

Architecture as Mutual Determination

In design, different kinds of justification coexist.

Some decisions are justified by correctness: structural integrity, technical feasibility, performance, efficiency. These can be tested for consistency and optimization.

Other decisions are justified by legitimacy: meaning, cultural fit, spatial experience, public acceptance, symbolic weight. These are negotiated, interpreted, and situated in context.

Most projects involve both kinds of justification. But architecture is not simply the combination of technical and aesthetic considerations. It is not “art plus engineering,” nor is it a balance between function and expression.

Architecture becomes distinct when the decisive constraints of a project are mutually binding across both kinds of validation. In such cases, a structural decision is not merely correct and then decorated with meaning, nor is an expressive gesture engineered after the fact. Instead, the technical and the cultural are co-determining: altering one destabilizes the other.

This provides a practical criterion.

A work is architecturally coherent to the extent that its key constraints cannot be justified within only one domain without collapsing the logic of the whole. If a project’s essential decisions can be explained entirely as matters of optimization, with meaning added later, then its coherence lies outside architecture. If its essential decisions are driven purely by symbolic or aesthetic aims, with technical resolution treated as an afterthought, the same problem appears from the other side.

Architecture operates where neither reduction is possible.

This criterion does not define what architecture “is.” It does not depend on style, scale, or historical period. It does not claim that all buildings achieve it. It simply identifies a structural condition: the degree to which correctness and legitimacy are inseparable at the level of decisive constraints.

Seen this way, architectural failure is not a matter of taste or engineering error alone. It is the failure of mutual determination—when one domain dominates and the other merely accommodates. Conversely, architectural durability often correlates with deep coupling: works that remain intelligible across time tend to be those whose structural and cultural logics are tightly interwoven.

This perspective does not replace existing forms of critique. It clarifies them. It asks, in any project: where do the decisive constraints come from, and are they truly co-determined?

That question alone is enough to separate architecture from mere building, from pure engineering, and from pure expression.