninja.”

“Architect” can’t hold a candle to that.

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