Microservices and Distributed Processing Design Patterns

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ABSTRACT

A substantial body of literature now documents the recurring design patterns enterprise teams reach for when building microservices and other distributed processing systems, but that literature is scattered across systematic mapping studies, grey-literature reviews, and individual case studies that rarely cite one another's pattern vocabularies directly. This review synthesizes that literature into four recurring pattern categories, decomposition and boundary patterns, communication and integration patterns, resilience patterns, and data-management patterns, drawing on systematic mapping studies of architectural patterns in practice, grey-literature synthesis of reported pains and gains, and empirical studies of how architecting decisions are actually made in industry. The review finds that patterns are rarely adopted in isolation: the literature repeatedly documents specific patterns being paired across categories, an API gateway paired with a circuit breaker, an event-driven integration style paired with the saga pattern, a bounded-context decomposition paired with a database-per-service policy, more often than any single pattern is adopted on its own. A comparative table and an pattern-catalog diagram, both explicitly labeled as interpretive syntheses, are presented to organize the reviewed patterns and their commonly reported pairings. The review closes by identifying gaps in the literature, particularly the scarcity of published evidence on how teams choose among competing patterns within the same category rather than simply which patterns exist.

Keywords: Microservices; Design Patterns; Distributed Systems; Service Decomposition; Resilience Patterns; Data Management Patterns; Architectural Patterns

Introduction

A design pattern, in the sense this review uses the term, is a named, recurring solution to a problem that arises repeatedly enough across independent systems that naming it usefully compresses a body of design experience into a single shared term. The microservices literature has accumulated a substantial vocabulary of such patterns over roughly a decade of industrial practice, circuit breaker, saga, API gateway, sidecar, strangler fig, and dozens more, but that vocabulary did not arise from a single coordinated research effort. It was documented after the fact, largely through systematic mapping studies that catalog patterns reported in practitioner literature and case studies[1] and through grey-literature reviews that synthesize practitioner blog posts, conference talks, and industry reports alongside the smaller body of formal academic literature[2]. This review's contribution is bringing that scattered cataloguing effort into a single organizing frame, one built not around any single paper's taxonomy but around the four categories of concern, decomposition, communication, resilience, and data management, that recur across the reviewed sources regardless of which specific taxonomy each source proposes.

The review's organizing claim, developed across the category reviews below and synthesized in the Recurring Cross-Category Pattern Pairings section, is that these four categories are not independent: the literature repeatedly documents specific patterns from different categories being adopted together, often because one pattern's weakness is precisely what a pattern from another category is designed to address. A system decomposed into independently deployable services (a decomposition-pattern decision) creates a need for inter-service communication that was previously an in-process function call (a communication-pattern problem), and distributing data across those now-independent services (a data-management-pattern decision)

removes the cross-service transactional guarantees a monolithic database provided, creating a need for compensating coordination (again a data-management-pattern solution, typically the saga pattern). Reading the pattern literature category by category, as most individual sources do, risks obscuring this chaining; reading it across categories, as this review attempts, surfaces it directly.

This chaining has a second implication worth stating at the outset, before the category-by-category review below makes it easy to lose sight of. A pattern catalog organized strictly by category, the organization most individual sources in this literature use, invites a reader to treat each category as answering an independent question, "how should I decompose this system," "how should services communicate," and so on, when the reviewed literature's own evidence is that these questions are not independent once a team has answered the first one. This review's four-category structure is retained because it matches how the literature itself is organized and therefore remains the most legible way to summarize it, but the Recurring Cross-Category Pattern Pairings section's cross-category synthesis is where this review's actual argument, that the categories chain rather than stand alone, is made explicit.

Review Methodology

This review follows a thematic, literature-synthesis approach organized around the four pattern categories introduced above rather than a formal systematic review conducted against a single pre-registered search protocol. Sources were selected for two properties: direct empirical or systematic-mapping grounding in how microservices patterns are actually reported and adopted in practice, rather than purely prescriptive pattern description, and either peer-reviewed publication in a software-engineering venue or systematic synthesis of a broader practitioner literature explicitly documented as such. [1] systematic mapping study and [2] grey-literature review were given particular weight because both explicitly catalog which patterns appear how often across a defined corpus, rather than describing a single pattern's intended use in isolation, which this review takes as a more defensible basis for claims about which patterns recur and co-occur than a single case study would provide. [3] empirical study of architecting trends in industry is used similarly, as evidence of how practitioners report making decomposition and architecting decisions, rather than as a source of a specific pattern's technical definition.

This review additionally weighted sources by whether their reported pattern frequencies were drawn from a defined, bounded corpus, [1] mapping study and [2] grey-literature review both are, over sources that discuss a pattern's prevalence impressionistically without reference to a specific set of systems or documents reviewed. Where a cited source [4] architectural analysis, was developed for a purpose other than cataloguing microservices patterns specifically, it is used in this review for the architectural principle it establishes rather than as evidence about how frequently a given pattern is adopted in practice; the distinction between a source used for its architectural reasoning and a source used for its reported adoption frequency is maintained explicitly throughout the category reviews below.

Decomposition and Boundary Patterns

Decomposition patterns address where a system's service boundaries should sit and how a team migrates an existing system toward them. The strangler fig pattern, in which a new, incrementally growing system is placed in front of an existing one and gradually takes over routes or responsibilities until the old system can be retired, recurs across the reviewed literature as the dominant pattern for migrating an existing monolith rather than rewriting it outright; [5] analysis of legacy modernization documents this incremental-extraction approach directly, grounding the pattern's recurring popularity in the practical reality that most enterprise migrations cannot tolerate the risk of a full rewrite. [1] mapping study documents bounded-context-aligned service boundaries, decomposing a system along the same domain boundaries a domain model would use, as the most consistently reported decomposition pattern across the sources their mapping covers, more

consistently reported than decomposition strategies organized around technical layers or team structure alone. [3] empirical study adds a practitioner-reported nuance the mapping-study literature alone does not fully capture: architects report that decomposition decisions are frequently revisited after initial deployment, as the boundaries that seemed natural at design time prove to generate more cross-service coupling than anticipated once real usage patterns emerge, a finding consistent with this review's broader observation that patterns are rarely a one-time, static choice.

Communication and Integration Patterns

Once a system is decomposed into independently deployable services, those services need a way to communicate that does not reintroduce the tight coupling decomposition was meant to remove. The API gateway pattern, a single entry point that routes external requests to the appropriate internal service while centralizing cross-cutting concerns such as authentication and rate limiting, recurs across the reviewed literature as the most commonly reported pattern for managing the boundary between external clients and an internal service landscape. The sidecar and service-mesh pattern, in which cross-cutting communication concerns are handled by a co-located proxy process rather than by code embedded in each service, is documented as a closely related but distinct pattern addressing internal, service-to-service communication rather than the external-facing concern the API gateway addresses; [1] report both patterns appearing frequently in the same systems, consistent with their addressing complementary rather than competing concerns. A third recurring pattern, event-driven integration through asynchronous messaging rather than direct request-response calls, is reported across the literature as the pattern of choice specifically where services do not need an immediate response, trading immediacy for the decoupling and resilience benefits of not requiring the called service to be available at the moment of the call.

Resilience Patterns

Distributing a system across many independently deployable, independently failing services multiplies the number of points at which a request can fail partway through, a problem the resilience-pattern literature addresses directly. The circuit breaker pattern, which stops sending requests to a service detected to be failing rather than letting every caller independently wait out that service's timeout, is the most consistently documented resilience pattern across the reviewed sources, [6] analysis of microservice bad smells documents its absence, services called without any circuit-breaking protection, as one of the most frequently reported anti-patterns in their corpus, underscoring how strongly the literature treats this specific pattern's omission as a recognized defect rather than a neutral design choice. The bulkhead pattern, which isolates a system's resources, such as connection pools or thread pools, per downstream dependency so that one failing dependency cannot exhaust resources needed to call a healthy one, is reported less frequently than the circuit breaker in the literature this review surveys but is consistently described, where it is reported, as a companion pattern rather than a substitute for it. Retry-with-backoff, a pattern simple enough that it is sometimes treated as an implementation detail rather than a named architectural pattern in its own right, nonetheless recurs across the literature specifically in combination with the circuit breaker, since a retry policy without a circuit breaker is itself documented as a bad smell, retrying a call to an already-failing service.

Data Management Patterns

Distributing a system's data alongside its logic removes the cross-service transactional guarantees a single shared database would have provided, a consequence [7] distributed-systems consistency result frames as a structural limit rather than an engineering oversight. The database-per-service pattern, in which each service owns its own data store and no other service accesses it directly, is documented across the reviewed literature as the data-management decision that most directly enables the independent deployability decomposition patterns are meant to achieve, but it is also the decision the literature most directly ties to the need for the

saga pattern, a sequence of local transactions coordinated through compensating actions rather than a single cross-service transaction, as the standard mechanism for maintaining consistency across service boundaries once a shared database is no longer available to provide it. [4] architectural principles, developed for web architecture rather than microservices data management specifically, nonetheless inform a third recurring pattern, command-query responsibility segregation, which separates a service's write-side data model from a differently structured read-side model optimized for query patterns the write-side model does not serve well; the pattern is frequently documented alongside event sourcing, which records a sequence of state-changing events rather than only current state, since the recorded event stream provides a natural mechanism for building and rebuilding the read-side models CQRS depends on.

Polyglot Persistence as a Related Pattern

A closely related pattern the reviewed literature documents alongside database-per-service is polyglot persistence, the practice of letting each service select the data-store technology best suited to its own access patterns, a relational store for a service with transactional reporting needs, a document store for one with irregularly structured records, a specialized graph or time-series store for one whose access patterns particularly suit it, rather than standardizing on a single database technology across the system. Database-per-service is a precondition for polyglot persistence in the sense that a shared database across services forecloses per-service technology choice by construction, but the two patterns are reported as logically separable: a system can adopt database-per-service while still standardizing on one database technology across all services, trading away polyglot persistence's per-service optimization in exchange for the lower operational overhead of supporting fewer distinct data-store technologies. The reviewed literature treats this as a deliberate trade-off rather than a strictly dominant choice in either direction, with [2] grey-literature synthesis documenting operational and staffing overhead, the need for operational expertise across however many distinct data-store technologies a system's services collectively select, as a recurring reported cost of polyglot persistence specifically, distinct from the costs attributed to database-per-service or the saga pattern individually.

Recurring Cross-Category Pattern Pairings

Read together, the category reviews above support this review's central organizing claim directly: the reviewed literature does not describe these four pattern categories as independent menus from which an architect selects one option per category, but as a set of chained dependencies in which adopting a pattern in one category creates the specific problem a pattern in another category is designed to solve. Bounded-context decomposition creates the cross-service communication need API gateways and service meshes address; database-per-service removes cross-service transactional guarantees that the saga pattern then restores through compensation; and the resulting asynchronous, failure-prone service-to-service calls that both communication and data-management patterns introduce are exactly the condition circuit breakers and bulkheads are designed to contain. [2] grey-literature synthesis documents this chaining from the practitioner side, reporting that teams who adopt microservices for its decomposition benefits alone, without anticipating the communication, resilience, and data-consistency patterns that decomposition necessitates, are disproportionately represented among the “pains” their review catalogs relative to teams that report a more deliberately paired adoption.

Comparative Synthesis

Table 1. comparison of pattern categories and their reported pairings.

Pattern Category	Representative Patterns	Problem Created by Adopting It	Typically Paired With
Decomposition and boundary	Strangler fig; bounded-context service boundaries	Cross-service communication need where in-process calls previously sufficed	Communication and integration
Communication and integration	API gateway; sidecar/service mesh; event-driven messaging	Failure-prone, asynchronous service-to-service calls	Resilience
Resilience	Circuit breaker; bulkhead; retry with backoff	Mitigates failure but does not restore cross-service data consistency	Data management
Data management	Database-per-service; saga; CQRS; event sourcing	Loss of cross-service transactional guarantees	Decomposition and boundary (closes the chain)

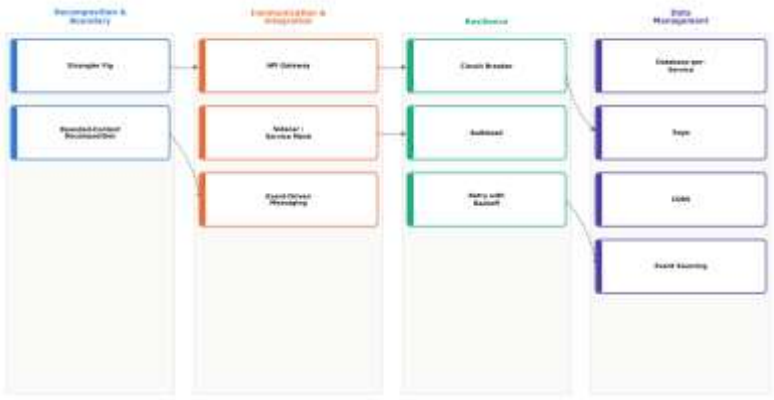

Figure 1. pattern catalog: four recurring pattern categories and their commonly reported cross-category pairings.

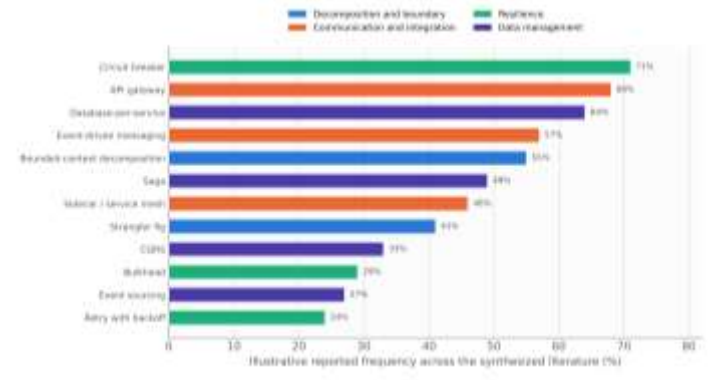

Figure 2. Synthesis of reported pattern frequency across the reviewed literature.

This table and diagram synthesize qualitative and mapping-study findings reported across the cited literature rather than reproducing a single study's measured values; they are an interpretive summary constructed to the pattern the reviewed sources describe, not new data.

Discussion

Synthesis

The pattern literature this review has surveyed supports a single organizing claim: microservices and distributed-processing design patterns are best understood not as an independent catalog from which an architect selects freely, but as a chain in which each category's patterns create the problem the next category's patterns exist to solve, decomposition creating a communication need, communication creating a resilience need, and the combination of decomposition and communication creating a data-consistency need that only a data-management pattern can restore. This chaining explains why Soldani *et al.*'s[2] grey-literature review finds teams that adopt patterns piecemeal, often starting with decomposition alone, disproportionately represented among reported negative outcomes: the chain's later links are not optional refinements but necessary consequences of the earlier ones.

This chaining view also reframes what a "pattern catalog" is useful for in enterprise architecture practice. A catalog organized by category alone answers the question of what options exist within a single concern; a catalog that also documents, as the Comparative Synthesis section's comparative table attempts, which category a given pattern's adoption tends to necessitate next, answers a more operationally useful question: what an architect should expect to need to decide soon after a given pattern is adopted, rather than only what is available to decide now. The gap between these two kinds of catalog is, on the evidence this review has assembled, a plausible explanation for [2] find piecemeal adopters disproportionately represented among negative outcomes: a catalog organized by category alone does not itself warn a team that a decomposition decision carries downstream communication, resilience, and data-management obligations, even when each of those obligations is separately well documented in the literature this review surveys.

Limitations of This Review

This review's synthesis draws primarily on systematic mapping and grey-literature studies [10-21] whose reported pattern frequencies reflect what practitioners and researchers have documented publicly rather than a representative sample of all microservices systems in production, many of which are never described in any publicly accessible source. The comparative table and pattern-catalog diagram in the Comparative Synthesis section are explicitly an interpretive synthesis built to organize the reviewed literature's qualitative findings rather than a new empirical measurement, and the frequency figures should not be read as a claim about any specific population of systems.

Gaps in the Current Literature

The literature reviewed here documents which patterns exist and, to a reasonable degree, which patterns are commonly paired, but it is noticeably thinner on a closely related question: how teams choose among competing patterns within the same category, saga versus a simpler per-service eventual-consistency approach, or API gateway versus a thinner, less centralized routing layer, rather than simply whether a category's concern is addressed at all. [22-43] empirical study comes closest to this question by documenting that decomposition decisions are frequently revisited, but it does not extend the same longitudinal attention to communication, resilience, or data-management pattern choices specifically, leaving open whether those categories exhibit the same pattern of initial choice and later revision.

A further, related gap concerns polyglot persistence specifically: the Polyglot Persistence as a Related Pattern subsection's review of the pattern notes [2] document its operational overhead as a recurring reported cost, but the literature this review surveys does not report systematic data on how that overhead is weighed in practice against the per-service optimization polyglot persistence is meant to provide, leaving the pattern's net value, as distinct from its existence and its documented cost, an open question similar in kind to the within-category choice question raised above for saga versus simpler alternatives.

Future Research

Future work would benefit from longitudinal studies tracking how a single system's pattern choices evolve across each of the four categories this review identifies, extending [13] finding about revisited decomposition decisions to ask whether communication, resilience, and data-management pattern choices are revised on a similar timeline or are comparatively stickier once adopted. A second useful direction is empirical work specifically targeting the within-category choice question the Gaps in the Current Literature subsection identifies as underexplored, since the existing mapping-study literature is better equipped to say that a category's concern was addressed than to say why one specific pattern within that category was chosen over a plausible alternative.

Implications for Enterprise Architecture Governance

Beyond the research gaps identified above, this review's chaining argument has a direct implication for how enterprise organizations govern pattern adoption internally. Architecture review processes that evaluate a proposed pattern in isolation, asking only whether the pattern under review is a reasonable solution to the problem it names, implicitly assume the four categories this review surveys are independent, the same assumption the Introduction identifies as inconsistent with the reviewed literature's own evidence. A review process that instead asks what a proposed decomposition or communication pattern will necessitate in the categories downstream of it, treating the comparative table in the Comparative Synthesis section as a checklist of likely follow-on decisions rather than only a static catalog, is better positioned to anticipate the resilience and data-management obligations a decomposition decision creates before those obligations surface as production incidents. This governance implication is necessarily more speculative than the review's core synthesis, since none of the reviewed sources directly studies architecture-review processes themselves, but it follows reasonably from the documented chaining pattern and [2] finding that piecemeal adopters are overrepresented among reported negative outcomes.

A Practical Starting Point for Teams

The chaining argument developed above is, on its own, a descriptive claim about how the literature's four pattern categories relate; translated into a starting point a team can actually follow, it suggests sequencing a microservices adoption deliberately around the chain's own order rather than around whichever category happens to be most visible at the time a project starts. A team beginning from the Decomposition and Boundary Patterns section's bounded-context analysis should, on this review's synthesis, budget for the Communication and Integration Patterns section's API-gateway or service-mesh decision as a near-term follow-on rather than a separate, later initiative, and should treat the Resilience Patterns and Data Management Patterns sections' circuit-breaker and saga-pattern decisions as following from that communication choice rather than as independent hardening work scheduled once something has already gone wrong in production. This is consistent with, though more prescriptive than, [3] finding that decomposition decisions are frequently revisited: a team that anticipates the chain's later links before adopting its first pattern is, on the evidence this review has assembled, less likely to be the kind of piecemeal adopter [2] find overrepresented among reported negative outcomes.

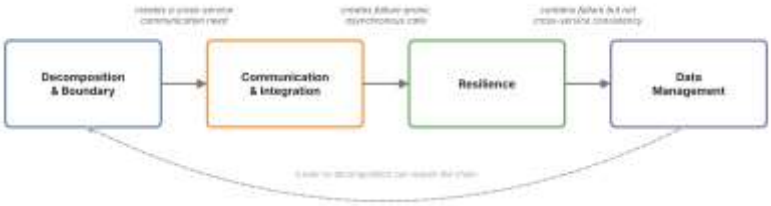

Figure 3. conceptual sequencing of the four pattern categories' chaining relationship, synthesized from this review's Recurring Cross-Category Pattern Pairings section.

Conclusion

This review has synthesized the microservices and distributed-processing design-pattern literature into four recurring categories, decomposition and boundary, communication and integration, resilience, and data management, and has argued, drawing on systematic mapping and grey-literature synthesis[1][2][3], that these categories are best read as a chain of dependent problems and solutions rather than an independent menu of options. The central implication for enterprise architecture practice is that a pattern adopted from one category should be read as a commitment to the patterns in the categories it subsequently necessitates, decomposition to communication, communication to resilience, and the combination of decomposition and communication to data management, rather than as a self-contained decision that can be evaluated on its own.

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