

Defining Architectural Work in Marketing:

A Functional Standard for Distinguishing Architecture,
Strategy, Design, and Execution

Technical Paper – TP-002

Marketing Architecture Institute

Abstract

Marketing has adopted the term "architect" without establishing a standard for what it requires. This paper proposes a functional test for architectural work: six criteria that a piece of work must materially satisfy before it qualifies as architecture, rather than strategy, design, optimization, or execution. The test is built to be applied, not merely cited, and this paper applies it to three worked cases, one that clearly passes, one that clearly fails, and one that is genuinely ambiguous even after full analysis. The paper also states directly what the test does not resolve: architecture is a function performed on a system, not a rank held by a person, and the six criteria say nothing about how skilled, senior, or valuable a piece of non-architectural work might be.

1. A borrowed word without a borrowed standard

Architecture, as a professional discipline, did not originate in marketing or in business generally. Building architecture established the basic premise first. Writing in the first century BCE, Vitruvius set out the earliest surviving systematic treatment of the discipline, describing sound architecture as the deliberate reconciliation of structural soundness, functional purpose, and aesthetic quality, rather than the production of any single one of those qualities alone (Vitruvius, 1914). The premise that carries forward from this earliest treatment is not the specific triad itself but the underlying claim: the architect is accountable for how the parts of a structure relate to one another and to their purpose, not primarily for producing any one part.

As technology systems grew too complex to manage component by component in the twentieth century, two related disciplines extended that same premise into new domains. Enterprise and information systems architecture, formalized in Zachman's (1987) framework, established a way to organize the relationships among an organization's data, processes, and technology from multiple stakeholder perspectives simultaneously, treating the organization itself as the system under design. Software architecture, formalized shortly after by Perry and Wolf (1992), defined architecture as a specific combination of a system's elements, the form that governs how those elements relate, and the rationale connecting that form to the constraints it was built to satisfy. What all three traditions share is not a subject matter. It is a claim about scope. The architect works on the relationships among the parts of a system, not primarily on the parts themselves.

It is worth being precise here about what that precedent does and does not establish for marketing. The enterprise architecture tradition demonstrated, at organizational scale, that governing the relationships within a complex environment is a legitimate professional discipline in its own right, not an incidental management activity layered on top of the real work. That demonstration matters well beyond the technology domain in which it originated. But enterprise architecture is not a parent discipline beneath which marketing architecture sits. The two are better understood as parallel applications of the same underlying premise to different environments, one to technology and information infrastructure, the

other to the broader conditions under which growth is produced. Treating one as superior to or containing the other overstates the relationship in either direction.

Marketing's adoption of the word "architect" arrived without this scope claim attached. A title borrowed the word before any standard existed for what the word was supposed to require, which is the same condition that allowed "guru," "ninja," and "hacker" to spread and then empty out. This paper's premise is that marketing can avoid the same outcome, but only if a standard exists before the title finishes spreading rather than after.

2. What a standard needs, and what existing treatments lack

Prior discussion of this question has established two useful but incomplete distinctions. The first is a general boundary between activity-level work and system-level work, useful for an initial read on a title but too coarse to resolve a specific case. The second is a taxonomy that separates execution, optimization, strategy, design, architecture, and governance as distinct kinds of work, which sharpens the picture considerably but still serves as a heuristic rather than a test. Neither offers a way to take a specific piece of work and determine, criterion by criterion, whether it qualifies as architectural.

That is the gap this paper is built to close. A functional test needs three properties to be useful rather than merely persuasive. It needs criteria specific enough to apply to an actual case, not just to a title. It needs criteria that are genuinely independent of one another, so that satisfying one does not automatically satisfy another. And it needs to produce a defensible answer even in ambiguous cases, rather than only working cleanly on the easy examples chosen to illustrate it.

3. The six-criterion test

Work qualifies as architectural when it materially satisfies all six of the following criteria. Partial or incidental contact with a criterion is not sufficient; the work must actively address it.

Boundary and Interfaces. A defined system or subsystem exists, and its connections to adjacent systems are specified. Architectural work draws a deliberate line around something and defines how it connects to what lies outside it. Work with no defined boundary, or with a boundary but no specified interfaces to what it touches, has not met this criterion.

Structure. The constituent components of the system are explicitly identified, and the relationships and dependencies among them are modeled rather than merely listed. A component inventory with no modeled relationships is documentation. A modeled relationship with no identified components is abstraction. Both are necessary together.

Principles and Decision Rights. Decisions about the structure are governed by explicit principles, and authority over structural decisions is clearly established. A principle with no one accountable for applying

it governs nothing in practice. Decision authority with no principle behind it is organizational power, not architecture.

Constraints and Tradeoffs. Non-negotiable requirements and limitations are documented, and where architectural qualities genuinely compete, that competition is deliberately reconciled rather than left unresolved. A constraint that never meets a competing constraint has not yet been tested; a tradeoff resolved without reference to a documented constraint is closer to preference than to design.

Governance and Adaptability. Mechanisms exist to maintain the structure's integrity over time, and the structure anticipates change without requiring continual reconstruction. Work that produces a coherent structure with no means of keeping it coherent as conditions change has solved a problem only temporarily.

Traceability. Structural decisions connect backward to business requirements and strategy, and forward to how execution subsequently proceeds under them. A structure that cannot be traced back to why it exists, or forward to what it actually governs, has not established its own relevance.

All six criteria must be materially present. A piece of work that satisfies five of six is not "mostly architectural." It has not met the standard, though naming which criterion is unmet is itself useful information, as the worked cases in Section 5 illustrate.

4. The practitioner-facing derivative

The following flowchart is a simplified derivative of the six-criterion test above, intended for quick use by practitioners. It is not an independent standard, and where the flowchart's plain-language questions diverge in emphasis from the formal criteria, the formal criteria in Section 3 govern.

Are you designing a system, rather than producing an output within one? This maps to Boundary and Interfaces.

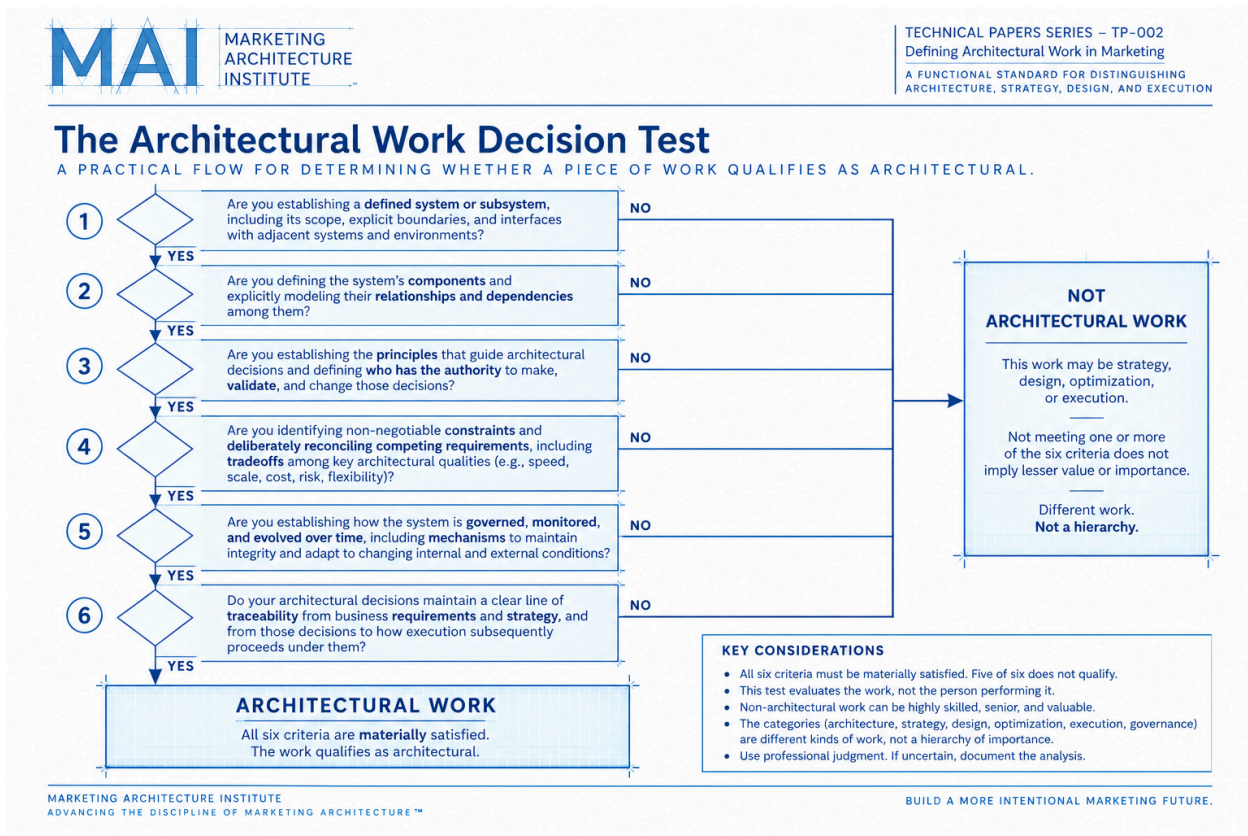
Are you defining components and how they relate to each other? This maps to Structure.

Are you establishing who decides, and under what principles? This maps to Principles and Decision Rights.

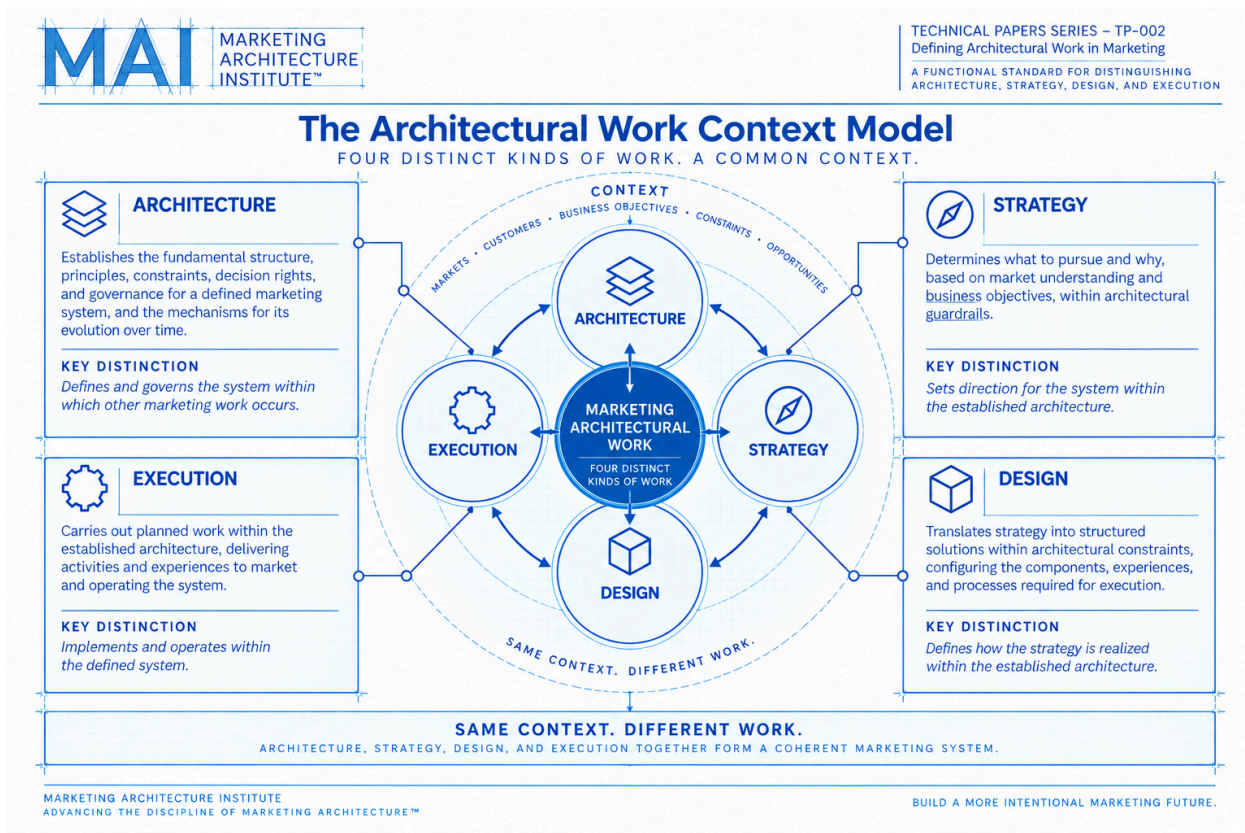
Are you resolving competing requirements deliberately, not by default? This maps to Constraints and Tradeoffs.

Does your work include a way to keep the structure coherent as things change? This maps to Governance and Adaptability.

Does your work trace back to strategy and forward to how others will execute under it? This maps to Traceability.



A "no" at any point indicates the work in question is strategy, design, optimization, or execution, each a legitimate and necessary category of work in its own right, not a lesser version of architecture.



5. Applying the test: three worked cases

Case A: lead-to-revenue process design. A practitioner is tasked with defining how leads move from initial engagement through qualification, handoff, and revenue attribution across multiple systems. The work identifies which platforms are involved and how they depend on one another (Structure), specifies how the process interfaces with adjacent systems in sales and finance (Boundary and Interfaces), establishes who has authority over scoring and qualification rules and under what principles those rules are set (Principles and Decision Rights), documents constraints including data privacy requirements and sales capacity limits and resolves the tension between lead volume and lead quality deliberately (Constraints and Tradeoffs), builds in a defined process for revisiting the model as conditions change (Governance and Adaptability), and ties the entire design back to a stated revenue strategy and forward to how sales and marketing teams execute under it (Traceability). This case satisfies all six criteria and qualifies as architectural work.

Case B: email nurture optimization. A practitioner improves subject lines, send timing, and segmentation logic within a single nurture sequence, inside a marketing automation platform someone else configured. There is no defined boundary beyond the one sequence, no specified interface to adjacent systems, and no authority over anything outside the sequence itself. The work fails Boundary and

Interfaces, Principles and Decision Rights, and Governance and Adaptability, since there is no structure to maintain. This is Optimization, performed well, and the test correctly does not classify it as architecture.

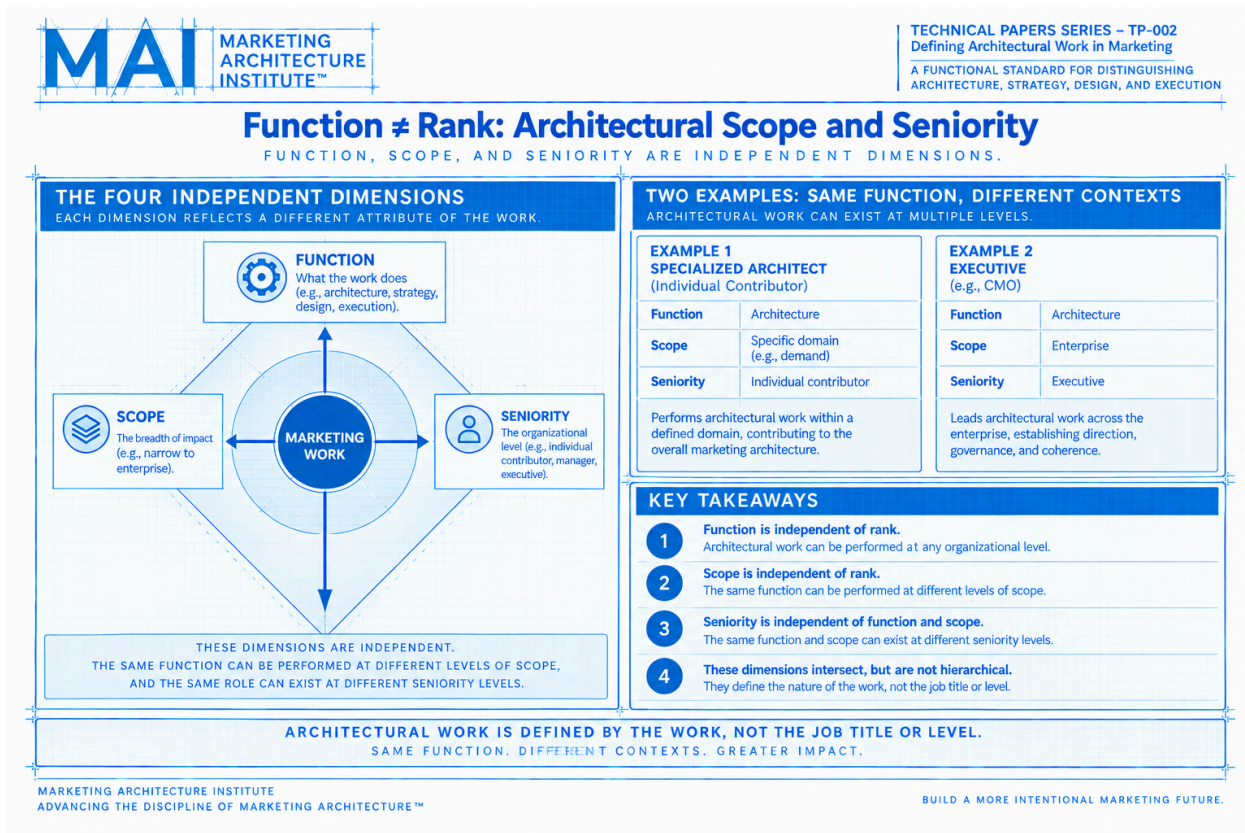
Case C: content operation redesign. A practitioner redesigns how a content function operates, introducing a taxonomy, defined workflow roles, and a review process that did not previously exist. This work clearly satisfies Structure, since components and their relationships are explicitly modeled where none were before, and partially satisfies Governance and Adaptability, since a review process exists. However, it is not clear the process anticipates change so much as it enforces the current design. It does not clearly satisfy Boundary and Interfaces, since the redesign's connection to the broader marketing technology stack it depends on is not documented. It does not satisfy Principles and Decision Rights, since no explicit decision-rights model accompanies the new roles. And it does not satisfy Constraints and Tradeoffs, since no competing requirements are documented as having been reconciled. The honest reading of this case is that it fails the full test, while succeeding partially and specifically on two of six criteria. That partial, specific result is more useful than a binary verdict would be, since it identifies exactly what needs to be added: a documented interface to the martech stack and an explicit decision-rights model for the work to cross the threshold.

6. Function, not rank

Architecture is a function performed on a system, not a rank held by a person. "Architect" should describe the nature of the work, not the seniority of the person doing it. A practitioner doing excellent, valuable work at the strategy, design, optimization, or execution level is not doing a lesser version of architecture. They are doing a different kind of work entirely, one this test is not designed to evaluate the quality of, only its category.

This has a direct bearing on how any ordered presentation of these categories should be read. A sequenced list moving from execution toward architecture and governance can be misread as a hierarchy of prestige, even where nothing in the text states one. That misreading should be corrected explicitly wherever such a sequence appears, rather than left to the reader's assumption, since an implied ladder undermines the very point this section exists to make.

The same principle governs how architectural scope should be understood. A specialized architect operating within a single domain and an architect operating across an entire system are not positioned on a competence ladder. They are working at different scopes, with different boundaries, interfaces, and decision authority. Scope is a structural fact about where the boundary in Criterion 1 has been drawn, not a measure of how good the work inside that boundary is.



7. Limitations

This test evaluates whether work qualifies as architectural. It does not evaluate how well that work is done. A piece of work can satisfy all six criteria and still be poorly executed architecture, just as a piece of optimization work can satisfy none of the six criteria and still be excellent optimization.

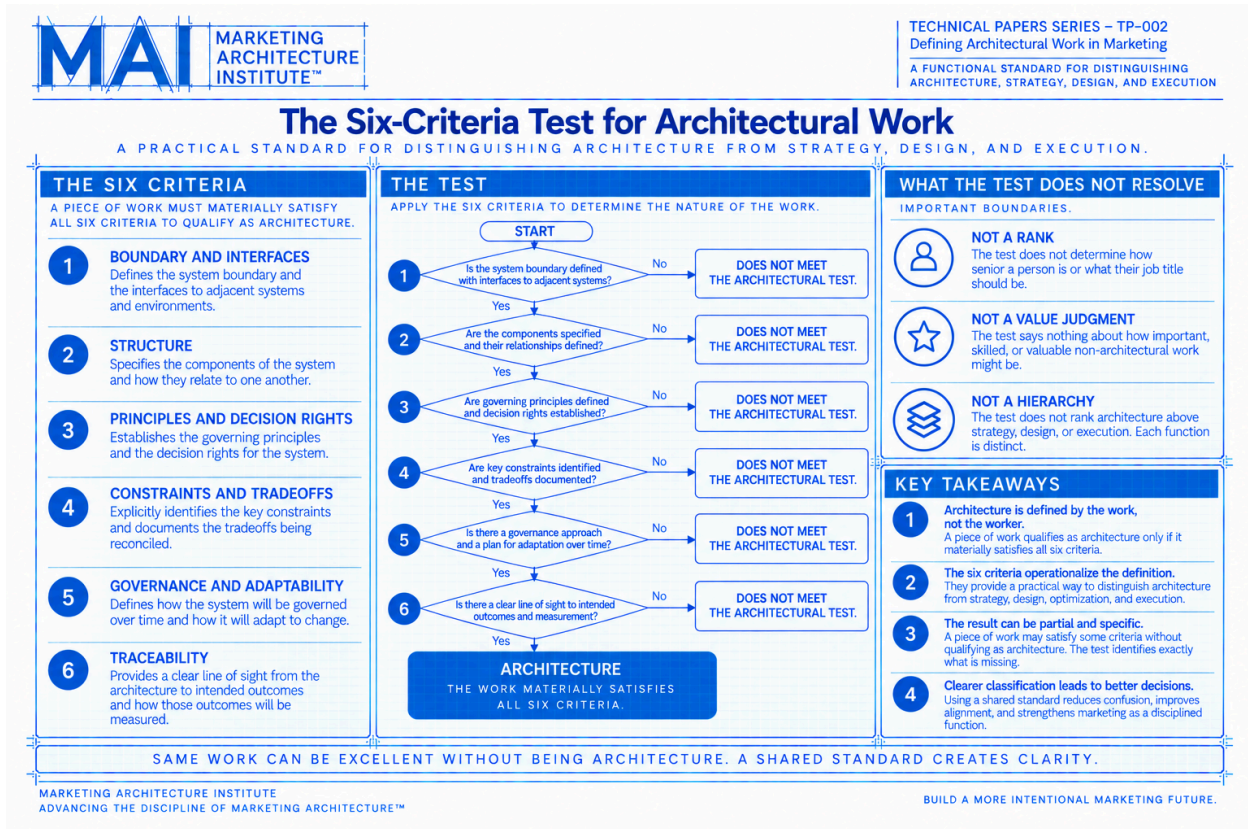
The test also depends on documented evidence. Where structural decisions, principles, or governance mechanisms exist only informally, undocumented and unexamined, the test cannot confirm their presence, even if they are functioning in practice. This is a limitation of the test's applicability, not a claim that undocumented structural judgment has no value.

Finally, as Case C demonstrates, the test does not always yield a clean binary result, nor is it designed to force one. A work product that materially satisfies some criteria and not others should be described in those terms, since the partial result is itself informative about what the work would need to qualify.

8. Conclusion

Without a functional test, "architect" in marketing is likely to follow the same path as "ninja" and "hacker," a title that once signaled something specific and gradually came to signal nothing at all. With

one, the term can continue to carry real information about the nature of a given piece of work, information a title alone cannot provide. The six criteria proposed here are offered as that test: specific enough to apply to a real case, independent enough that satisfying one does not imply satisfying another, and honest enough to produce a genuinely ambiguous result when the work itself is genuinely ambiguous.



References

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