

What is an Enterprise Architect?

By: Saleem Khan

I find myself having to explain what I do pretty often. Invariably, the person I'm speaking with is non-technical and when I say that I'm an enterprise architect the puzzled looks begin. I've come to expect the confused responses: "Oh, so you work on buildings or something?" or, "Oh, so you work with computers, like a programmer?" or, my personal favorite, "Can you help me fix my wireless router?" All joking aside, the idea that I design or construct actual buildings seems to come up fairly often. People seem to gravitate toward the 'architect' part of 'enterprise architect,' probably because it's the most recognizable word in the title. Irrespective of the mental image in my audience's mind I feel they're never quite satisfied with the explanation I give. So, in this post, I hope to explain what an enterprise architect is once and for all by way of analogy.

"Though analogy is often misleading, it's the least misleading thing we have."
- Samuel Butler

Ironically, while I do not work on buildings as so many people have assumed, I find it easiest to explain my job using what I've come to refer to as "the urban planner analogy." So here it is in one sentence:

An enterprise architect is not like an architect building a single building, but more like an urban planner designing a city full of buildings.

I think it would be beneficial to start from the ground up to work through this analogy. Architects are responsible for designing and modeling a structure before it is actually built; they are responsible for determining ceiling heights, wall thicknesses and considerations for HVAC and electrical. The closest analog in the technology world would be an application or solution architect. Application architects are responsible for a single application, but often times end up with a portfolio of applications. These application architects are responsible for designing an application, conducting a proof-of-concept or model of a potential solution, and designing complex interactions between modules, to name a few tasks. Their role is very much focused on the quality of a single 'building' or application in our 'city' or enterprise.

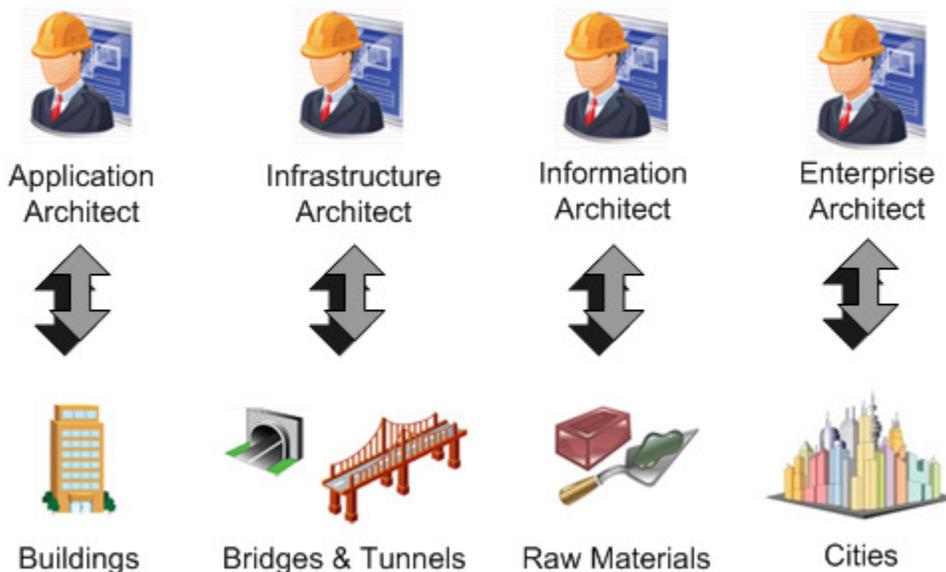
Now another very important role in building a good city is having good civil engineers. Civil engineers are responsible for the design and fabrication of public works projects. They build and design the roads, bridges, tunnels, and water treatment plants that allow for efficient transport and a high quality of life for its



citizenry. These civil engineers help lay the groundwork that allows individual buildings to "connect" to other buildings. If there is any analog in the technology world it would be infrastructure architects and shared-services architects. These architects are responsible for linking applications and providing the required hosting needs for applications to work and connect to one another. Like civil engineers they provide the shared services that all applications in an enterprise require.

One last analogy is that of the information architect. The information architect is responsible for the brick and mortar and the constituent parts that compose our 'cities' or enterprises. They help source the raw materials required to build a bridge or a steel reinforced concrete building. Without information architecture our applications would be empty shells.

Finally, enterprise architecture is a lot like urban planning because urban planners work very closely with all levels of architecture and engineering to design a robust *city* or enterprise which optimizes the quality of life for its *citizens* or applications and users. Enterprise architects are judged by similar measures; the economies-of-scale provided for the enterprise and a standard and consistent delivery methodology. The urban planner is responsible for setting general guidelines for materials and zoning and the enterprise architect does the same. There are great cities that have great urban planning which leads to less traffic, good public transportation and excellent municipal services and then there are not so good cities with tremendous sprawl, bad public transport and few public amenities. It is the job of enterprise architects to use all the tools at their disposal to build great enterprises that are nimble and able to respond to any technical need in a cost-effective manner.



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