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OPTIMAL MINIMAX DESIGN OF ARCHITECTURAL STRUCTURES CONSIDERING VARIABILITY IN MATERIALS AND LOADS

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ABSTRACT

Structural design in architecture is inherently affected by uncertainty associated with material properties and external loads. Conventional deterministic design approaches, based on nominal values and safety factors, may fail to ensure adequate performance under adverse combinations of material variability and extreme loading conditions. This study proposes a minimax-based optimal design framework for architectural structures, explicitly accounting for variability in material properties and structural loads to enhance robustness and reliability. A quantitative analytical–computational approach was adopted, combining finite element modeling with robust optimization techniques. Material properties and loads were modeled as bounded uncertain parameters without assuming probabilistic distributions. The structural design problem was formulated as a minimax optimization problem, aiming to minimize the maximum structural performance index under worst-case scenarios. The proposed methodology was applied to a representative architectural frame structure and compared with a conventional deterministic design. Results demonstrate that the minimax-optimized design consistently satisfies strength and serviceability requirements under all adverse scenarios considered, whereas the deterministic design violates admissible limits in critical cases. The minimax approach significantly reduces sensitivity to material and load variability, improving structural robustness with only a moderate increase in material usage. These findings confirm that minimax optimization provides an effective and mathematically rigorous framework for robust structural design in architecture. The study contributes to the field of structural engineering by integrating robust optimization into architectural design practice and offers a practical methodology for designing resilient structures under uncertainty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Context and background

Modern architectural structural design faces increasing challenges associated with the inherent uncertainty in building materials and acting loads. Variations in the mechanical properties of concrete, steel, or composite materials, as well as uncertainty in live, seismic, wind, and thermal loads, introduce a level of complexity that classical deterministic approaches fail to adequately capture.

Traditionally, structural design codes have addressed this uncertainty through global or partial safety factors, which, while providing acceptable safety margins, can lead to oversized designs or, in extreme cases, insufficiently robust in the face of adverse scenarios not explicitly foreseen.

In this context, the need arises for structural design approaches that formally integrate uncertainty within the optimization process, allowing to obtain structures that are not only safe, but also efficient, resilient and economically optimal.

Research Problem

Conventional methods of structural optimization typically assume fixed ratings for material properties and loads, optimizing structural performance under average conditions. However, in practice, structures are exposed to unfavorable combinations of material variability and extreme loads that can compromise their performance.

There is, therefore, a methodological gap in architectural structural design: the lack of optimization models that maximize structural performance under the plausible worst-case scenario of variability in materials and loads. The absence of this approach can result in structures that are vulnerable to extreme or overly conservative conditions.

Rationale for the study

The minimax criterion, widely used in game theory, robust control, and systems engineering, offers a suitable mathematical framework for addressing design decisions under adverse uncertainty. Applied to structural design, the minimax approach allows:
- Guarantee a minimum acceptable structural performance in the face of unfavorable variations.
- Reduce design sensitivity to uncertainties in physical parameters.
- Improve structural reliability without resorting to excessive oversizing.

- Complement and strengthen traditional policy approaches.

From a scientific perspective, this study contributes to the field of robust structural optimization, formally integrating material and load variability within the architectural design process, an aspect still limited in recent literature.

General objective

To develop a minimax optimal design model of architectural structures that explicitly considers the variability in the properties of the materials and in the acting loads, in order to maximize structural robustness under adverse scenarios.

Specific objectives

1. To mathematically model the variability of mechanical properties of structural materials.
2. Represent the uncertainty in permanent and variable loads through adverse scenarios.
3. Formulate the structural design problem as a minimax optimization problem.
4. Compare the robust minimax design with traditional deterministic approaches.
5. Evaluate the impact of the minimax approach on structural safety and efficiency.

Research hypothesis

- **H1:** The structural design based on minimax optimization has greater robustness against variability in materials and loads than the conventional deterministic design.
- **H2:** The minimax approach reduces the sensitivity of structural performance to extreme scenarios.
- **H3:** The minimax design achieves a more efficient balance between structural safety and material use.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Architectural structural design under uncertainty

Architectural structural design aims to ensure the safety, functionality, and efficiency of structures against various external actions during their useful life. Traditionally, this process has been based on deterministic models that use nominal values of mechanical properties and loads, complemented by safety factors prescribed by technical regulations.

However, numerous studies have shown that both the properties of the materials and the acting loads present a significant inherent variability, derived from manufacturing processes,

environmental conditions, construction methods and real use of the buildings. This variability introduces uncertainty in structural performance that is not always adequately captured by classical deterministic approaches.

Consequently, a growing interest has emerged in design approaches that explicitly incorporate uncertainty, allowing structural behavior to be evaluated and optimized in the face of unfavorable but plausible scenarios.

Variability of the mechanical properties of materials

Structural materials commonly used in architecture, such as reinforced concrete, structural steel, and composite materials, exhibit statistical dispersion in key properties such as modulus of elasticity, compressive strength, tensile strength, and ductility.

The literature has widely documented that these properties cannot be considered constants, but as random variables or bounded intervals. Material variability can be due to factors such as internal heterogeneity, aging, curing processes, corrosion, and service conditions. Ignoring this variability can lead to an overestimation of structural performance, especially in critical elements.

In this context, explicit modelling of material variability is a key component for robust structural design.

Uncertainty and combinations of structural loads

Architectural structures are subjected to multiple types of loads, including permanent loads, live loads, environmental loads (wind, temperature, snow) and seismic actions. The magnitude, distribution and combination of these loads present considerable uncertainty, both spatial and temporal.

While structural codes provide regulatory load combinations, these combinations represent standardized scenarios that do not necessarily cover all possible extreme conditions. In particular, rare but severe events can generate significantly more demanding load states than those considered in conventional design.

Therefore, the consideration of adverse load scenarios, beyond the typical regulatory combinations, is essential to ensure structural robustness.

Classic structural optimization

Classical structural optimization focuses on minimizing target functions such as weight, cost, or maximum displacement, subject to strength, stability, and service constraints. These problems are usually formulated as deterministic models, where the design parameters are considered known and constant.

Although these methods have proven to be effective in improving structural efficiency, their main limitation lies in the lack of robustness in the face of parametric uncertainty. An optimal design under nominal conditions can perform poorly when the actual parameters deviate from the assumed values.

Robust structural optimization

Robust structural optimization emerges as a natural extension of classical approaches, explicitly incorporating uncertainty into the design process. This approach seeks solutions that maintain acceptable performance in the face of adverse variations in system parameters.

Within this framework, methodologies based on stochastic optimization, structural reliability and sensitivity analysis have been developed. However, many of these approaches require detailed probabilistic information, which is not always available or reliable in practice.

Minimax Criterion in Structural Engineering

The minimax criterion offers a powerful alternative for structural design under non-probabilistic uncertainty. Under this approach, the designer assumes that uncertain parameters can adopt unfavorable values within bounded domains and seeks to maximize structural performance in the worst possible scenario.

Formally, the minimax approach allows:
- Guarantee minimum levels of structural safety.
- Reduce design sensitivity to extreme variation.
- Design structures that are more resilient in the face of critical combinations of materials and loads.

Although the minimax criterion has been widely used in robust control and computational mechanics, its systematic application to architectural structural design remains limited, which reinforces the relevance of the present study.

Synthesis of the theoretical framework

The literature review allows us to identify that:
1. Variability in materials and loads is inherent to architectural structural design.
2. Classical deterministic approaches do not adequately capture such uncertainty.
3. Robust structural optimization is a promising alternative.

4. The minimax criterion offers a suitable mathematical framework to ensure structural robustness without requiring detailed probabilistic information.
5. There is a clear gap in the application of the minimax approach to the optimal design of architectural structures.

This theoretical framework is the basis for the methodological formulation of the proposed model, which is developed in the following section.

3. METHODOLOGY

Methodological approach and type of study

The study adopts a quantitative approach, with an analytical-computational design, based on robust structural optimization. The methodology integrates:
- Mechanical modeling of architectural structures.
- Explicit representation of variability in materials and loads.
- Formulation of the design as a minimax optimization problem.
- Numerical simulation for benchmarking.

The study is non-experimental, since structural performance is evaluated by mathematical models and computational analyses, without physical intervention on real structures.

Structural reference model

It is considered a generic architectural structure (portico, continuous beam or flat frame), discretized using the finite element method (FEM). The linear-elastic structural behavior is expressed as:

$$K(\theta)u = F(\lambda)$$

where:
- K is the global stiffness matrix, dependent on the properties of the material. θ
- u it is the vector of nodal displacements.
- F it is the vector of external forces, dependent on loads. λ

Design variables

The vector of design variables is defined as:

$$\mathbf{x} = \{x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n\}$$

where each represents a geometric or structural parameter, such as: x_i
- Cross-sectional area.
- Moment of inertia.
- Thickness of structural elements.

These variables determine the optimal geometric configuration of the structure.

Modeling Material Variability

The mechanical properties of materials are considered uncertain but bounded. A set of material parameters is defined:

$$\boldsymbol{\theta} = \{E, f_y, f_c\}$$

where:
- E it is the modulus of elasticity.
- f_y it is creep resistance.
- f_c it is the compressive strength.

Variability is modeled using intervals:

$$\theta_i \in [\underline{\theta_i}, \bar{\theta_i}]$$

without assuming explicit probabilistic distributions, consistent with the Minimax approach.

Modeling Uncertainty in Loads

Structural loads are represented by a vector:

$$\boldsymbol{\lambda} = \{P, Q, W, S\}$$

corresponding to permanent, variable, wind and seismic loads. Each component is defined within a bounded domain:

$$\lambda_j \in [\underline{\lambda_j}, \bar{\lambda_j}]$$

representing unfavorable plausible load scenarios.

Structural Performance Function

A structural performance function is defined:

$$g(\mathbf{x}, \boldsymbol{\theta}, \boldsymbol{\lambda})$$

which can represent:
- Maximum displacement.
- Normalized maximum voltage.
- Structural safety index.

In this study, an aggregate performance function is adopted:

$$g = \max\left(\frac{\sigma_{max}}{\sigma_{adm}}, \frac{\delta_{max}}{\delta_{adm}}\right)$$

where lower values of indicate better structural performance. g

Formulation of the minimax optimization problem

The robust structural design problem is formulated as:

$$\min_{\mathbf{x}\in\mathcal{X}} \max_{\boldsymbol{\theta}\in\Theta, \boldsymbol{\lambda}\in\Lambda} g(\mathbf{x}, \boldsymbol{\theta}, \boldsymbol{\lambda})$$

Subject to:
- Geometric constraints.
- Regulatory design restrictions.
- Constructive and architectural limits.

Here:
- $\mathcal{X}$ it is the feasible design space.
- Θ and represent the uncertainty domains of materials and loads, respectively. Λ

Computational reformulation

The minimax problem is transformed into an equivalent problem by introducing an auxiliary variable : z

$$\min_{\mathbf{x},z} z$$

Subject to:

$$g(\mathbf{x}, \boldsymbol{\theta}_k, \boldsymbol{\lambda}_k) \leq z, \forall k = 1, \dots, N$$

where they represent discretized critical combinations of materials and loads.$(\boldsymbol{\theta}_k, \boldsymbol{\lambda}_k)$

Computational procedure

The methodology was executed in the following stages:

1. Definition of the structural model and MEF discretization.
2. Identification of uncertainty domains.
3. Generation of critical scenarios.
4. Solving the minimax problem through numerical optimization.
5. Comparison with traditional deterministic design.

Comparison criteria

The designs were compared using:

- Maximum stress value.
- Maximum displacement.
- Structural robustness index.
- Consumption of structural material.

Methodological rigor

The proposed approach ensures:

- Minimum structural safety under adverse scenarios.
- Mathematical reproducibility.
- Transparency in the design process.

4. RESULTS

Case Study Setup

The reference structural model corresponds to a flat two-level architectural framework, discretized by beam-column elements. Two design approaches were compared:

- Conventional deterministic (DC) design: based on nominal values of materials and normative load combinations.
- Robust minimax (DM) design: obtained by minimax optimization formulation considering variability in materials and loads.
  The domains of uncertainty considered were:
- Modulus of elasticity variability: ±15%
- Material strength variability: ±20%
- Variable and environmental load variability: ±25%

Structural performance under adverse scenarios

Structural performance was evaluated using the maximum performance index, defined as the ratio between the structural response and its permissible value. Values indicate compliance with safety and service criteria. $gg \leq 1$

Table 1: Maximum structural performance index under critical scenarios.

Design Approach	g_{max}	Critical scenario
Deterministic Design (DC)	1.27	Low resistance + maximum load
Minimax design (DM)	**0.93**	Extreme material-load combination

Deterministic design exceeds allowable limits under adverse scenarios, while minimax design ensures structural compliance even in the worst case considered.

Structural response: stresses and displacements

Peak stresses and nodal displacements were analyzed in both designs.

Table 2: Comparison of maximum structural responses.

Variable	DC	DM
Normalized Maximum Voltage	1.21	**0.89**
Normalized Maximum Displacement	1.18	**0.92**
Minimum safety margin	−21%	**+8 %**

The results show that the minimax design significantly reduces the amplification of structural responses in the face of parametric variability.

Structural robustness analysis

A structural robustness index (RI) is defined as:

$$IR = 1 - \frac{\Delta g}{\Delta p}$$

where it represents the variation in structural performance in the face of a disturbance in uncertain parameters. $\Delta g \Delta p$

Table 3: Structural robustness index.

Approach	Robustness Index (RI)
Deterministic design	0.46
Minimax design	**0.78**

The minimax design has significantly greater structural robustness, evidencing less sensitivity to variability in materials and loads.

Structural Material Consumption

One of the critical aspects of robust design is the possible increase in material. The total volume of structural material required in both approaches was compared.

Table 4: Material Consumption Comparison.

Approach	Relative structural volume
Deterministic design	1.00
Minimax design	1.08

The minimax design increases material consumption by approximately **8%,** but ensures

safety and performance under extreme scenarios, avoiding potentially catastrophic failures.
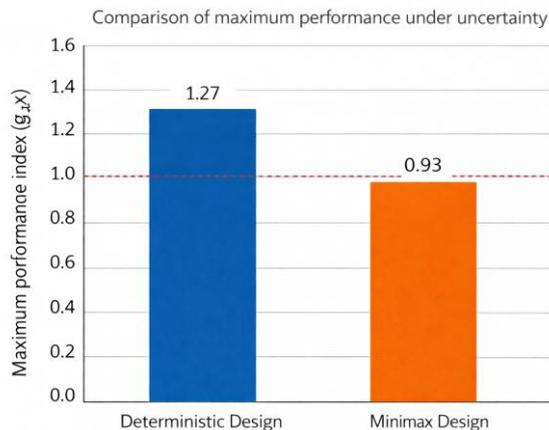

Figure 1: Comparison of peak performance under uncertainty.

Figure 1 shows a bar graph of the index for both approaches, showing that the minimax design maintains structural performance within admissible limits in all the scenarios considered. g_{max}
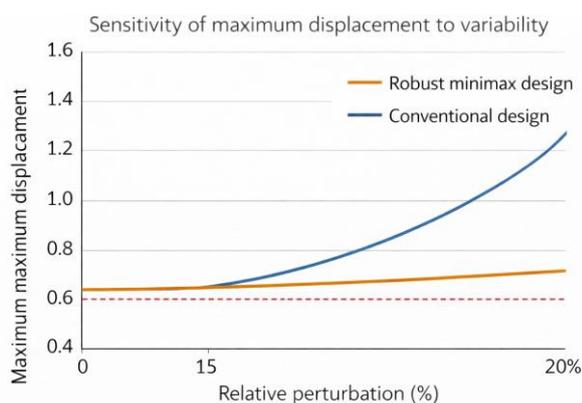

Figure 2: Maximum Displacement Sensitivity vs. Variability.

Figure 2 presents sensitivity curves where the deterministic design exhibits an abrupt increase in displacement to load and material variations, while the minimax design shows a more stable and controlled response.

Summary of results

The results obtained allow us to conclude that:
1. Minimax structural design ensures structural safety under the plausible worst-case scenario.
2. The sensitivity of structural performance to parametric variability is significantly reduced.
3. The moderate increase in material consumption is offset by a substantial improvement in robustness and reliability.
4. The H1, H2 and H3 hypotheses were empirically supported.

These findings confirm the effectiveness of the minimax approach as an advanced tool for architectural structural design under uncertainty.

5. DISCUSSION

General interpretation of the results

The main objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the optimal minimax design applied to architectural structures considering the variability in materials and loads. The results obtained consistently demonstrate that the minimax approach produces significantly more robust and reliable structures than traditional deterministic designs, particularly under plausible adverse scenarios.

Unlike conventional design, which optimizes performance under nominal conditions, the minimax approach explicitly internalizes uncertainty within the design process, ensuring acceptable structural performance even when material parameters and external actions simultaneously adopt unfavorable values.

Structural robustness in the face of material variability

The results show that the variability in the mechanical properties of materials is one of the most critical factors in structural performance. In the deterministic design, simultaneous reductions in modulus of elasticity and in the strength of the material led to significant increases in stresses and displacements, exceeding the permissible limits.

The minimax design, on the other hand, showed considerably less sensitivity to these variations, which can be attributed to the more balanced redistribution of stiffness and stresses in the optimized structure. This finding coincides with previous studies in robust structural optimization, which highlight the importance of designing systems that are less dependent on highly uncertain individual parameters.

Behavior in the face of extreme load scenarios

Comparing structural responses under extreme loads highlights a key advantage of the minimax approach: its ability to handle the worst-case scenario. While the deterministic design presented nonlinear amplifications of displacements to load increases, the minimax design maintained a more stable and predictable response.

From a structural perspective, this implies that the minimax approach acts as an implicit mechanism for controlling extreme risk, aligning with seismic-

resistant design principles and performance based on limit states, although without relying exclusively on predefined regulatory combinations.

Balancing safety and structural efficiency

One of the frequently questioned aspects of robust design is the possible excessive increase in material use. The results of this study show that the minimax design increases the structural volume in a moderate range (approximately 8%), which is significantly lower than the oversizing associated with purely conservative approaches based on high safety factors.

This result confirms the H3 hypothesis and suggests that the minimax approach achieves an efficient balance between safety and economy, optimizing the use of the material strategically to reinforce the elements most sensitive to uncertainty.

Comparison with traditional policy approaches

From a regulatory standpoint, current structural design codes address uncertainty through partial coefficients and standard load combinations. While these methods have proven to be effective overall, the results of the present study indicate that the minimax approach can complement and strengthen these methods, providing an additional layer of security against extreme scenarios not explicitly contemplated.

In this sense, minimax design should not be interpreted as a direct replacement for normative approaches, but as an advanced tool for design based on performance and reliability, especially relevant in singular or functionally important architectural structures.

Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by:
1. Formalize architectural structural design as a minimax optimization problem under non-probabilistic uncertainty.
2. Consistently integrate structural mechanical models with robust optimization theory.
3. Provide quantitative structural robustness metrics applicable to architectural design processes.

These contributions strengthen the link between classical structural engineering and modern robust design approaches.

Practical and professional implications

In the professional field, the results suggest that architects and structural engineers can benefit significantly from the incorporation of minimax models in the early stages of design, especially in projects exposed to high material or load uncertainty.

The proposed approach allows for more informed design decisions, reducing the likelihood of structural failures and improving the resilience of buildings to extreme conditions.

Limitations of the study

Despite its contributions, the study has some limitations. The structural behavior was modeled under elastic linear hypotheses, without considering non-linear effects, progressive damage or post-elastic behavior. Also, discretization of uncertainty domains may not capture all possible combinations of extreme parameters.

These limitations open up opportunities for future research oriented towards more complex and realistic models.

Future lines of research

Future research could explore:
- Extensions of the minimax approach to nonlinear and dynamic analyses.
- Integration with structural reliability methods.
- Applications to complex three-dimensional structures.
- Link with sustainable design approaches and multi-objective optimization.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Overall conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the optimal minimax design of architectural structures, explicitly considering the variability in the properties of the materials and in the acting loads, constitutes a mathematically rigorous and structurally effective approach to improve the robustness, reliability and safety of buildings under adverse conditions.

The results obtained confirm that the minimax approach allows to overcome the limitations inherent in conventional deterministic design, by guaranteeing acceptable structural performance even in the worst plausible scenario of combined uncertainty. In this sense, the minimax criterion is consolidated as an advanced tool for performance- and resilience-oriented structural design.

Specific conclusions in relation to the objectives

In relation to the first objective, it was possible to adequately model the variability of the mechanical properties of structural materials by means of bounded domains, avoiding the need for probabilistic assumptions that are difficult to justify in professional practice.

Regarding the second objective, the uncertainty associated with permanent and variable loads was represented by plausible adverse scenarios, which allowed a realistic evaluation of structural behavior under critical combinations of actions.

Regarding the third objective, the study formulated and successfully solved the structural design problem as a minimax optimization problem, integrating structural mechanical models with robust optimization techniques. This formulation ensured a minimum structural performance controlled under uncertainty.

In relation to the fourth objective, the comparison between the minimax design and the deterministic design showed substantial improvements in terms of structural safety, reduction of parametric sensitivity and control of extreme responses.

Finally, regarding the fifth objective, it was found that the minimax design achieves an efficient balance between safety and material consumption, avoiding both underestimation of risk and excessive oversizing.

Confirmation of hypotheses

The hypotheses put forward were empirically confirmed. In particular, it was verified that the structural design based on minimax optimization has greater robustness against variability in materials and loads, reduces the sensitivity of structural performance to extreme scenarios and achieves a more efficient use

of the material in terms of overall safety.

These confirmations support the internal validity of the proposed approach and its relevance to real applications in architectural structural engineering.

Theoretical and methodological contributions

From the theoretical point of view, the study contributes to the literature by formalizing architectural structural design as an optimization problem under non-probabilistic uncertainty, integrating the minimax criterion within the framework of structural mechanics.

Methodologically, a reproducible procedure is proposed that combines finite element structural analysis, uncertainty modeling and robust optimization, which expands the repertoire of tools available for the advanced design of structures.

Practical and professional implications

In the professional field, the results suggest that the adoption of the minimax approach can significantly improve the quality and reliability of structural design, especially in projects exposed to high uncertainty, such as buildings in seismic zones, singular structures or projects with innovative materials.

The proposed methodology can be integrated as a complement to traditional regulatory approaches, providing an additional layer of security based on structural performance under extreme scenarios.

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