

Five Hat Racks

There are five ways to organize information: category, time, location, alphabet, and continuum ¹

The organization of information is one of the most powerful factors influencing the way people think about and interact with a design. The five hat racks principle asserts that there are a limited number of organizational strategies, regardless of the specific application: alphabetical, time, location, continuum, and category.²

Alphabetical refers to organization by alphabetical sequence. Examples include dictionaries and encyclopedias. Organize information alphabetically when information is referential, when efficient nonlinear access to specific items is required, or when no other organizing strategy is appropriate.

Time refers to organization by chronological sequence. Examples include historical timelines and *TV Guide* schedules. Organize information by time when presenting and comparing events over fixed durations, or when a time-based sequence is involved (e.g., a step-by-step procedure).

Location refers to organization by geographical or spatial reference. Examples include emergency exit maps and travel guides. Organize information by location when orientation and wayfinding are important or when information is meaningfully related to the geography of a place (e.g., an historic site).

Continuum refers to organization by magnitude (e.g., lowest to highest, worst to best). Examples include baseball batting averages and Internet search engine results. Organize information by continuum when comparing things using a common measure.

Category refers to organization by similarity or relatedness. Examples include areas of study in a college catalog, and types of retail merchandise on a Web site. Organize information by category when clusters of similarity exist within the information, or when people will naturally seek out information by category (e.g., a person desiring to purchase a stereo may seek a category for electronic appliances).

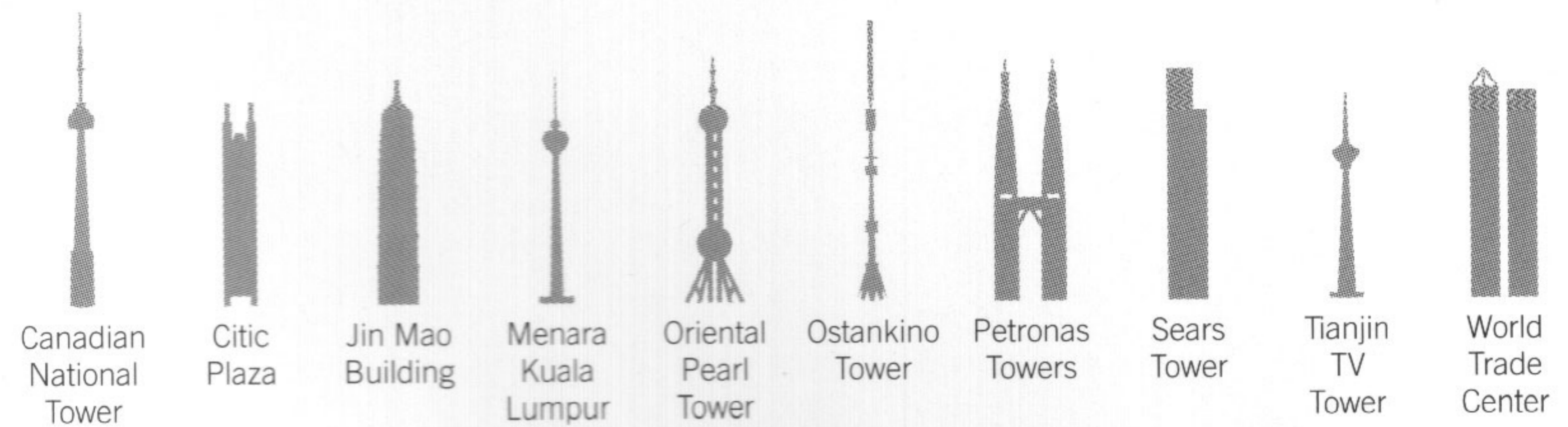
See also Advance Organizer, Consistency, and Framing.

¹ The term *hat racks* is built on an analogy—*hats* as information and *racks* as the ways to organize information. Also known as *five ways of organizing information*.

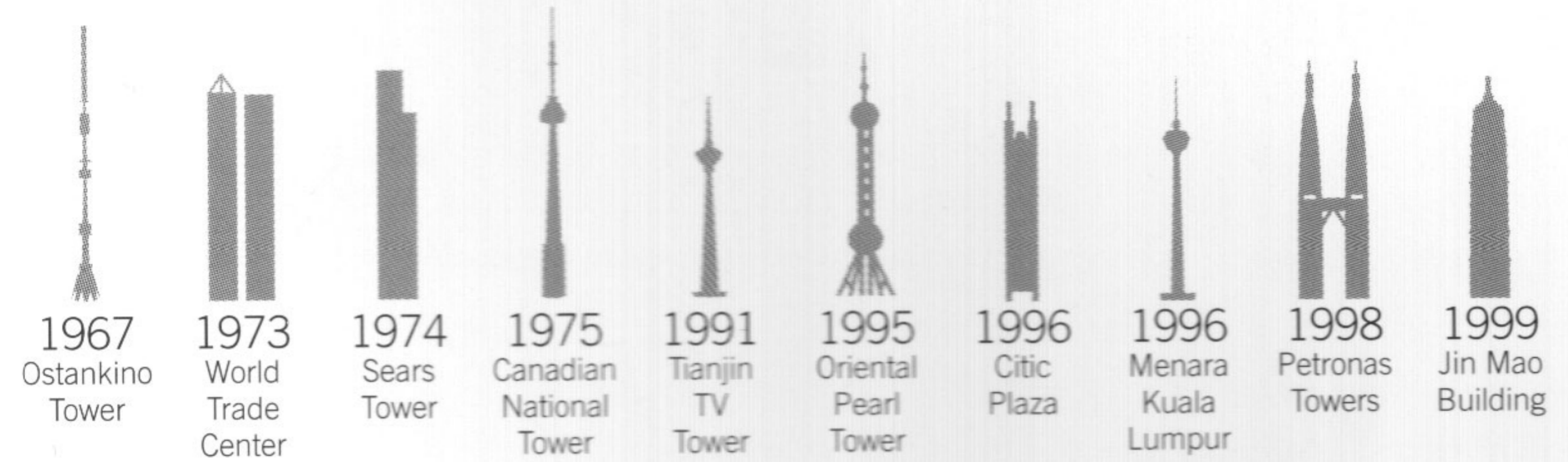
² The seminal work on the five hat racks is *Information Anxiety* by Richard Saul Wurman, Bantam Books, 1990. Note that Wurman changed the hat rack title of *continuum* to *hierarchy* in a later edition of the book, which permits the acronym LATCH. The original title *continuum* is presented here, as the authors believe it to be a more accurate description of the category.

The five hat racks are applied here to the tallest structures in the world. Although the same information is presented in each case, the different organizations dramatically influence which aspects of the information are emphasized.

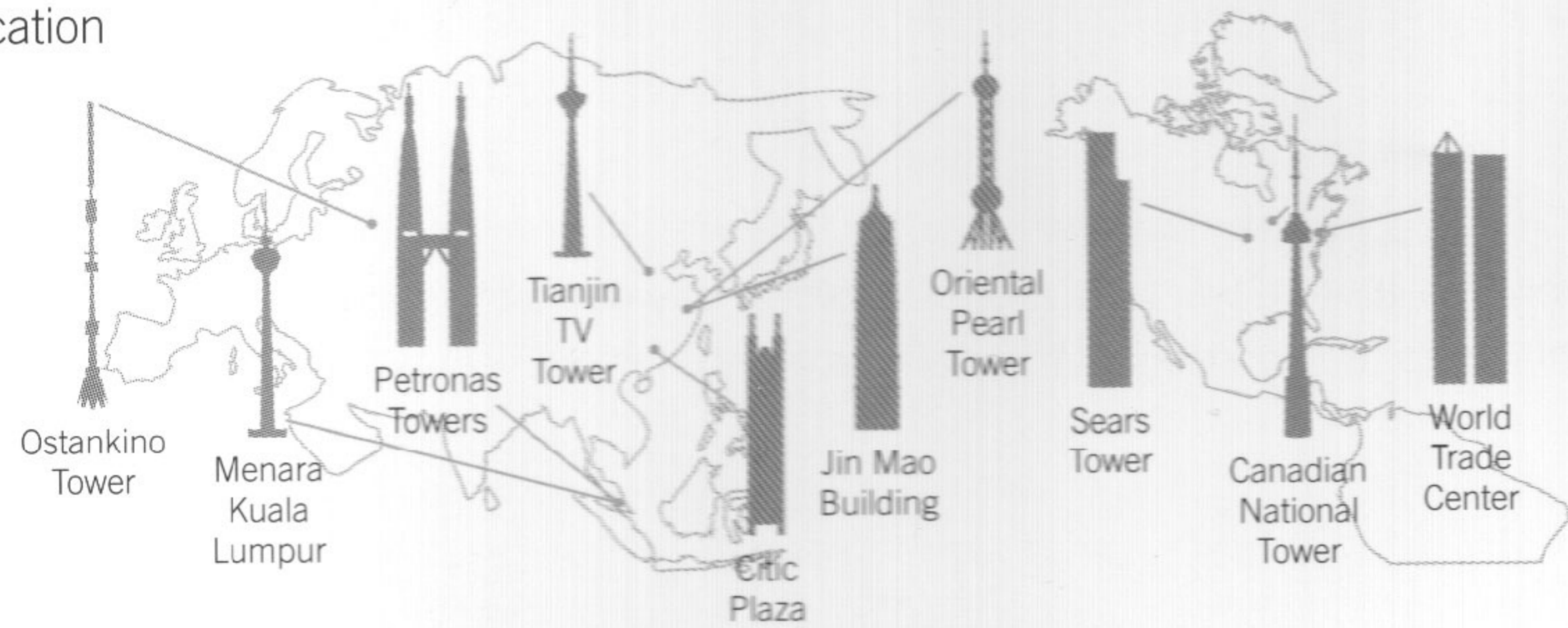
Alphabetical



Time



Location



Continuum



Category

Towers



Buildings

