Chapter 10

The Art and Architecture Thesaurus: Controlling Relationships through Rules and Structure

Pat Molholt
Health Sciences Division, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA

Abstract:

The Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) staff developed a set of associative, interconcept relationships to interconnect terminology contained in 33 hierarchies. Each of the 20 relationships is tightly defined and is applied under strict rules. The result benefits the user by providing reliable, standardized links between concepts. This chapter describes the logic, methodology, and impact of the AAT approach to relationships.

1. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AAT

The creation of the AAT grew out of a desire on the part of an architectural historian to find or create a single rational slide classification scheme. Repeatedly faced with mastering new numbering systems as she moved from collection to collection, the historian, Dr. Dora Crouch, wanted uniformity. Teaming up with Toni Petersen and Pat Molholt1, the three women met with architectural historians and slide-collection curators to better understand the problem and quickly recognized that agreement on object and concept names must precede classification of those objects and concepts. Without agreeing on how to describe something or what to call it, agreement cannot be achieved on how to classify it. With this recognition, the focus of the work quickly turned away from classification and toward a search for the “perfect” vocabulary.

The group obtained a modest grant from the Council on Library Resources to evaluate existing relevant vocabularies. That investigation led to a report on a series of incompatible, incomplete, and imprecise word lists, none individually able to serve the descriptive needs of the broad art and architecture community (Crouch, Molholt, & Petersen, 1981). When taken together and modified, however, they could begin to address those needs. A subsequent planning grant was obtained from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in 1980 and another NEH grant to begin work on the architecture section was obtained in 1981. In 1993 support for the project was assumed by the J. Paul Getty Trust under its Art History Information Program.

As the project underwent a transition through funding sources, its leadership changed to Petersen and Molholt as co-directors. The mission also changed, with the realization that, despite the tremendous advantage provided by the cooperative partners who allowed the team to incorporate their vocabularies, there remained a great deal of work to be done, not the least of which revolved around the structure of the vocabulary. The purpose of the vocabulary became clearer as well.

The thesaurus was envisioned as a set of terms that would include vocabulary for the history and the making of the visual arts; that is, it would form a hinge between objects and their replicas or representations and the bibliography about them. Its coverage would be geographically and historically comprehensive but would not include terminology for iconographical themes. The terminology would be hierarchically organized and optimized for computerized use. Scholars in the field would review the work at all stages. (Art & Architecture Thesaurus, 1994)

The result, 15 years and millions of dollars later, was the publication in 1994 by Oxford University Press of the second edition of the AAT in five volumes containing nearly 90,000 terms in 33 hierarchies; Oxford had also published the first edition in 1990.

In the context of the monograph in hand, the AAT is important because it introduced a rational scheme for the deployment of associative, non-hierarchical relationships into a complex, large-scale thesaurus. This effort took the notion of the unprincipled "see also" reference found in card catalogs and various vocabulary tools and converted it into a rule-based scheme that allows users to view information from predictable alternate perspectives. The AAT is also important for having created a set of explicit editorial guidelines that are available for use by others wishing to do similar work in other disciplines.

2. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE AAT

2.1 Overview

The scope of the AAT began somewhat narrowly with art and architecture, initially omitting, among other things, the world of decorative or fine arts. In due time the scope broadened to encompass a much richer span of topics, including material culture and the built environment. These changes came slowly, prompted by needs from the field. The scope is now described in the Introduction to the AAT as including the "disciplines of fine arts, architecture, decorative art, material culture of the Western world from antiquity to the present" (Art & Architecture Thesaurus, 1994). It does not include iconography per se, although there are many object names that are commonly used for iconographic purposes. In addition, terms in the Associated Concepts hierarchy often serve to describe, for example, the content of art (e.g., satire).

The terms chosen as descriptors or main terms (as opposed to lead-in vocabulary or alternate terms) come primarily from the language used by scholars and researchers. In addition, terminology used by librarians, curators, archivists, registrars—those who organize