Getting started with information architecture

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What is information architecture?

— Not just a site map
— How people find things

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Information architecture is the way that we arrange the parts of something to make it understandable.

— Abby Covert, *How to Make Sense of Any Mess*

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Information architecture for websites includes...

— Site structure
— Navigation
— Taxonomy
— Search
— Personalisation

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There is no single 'correct' way to do information architecture, but there are broad principles

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IA principles

— Use language your users use ('information scent')
— Start with users' mental model, not your own
— Think about user journeys

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Information architecture should be user-centric, not organisation-centric

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Mythbusting

❌ 'The ideal number of top-level menu items is 7 (or whatever).'
❌ 'All content should be accessible within 3 clicks.'
❌ 'Shorter menu links are always better.'

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3 questions to get started

— What are our most important user needs?
— What content do we have?
— Why is our current information architecture broken?

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3 questions to get started

- What are our most important user needs? → user research
- What content do we have? → content inventory
- Why is our current information architecture broken? → benchmark usability testing

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Ways of structuring websites

— Audience
— Topic
— Task
— Format
— Organisation structure

Many websites use a combination – this is OK as long as the rationale is clear.

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Audience

- First question: 'who are you?'
- Good for sites with very different user needs for different audiences
- Not so good if the audiences are marketing segments

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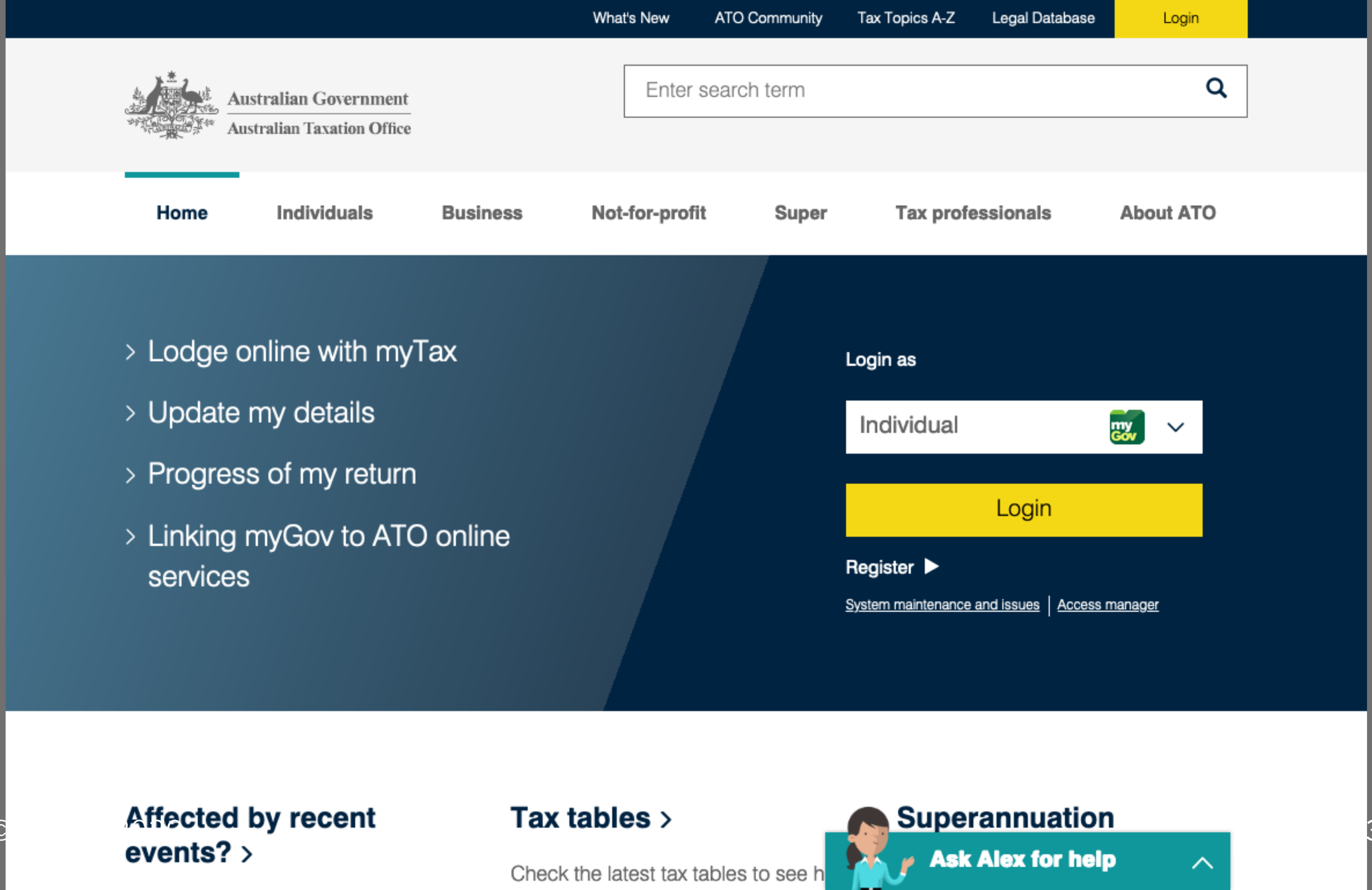
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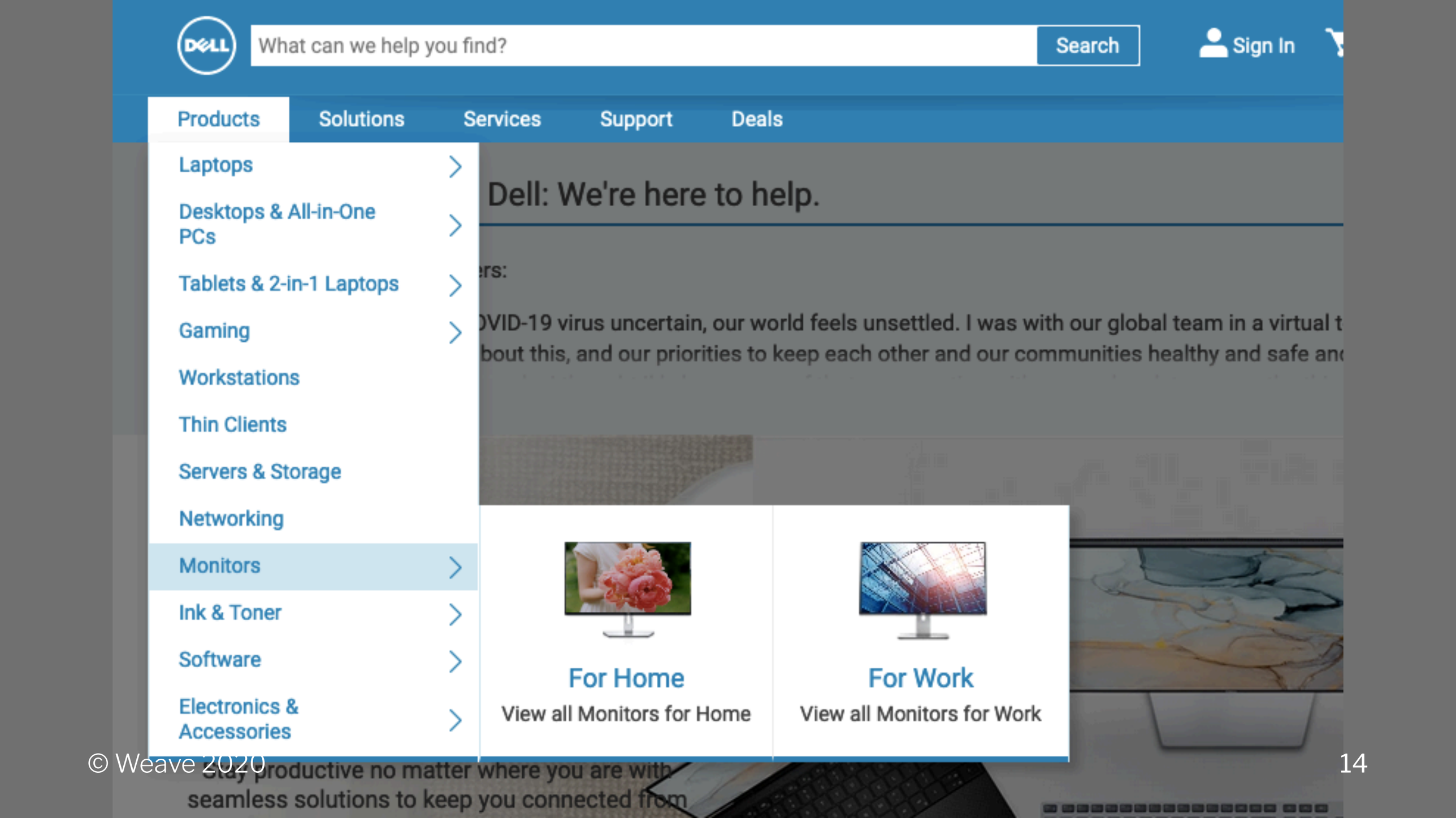
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Topic

- First question: 'what are you interested in?'
- The most common kind of structure
- Can work well as long as it follows users' mental model
- Integration with taxonomy can allow for more automation

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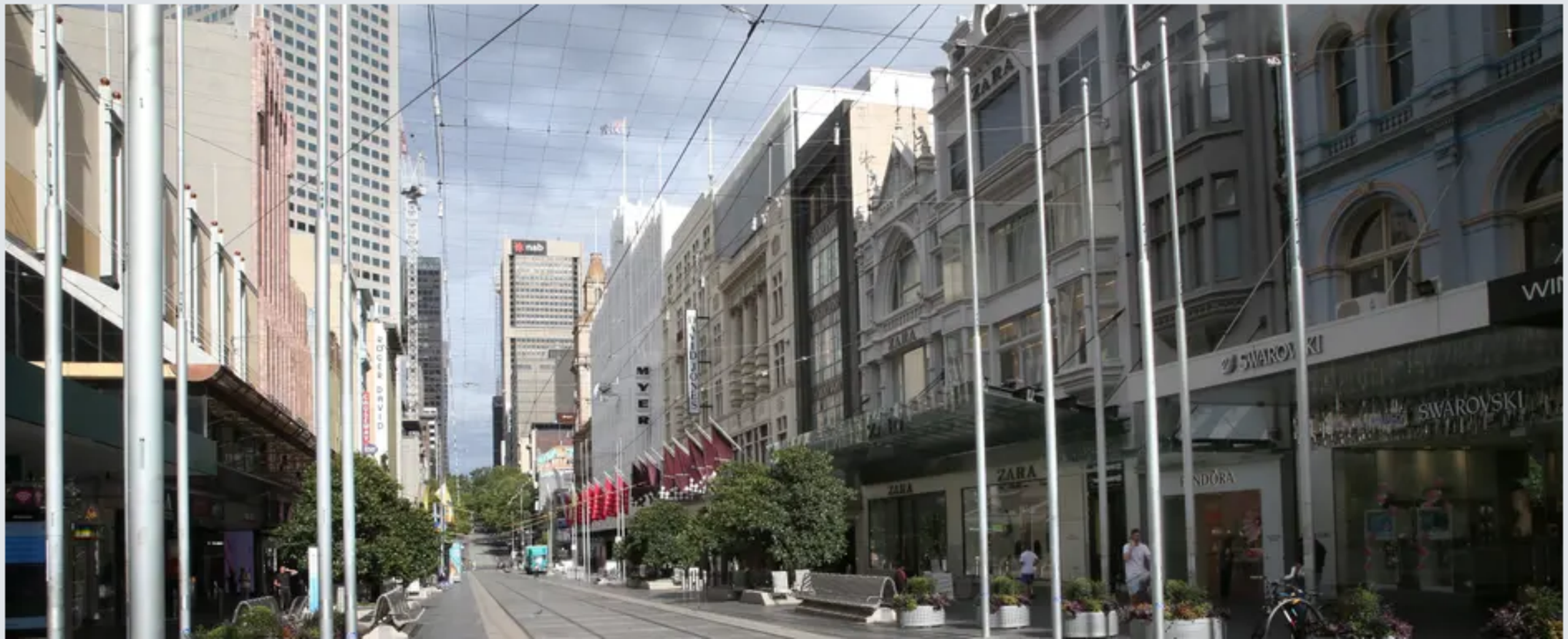

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Task

- First question: 'what are you trying to do?'
- Site structure tries to follow the user journey
- Sounds like it should work well...but it rarely does
- Lack of trigger words
- User journeys don't divide up neatly

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Format

- First question: 'what kind of content are you looking for?'
- Site structure based on formats or content types
- Can work for common formats that you know people are looking for – e.g. events, case studies
- Big problem when user wouldn't know what format the information is in

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Organisation structure

— First question: 'what department do you need?'
— Still common on intranets
— Always bad

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Tools to use when developing a site structure

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Card sorting

- With stakeholders: good for understanding points of contention
- Online with users: good for understanding how people group things
- Optimal Sort: https://www.optimalworkshop.com/optimalsort/
- Card sorting doesn't create your structure for you!

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Tree testing

- Test a hierarchical site structure
- Treejack: https://www.optimalworkshop.com/treejack/
- Great for spotting false trails and confusing labelling

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Moderated usability testing

- You can test with anything: a site structure, wireframes, a prototype, etc.
- Test early and often (3 to 5 participants is fine)
- Moderated testing means you can ask why

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Documenting a site structure

- A visual sitemap can be useful for stakeholders, but it can be difficult to make changes and it doesn't suit detailed info.
- Use a spreadsheet (or similar) as your source of truth.
- Write guidelines explaining rationale and how to deal with new or changed content.

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Information architecture in context

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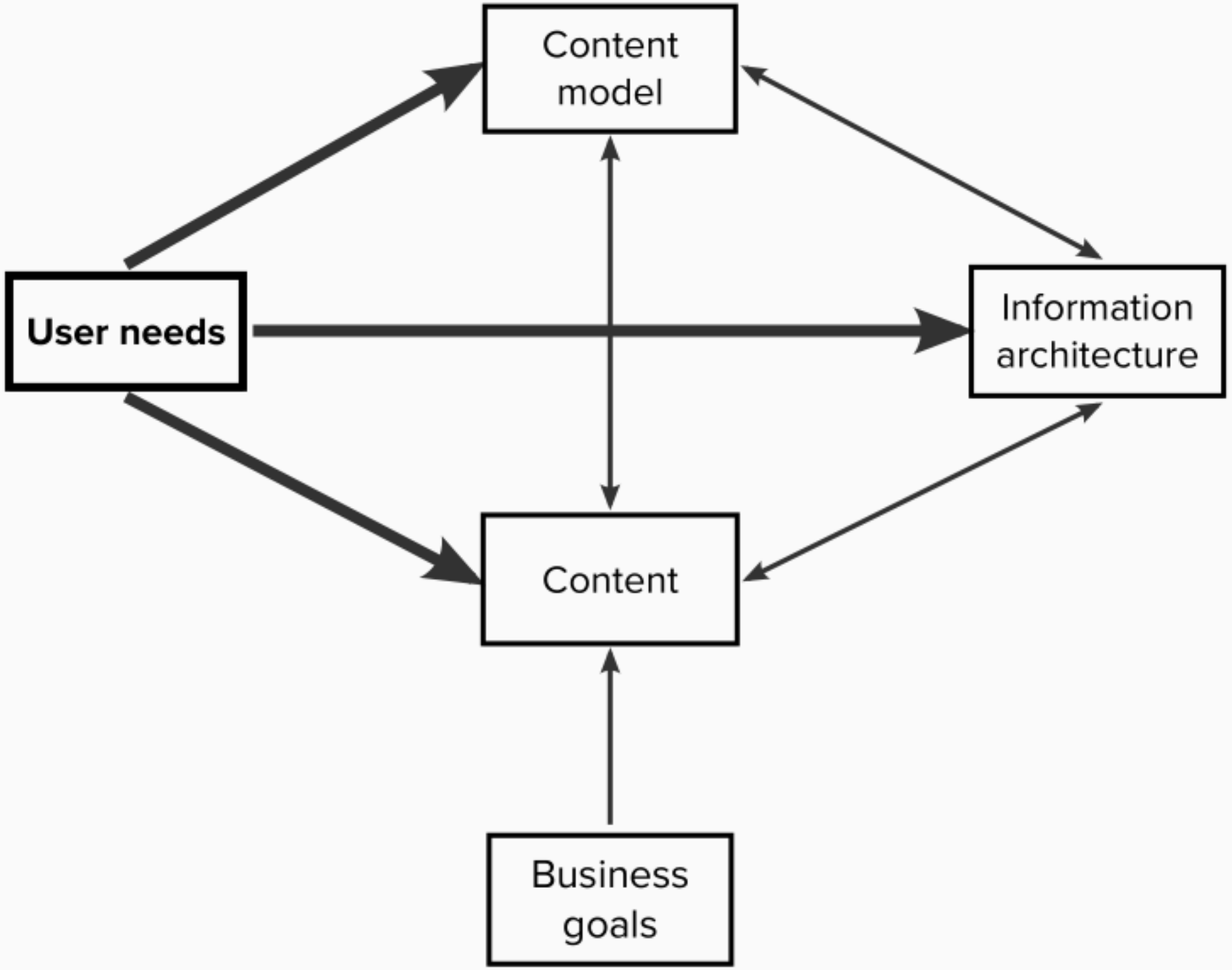
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User needs
Information architecture
Content
Business goals

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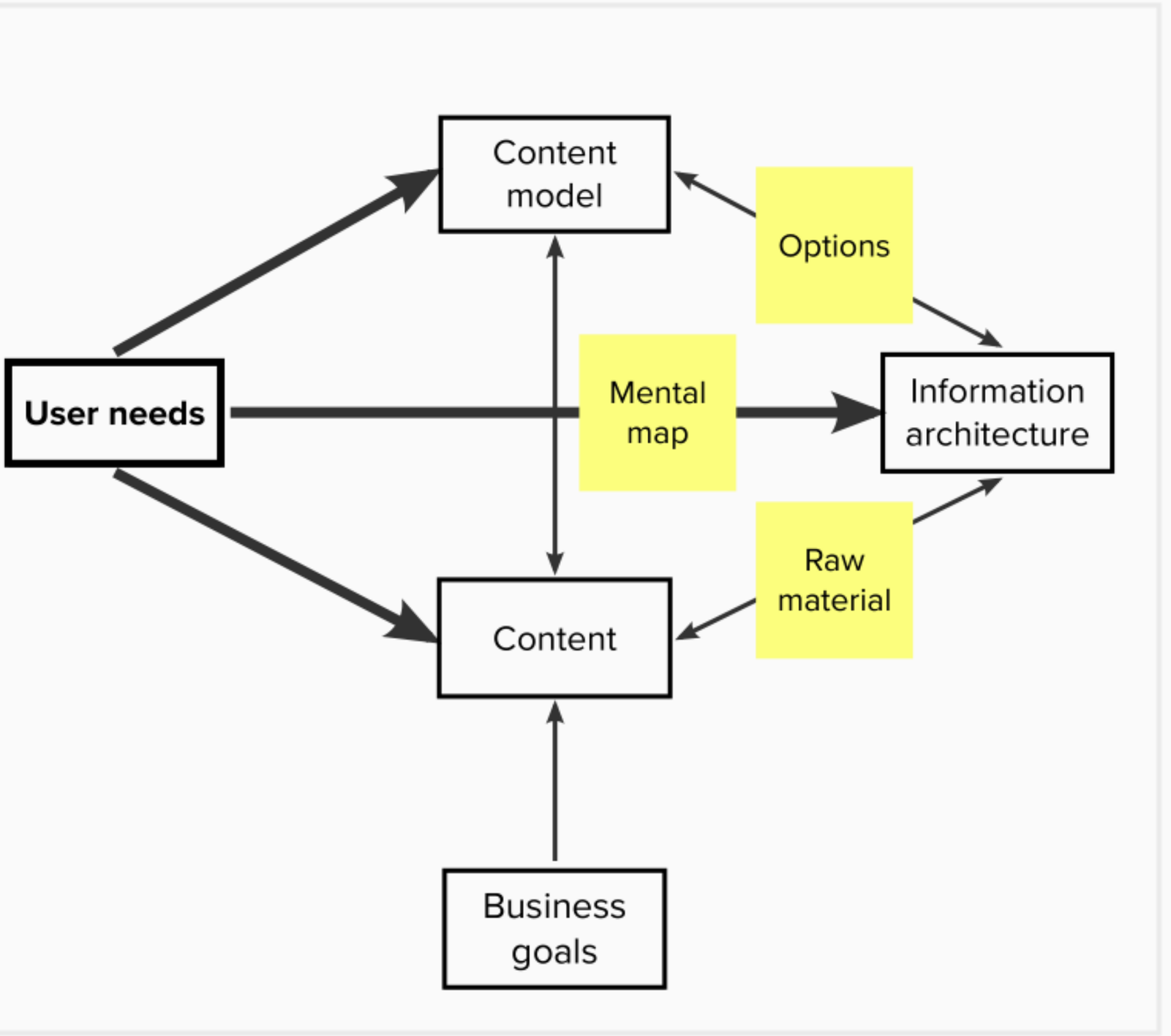
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Mental map
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Raw material
Content
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Further reading

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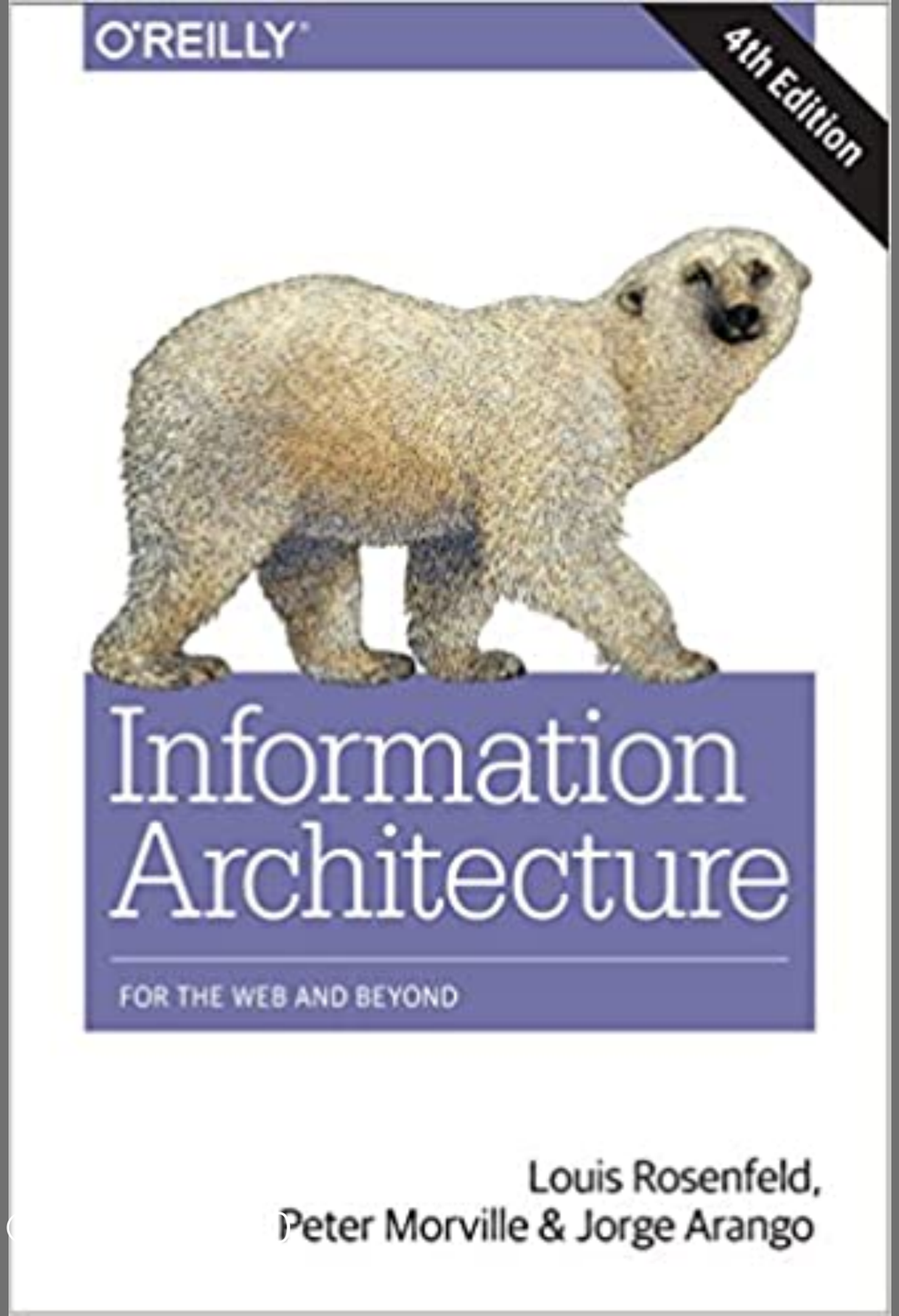
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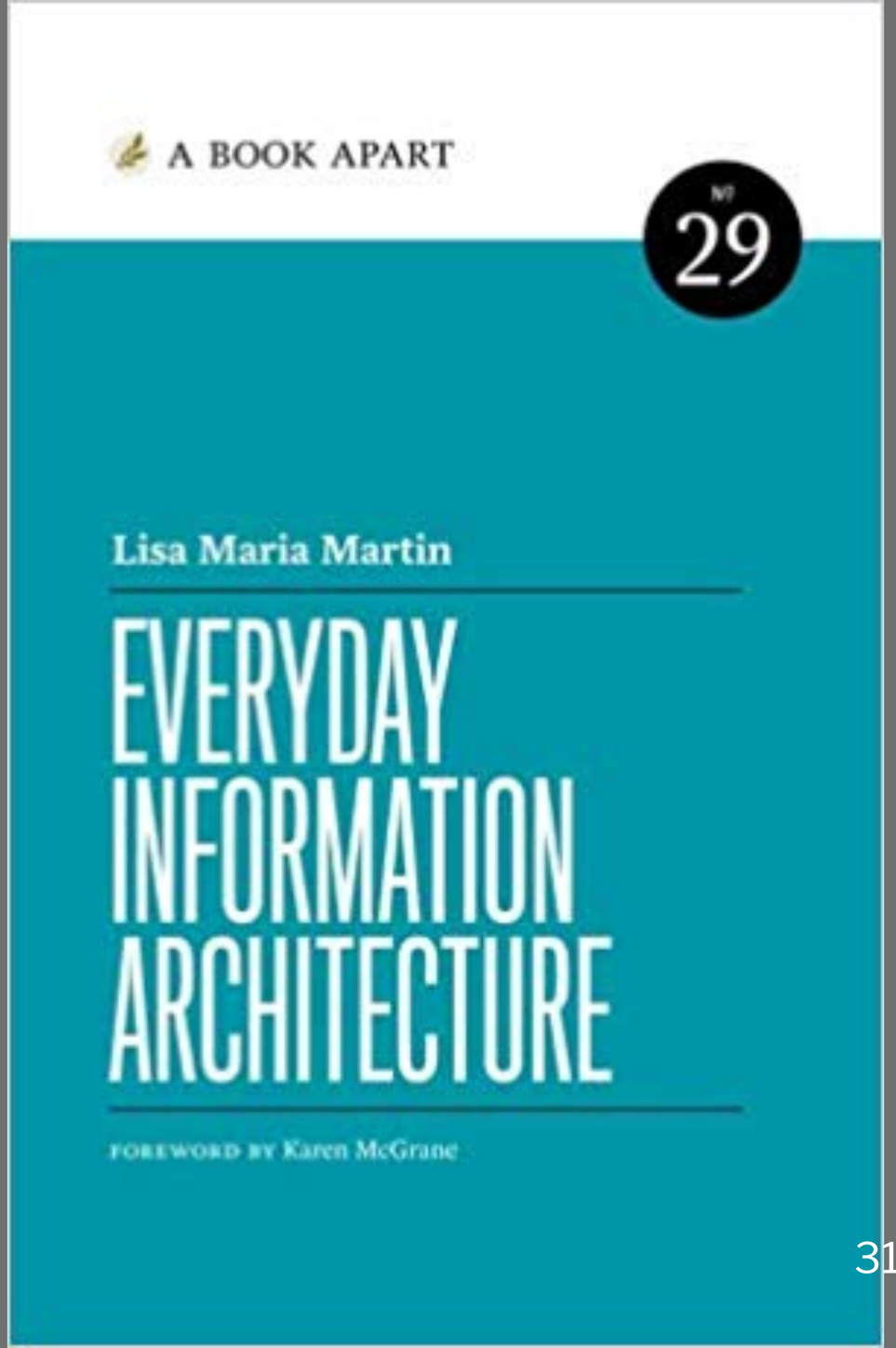
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