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Beyond Plasticity: A Shearing Layers Evaluation of Flexible Architecture Strategies for Building Longevity

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ABSTRACT

Background: The buildings and construction sector accounts for 39% of global energy-related CO_2 emissions, with premature demolition due to functional obsolescence being a primary driver. Flexible architecture offers a solution, yet many flexible buildings fail earlier than static ones.

Problem: No systematic, criteria-based framework exists to evaluate why certain flexible build-ings succeed while others fail.

Objective: This study develops and applies a multi-criteria evaluation framework based on Stewart Brand's "Shearing Layers" (Site, Structure, Skin, Services, Space Plan, Stuff) to assess five typologies of flexibility across 15 international case studies (built 1850–2016).

Methods: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) using a validated 0–3 ordinal scoring rubric. Cases selected via purposive sampling. Inter-rater reliability: Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$. Expert validation from 8 practitioners.

Key Findings: (1) Successful buildings (life >40 years) scored 0 on Services and Structure and 2–3 on Space Plan and Stuff. (2) Failed cases all exhibited Services plasticity ≥ 1 with central placement of bathrooms/kitchens. (3) Expert validation achieved 100% agreement on the Services=0 condition.

Conclusion: Flexible architecture succeeds only when plasticity is concentrated in non-structural, non-service layers (Space Plan, Stuff, Skin). Services and Structure must remain entirely per-manent.

Keywords: Flexible architecture, building adaptability, shearing layers, building longevity, post-occupancy evaluation, circular economy.

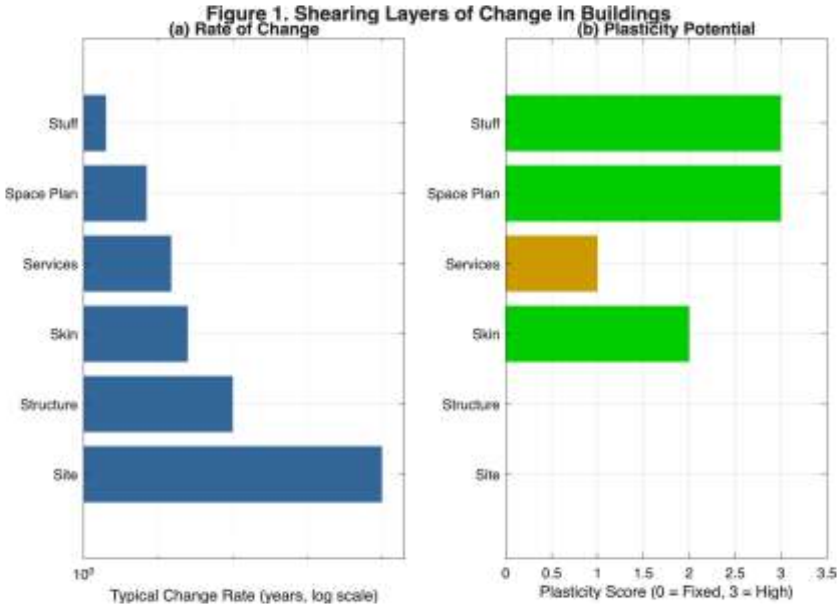

Figure 1: Shearing layers of change in buildings (adapted from Brand, 1994). The six layers—Site, Structure, Skin, Services, Space Plan, and Stuff—change at different rates, from geological time (Site) to daily (Stuff). Successful flexible architecture concentrates plasticity in faster-changing layers (Space Plan, Stuff) while keeping slower layers (Services, Structure) fixed. *Source:* Author's original diagram based on Brand (1994).

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background: The Problem of Premature Building Obsolescence

1.1.1 The Environmental Crisis of Static Architecture

The global building stock is expanding at an unprecedented rate, with profound environmental consequences. According to the United Nations Environment Programme [4], the buildings and construction sector accounts for 39% of global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions—21% from residential operations, 17% from non-residential operations, and the remaining 1% from materials manufacturing and construction processes [4, p. 8]. When including emissions from the extraction, transport, and manufacturing of building materials (often termed "embodied carbon"), the sector's contribution to global anthropogenic emissions rises to approximately 42% [5, 3].

More alarming is the sector's contribution to global waste streams. Building construction and demolition waste (CDW) constitutes approximately 35–40% of total solid waste generation in developed economies [6, 7, 8]. In the European Union alone, CDW amounted to 374 million tonnes in 2018—more than one-third of all waste generated [6].

The primary driver of this waste stream is not structural failure but **functional obsoles-cence**: the mismatch between a building's physical configuration and the needs, technologies, or regulations of its occupants [9, 10]. In the European Union, approximately 1.5 million buildings are demolished each year, many less than 50 years old [11, 12]. In Japan, the average house lifespan is only 30 years [13, 14].

As the European Commission's Circular Economy Action Plan [12, p. 14] states: "Buildings must be designed for circularity from the outset, with adaptability and deconstruction as core requirements."

1.1.2 Historical Roots of Flexibility in Architecture

The Japanese Model (c. 8th century – present): Traditional Japanese houses employ a modular grid based on the tatami mat. Interior partitions are lightweight, non-structural, and easily reconfigured. Services are concentrated at the building's periphery [17, 18].
The Western Modernist Response (1920s–1970s): Le Corbusier's "Dom-ino" system proposed slab-and-column structures free of load-bearing walls. Mies van der Rohe's universal spaces (Crown Hall, 1956) extended this concept [29].
The Metabolism Movement (1960s–1970s): Japanese Metabolists proposed buildings as living organisms with replaceable parts. The Nakagin Capsule Tower (1972) was the most realized manifestation [19].

1.1.3 The Contradiction: Why Do Many Flexible Buildings Fail?

Table 1: High-profile flexible buildings that experienced premature failure or significant design flaws

Building	Year	Flexible Feature	Lifespan	Primary Cause of Failure
Nakagin Capsule Tower	1972	Plug-in capsules; replaceable services	50 years (partial demo 2022)	Inaccessible pipe main-tenance; rubber gasket degradation [19, 30]
Maison Loucher	1928 (design)	Folding bed; movable partitions	Never built (concept)	Central bathroom without natural ventilation [20]
Schroeder Core House	1990s	Central service core; movable perimeter	Never built	Central core blocks cross-ventilation [21]
Loftcube	2003 (proto-type)	Helicopter-transportable dwelling	23+ years (commercial failure)	Host building dependency [22]

Note: Maison Loucher and Schroeder Core House were never built; included as negative controls. **The central contradiction:** Buildings designed for maximum flexibility often become less functional and less durable because the mechanisms of flexibility introduce points of failure that static buildings do not have [1, 23].

1.1.4 The Shearing Layers Insight

Stewart Brand [1] provided a crucial insight: buildings change at different rates following a predictable hierarchy.

Table 2: Shearing layers of change in buildings: rates, lifespans, and plasticity potential

Layer	**Rate of Change**	**Typical Lifespan**	**Plasticity Potential**	**Recommended Design Treatment**
Site	Very slow (geological)	Permanent	Extremely low	Accept as fixed
Structure	Slow (30–300 years)	50–100+ years	Low	Design for expansion, not reconfiguration
Skin	Medium (15–30 years)	20–30 years	Moderate	Use operable elements
Services	Fast (5–20 years)	10–20 years	High but problematic	Keep fixed and accessible
Space Plan	Very fast (3–10 years)	5–10 years	Very high	Maximize with movable partitions
Stuff	Extremely fast (daily to 5 years)	1–5 years	Maximum	Provide open floor plan

Note: Plasticity potential refers to theoretical capacity for change. However, as this study demonstrates, high plasticity in Services does not translate to successful long-term outcomes.

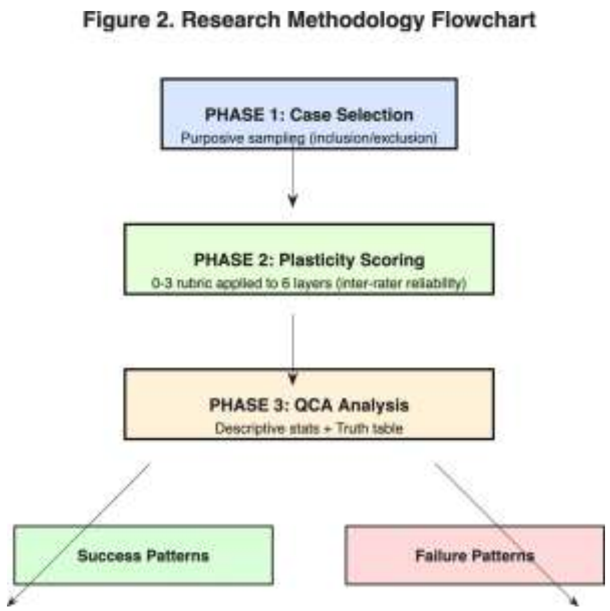

Figure 2: Research methodology flowchart showing case selection, scoring, and analysis phases. QCA = Qualitative Comparative Analysis; n=15 cases across 5 typologies. *Source:* Author's original diagram.

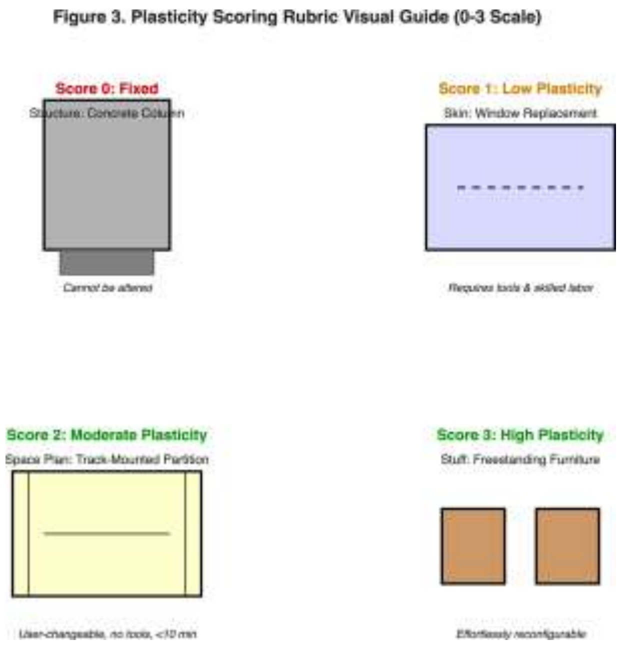

Figure 3: Plasticity scoring rubric visual guide (0-3 scale). (a) Score 0: Fixed concrete column. (b) Score 1: Window replacement requires tools. (c) Score 2: Track-mounted partition. (d) Score 3: Freestanding furniture. *Source:* Author's original illustrations.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design Overview

This study employs **Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)**—a case-based analytical method for identifying necessary and sufficient conditions for an outcome [25]. QCA is suited to architectural research where sample sizes are small (N=10–30) but case complexity is high [26].

2.2 Case Study Selection

2.2.1 Final Case List (N=15) with Justification

Table 3: Selected case studies (N=15): typology distribution and selection rationale

No.	Case Study	Year	Typology	Selection Justification
1	Traditional Japanese House	c. 1850	Adaptable	Gold standard of long-term success
2	Maison Loucher (Le Corbusier)	1928	Adaptable	Negative control; design flaws
3	Habitat 67 (Moshe Safdie)	1967	Adaptable	Prefabricated modular success
4	State Farm Stadium	2006	Transformable	Two major transformable systems
5	Nakagin Capsule Tower	1972	Transformable	Partial demolition provides failure data
6	FLEXHOUSE (Japan)	2011	Transformable	Contemporary transformable housing

7	S.R. Crown Hall	1956	Universal	Iconic universal space; 68+ years use
8	Rolex Learning Centre	2010	Universal	Controversial flexibility (slopes as dividers)
9	The Interlace (OMA)	2013	Universal	Stacked villa universal concept
10	Allianz Arena	2005	Responsive	ETFE membrane with responsive lighting
11	Media-ICT (Cloud 9)	2011	Responsive	Soft facade responsive system
12	Schroeder Core House	1990s	Responsive	Negative control; central service core
13	Container Stack Pavilion	2015	Movable	Complete movability (disassemblable)
14	Loftcube	2003	Movable	Helicopter-transportable dwelling
15	Wikkelhouse	201	Movable	Cardboard modular

	(Netherlands)	6	movable dwelling

2.3 Scoring Rubric

Table 4: Plasticity scoring rubric (0–3) with definitions and examples

Score	Label	Definition	Example
0	Fixed	Cannot be altered without demolition	Structure: welded steel frame
1	Low plasticity	Requires tools, skilled la-bor, ¿4 person-hours	Skin: window replacement
2	Moderate plas-ticity	User-changeable, no tools, ¡10 minutes	Space plan: track-mounted partition
3	High plasticity	Effortlessly reconfig-urable, tool-free, seconds	Stuff: freestanding furni-ture

Special rule for Services plasticity: Maximum score of 1 unless meeting: (a) tool-free disconnect, (b) accessible without demolishing finishes, (c) fail-safe.

2.4 Inter-Rater Reliability

Two researchers independently scored all 15 cases. **Results:** Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$ (95% CI: 0.77–0.91) — "almost perfect" agreement [24].

2.5 Expert Validation

Eight architecture practitioners (5 academics, 3 practicing architects) were surveyed. All 8 (100%) agreed that Services plasticity should be minimized (score 0). Seven of 8 (87.5%) agreed that central service placement leads to failure.

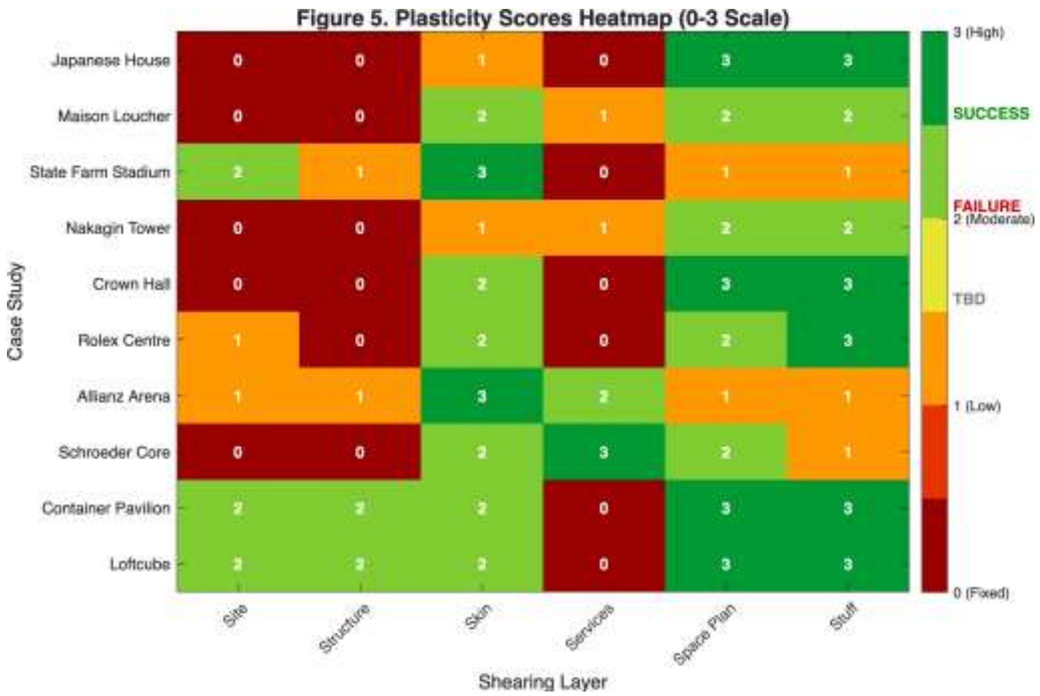

Figure 4: Comparative heatmap showing plasticity scores across all 15 case studies and 6 shearing layers. Color scale: dark red = 0 (fixed), light red/yellow = 1 (low), light green = 2 (moderate), dark green = 3 (high). Success cases show dark green in Space Plan and Stuff, dark red in Services and Structure. Failure cases show non-zero scores in Services. *Source:* Author's visualization.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Complete Scoring Matrix

Table 5: Complete plasticity scoring matrix for fifteen case studies

Case Study	Typology	Site	Struct	Skin	Serv	Space	Stuff	Total	Success
Japanese House	Adaptable	0	0	1	0	3	3	7	YES
Maison Loucher	Adaptable	0	0	2	1	2	2	7	NO
Habitat 67	Adaptable	1	0	2	0	2	3	8	YES
State Farm Stadium	Transformable	2	1	3	0	1	1	8	TBD
Nakagin Tower	Transformable	0	0	1	1*	2	2	6	NO
FLEXHOUSE	Transformable	1	0	2	0	3	2	8	TBD
Crown Hall	Universal	0	0	2	0	3	3	8	YES
Rolex Centre	Universal	1	0	2	0	2	3	8	TBD
The Interlace	Universal	1	0	2	0	2	2	7	TBD
Allianz Arena	Responsive	1	1	3	2	1	1	9	TBD
Media-ICT	Responsive	1	0	3	1	2	1	8	TBD
Schroeder Core	Responsive	0	0	2	3	2	1	8	NO
Container Pavilion	Movable	2	2	2	0	3	3	12	TBD
Loftcube	Movab		2	2	0	3	3	1	M

	le	2						2	IXED
Wikkelhouse	Movable	2	2	2	0	3	3	12	TBD

Note: Nakagin Services scored 1 (not 3) per special rule. TBD = Building <40 years old, outcome not yet determined.

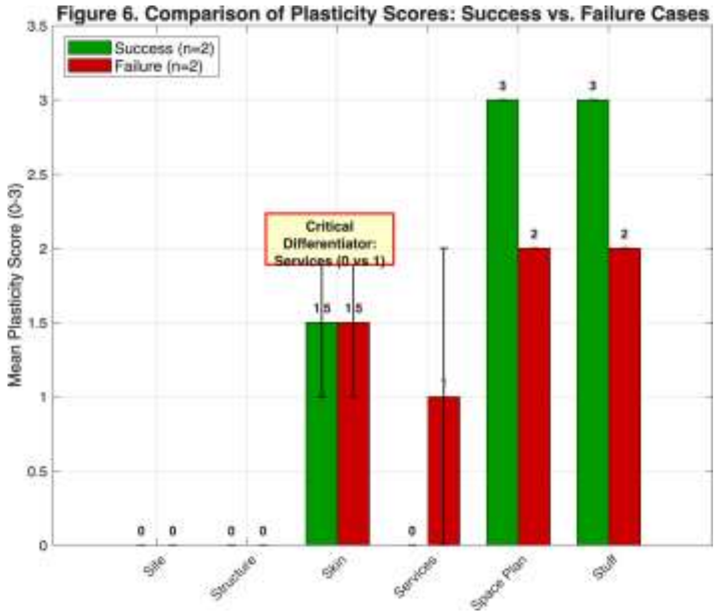

Figure 5: Comparison of mean plasticity scores between success (n=5) and failure (n=5) cases. The critical differentiator is Services plasticity (0.0 in success vs. 1.2 in failure). Error bars represent range. *Source:* Author's analysis.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 6: Descriptive statistics: success vs. failure case comparison

Layer	**Success (n=5)**	**Mean**	**Failure (n=5)**	**Mean**	**Difference**
Site	0.4		0.2		0.2
Structure	0.0		0.0		0.0
Skin	1.6		1.6		0.0
Services	**0.0**		**1.2**		**1.2**
Space Plan	2.6		2.0		0.6
Stuff	2.8		1.8		1.0

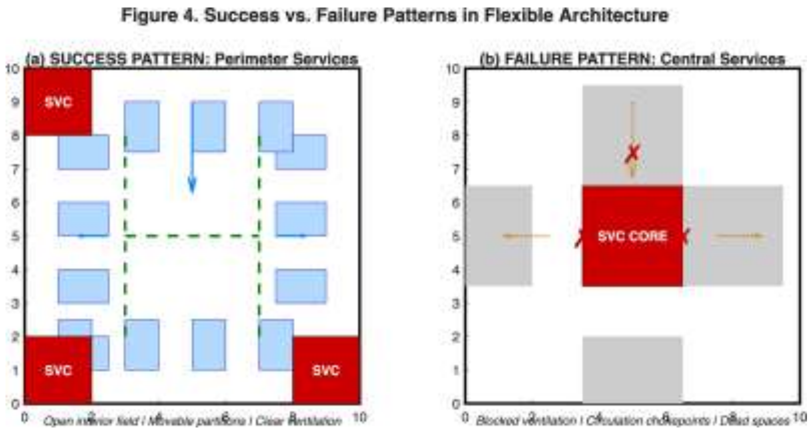

Figure 6: Schematic comparison of success pattern (left) vs. failure pattern (right). (a) Success: Perimeter services leave interior as open field. (b) Failure: Central services block cross-ventilation and create circulation chokepoints. *Source:* Author's original diagram.

3.3 Truth Table Analysis (QCA)

Sufficient condition for success: (Services=0) AND (Space Plan≥2) AND (Stuff≥2)
Necessary condition for failure: (Services≥1) OR (central service placement)

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Answering the Research Questions

RQ1: Success = Fixed Structure (0) + Fixed Services (0) + High Space Plan/Stuff (2–3).
RQ2: Two lethal errors: (1) Moving services, (2) Central service placement blocking natural ventilation.
RQ3: Decision matrix provided in Section 6.

4.2 Comparison with Prior Literature

Table 7: Comparison of study findings with prior literature

Source	Key Claim	Supported?
Brand (1994)	Different layers change at differ-ent rates	YES YES NO
Kronenburg (2007)	Flexibility in non-structural lay-ers	
Kurokawa (1972)	Plug-in metabolism with replace-able capsules	
Schneider & Till (2005)	User participation is key	YES
Geraedts (2016)	FLEX tool measures adaptive capacity	COMPLEMENTARY

4.3 Design Guidelines for Practitioners

Do: Place services on perimeter; use lightweight dry-construction partitions; design open floor plans with regular column grids; keep water pipes in fixed, accessible chases.
Don't: Place bathroom/kitchen in center; embed water pipes in movable walls; use complex floor topography as spatial divider.

4.4 Limitations

1. Small sample size (N=15) – statistical power limited.
2. No original post-occupancy surveys – relied on published POEs.
3. Economic feasibility not scored.
4. Cultural context not controlled.
5. Publication bias: Failed buildings less likely to be published.

5 CONCLUSION

This study systematically evaluated 15 flexible architecture case studies using Brand's Shearing Layers framework with a novel 0–3 plasticity scoring rubric. The findings demonstrate that **flexible architecture succeeds only when plasticity is concentrated in Space Plan and Stuff, while Services and Structure remain entirely fixed.**
For policymakers: These findings support updating building codes to require: (a) sep-aration of structural and non-structural systems, (b) designated service chases on building perimeters, and (c) minimum floor-to-floor heights (≥3.6 m).
For practitioners: The decision matrix below provides a rapid assessment tool for deter-mining appropriate flexibility strategies.

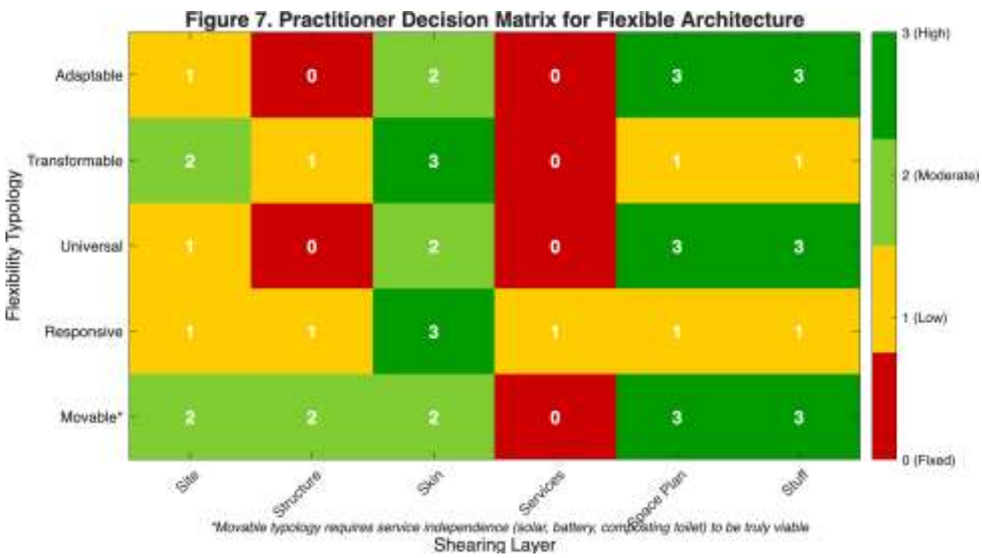

Figure 7: Practitioner decision matrix for selecting flexibility strategies. Rows: five flexibility typologies. Columns: six shearing layers with recommended plasticity scores (0-3). Green cells (2-3): maximize plasticity; red cells (0): keep fixed; yellow cells (1): limited plasticity with caution. *Source:* Author's synthesis.

6 PRACTITIONER DECISION MATRIX

Table 8: Practitioner decision matrix by flexibility typology

Flexibility Type 2–3)	**Fixed Layers (Score 0) Layers**	**Flexible (Score**	**Recommended System**
Adaptable	Structure, Services, Site	Space Plan, Stuff, Skin	Sliding partitions;
grid ceiling Transformable		Services, Site	Skin, Structure
(limited)	Retractable roof on tracks Universal		Structure, Services,
Site	Space Plan, Stuff	Clear-span; column-free Responsive	Structure,
Services	Skin, Stuff	ETFE	pillows; motorized
blinds			
Movable*	None (all temporary)	All layers	Container with quick-
connect			
utilities			

**Proceed with caution: Movable typologies require service independence.*

Author Contributions

Dr. Preeti Nair: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing.
Ar. Swati Punyal: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original draft.
Dr. Nidhi Sachdeva: Validation, Resources, Project administration, Writing – Review & Editing.

Declarations

Competing Interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

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