

TONFONI, Graziella. **Information Design: The Knowledge Architect's Toolkit**. Exeter: Scarecrow Press and Intellect, 1998. 183p. ISBN 1-871516-61-7.

Graziella Tonfoni's recent book, *Information Design*, is the latest in a progressive series of works by the author which deal with the complex and fascinating topic of how to interpret and design textual information. The subject is timely given the rising influence of new Web-based media in daily life and the difficulty of communicating ideas over hypertext structures. In this regard, the book is quite useful. It offers insights into analyzing text in new ways and highlights the complexity of designing text for specific purposes. However, it fails to do this in a clear and forthright manner, leaving the information designer void of what Tonfoni attempts to deliver in the first place – precise rules for designing and interpreting a variety of information places.

Tonfoni takes her reader through a guided journey that redefines and furthers several concepts from her own past scholarly activity. Central to this journey is the use of metaphors to explain seven conceptual constructs of information design. As Tonfoni describes them, these metaphorical environments outline the building blocks of textual information which could be helpful to the person seeking to understand how to arrange disparate pieces of information together. The main metaphor is textual information as architecture, where information like building materials can be packaged and arranged in various ways to create different and diverse spaces that reflect the designer's intent.

Though insightful and creative, these ideas lose impact due to the book's problems with scant information content, loose structure, and turgid writing style. To start, the book is deceptively short. Though 183 pages long, there are only 62 pages of text; the remainder of the book contains photographs of architecture and other drawings. Further, access to background information in the book is difficult. Several times, Tonfoni directs the reader to external Web sites for explanatory notes, or cites prior work which comes from predominantly non-English sources; few references are given to other theoretical works and roughly half of the book's citations reference Tonfoni's personal publications. The textual style is exceedingly thick and information dense; the book's own foreword gives warning that the book is not an easy read. Written as a stream of consciousness, this style does little to aid understanding as it lessens the impact of the statements the author tries to make since they seem disjointed and scattered. In her textual descriptions, Tonfoni leads the reader down an intricate path of theoretical twists and turns, with little signs or discussion as to the exact destination. This

is unfortunate as Tonfoni is adamant in professing the need for readers to have maps or guides to existing information territories, and ways of finding instructions when no maps or guides exist. A more serious problem in terms of structure deals with the lack of description for the pictures and diagrams which comprise the majority of the book's pages. Readers are left to their own devices to formulate interpretations of the purpose and intent of each diagram.

However, despite its structural and stylistic problems, the book does have merit. What is insightful and mysteriously appealing is that the book is an excellent metaphor for its own ideas. Through its own looseness and non-conformity to standard layout design, the work emphasizes Tonfoni's central point that information can be structured and designed in many ways. For example, Tonfoni encourages readers to renumber the pictures and diagrams as a means to create individual paths relating concepts from the diagrams to different sections of text appearing in the first section. This idea of allowing readers to organize and sort the book's information content to create an information space that has personal relevance is central to the purpose of the book.

This document would be suitable as a companion guide to one of Tonfoni's lecture series, where one could make notes and ask questions directly to the author, rather than try to decipher answers from stand-alone diagrams. However, its weakness lies in its own design. A book on information design should excel in the presentation and explanation of its own ideas. If not, then readers have the right to be sceptical of any insights gleaned from it.

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