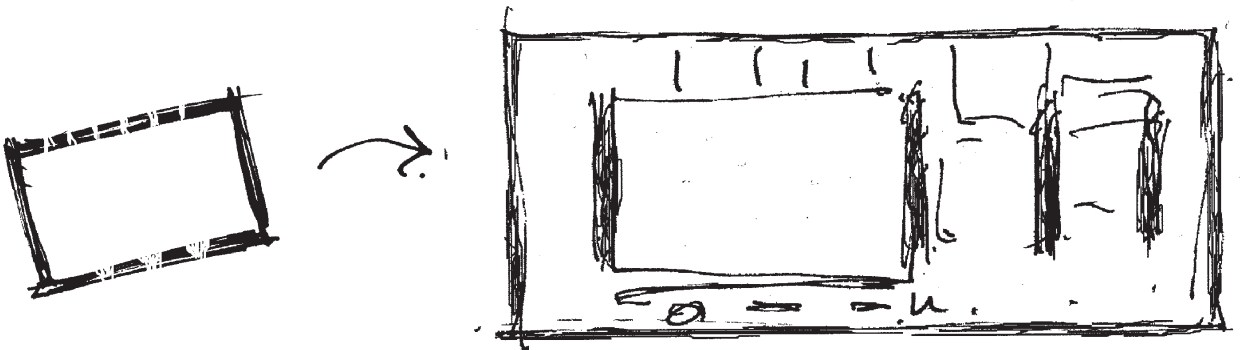


plate any living process at all, we always see that the length and breadth of the process will be suffused by steps through which a coherent geometry unfolds. But the origin of its particular geometry varies with the type of system. In the formation of water, it is the wave motion of the water which most clearly gives rise to the geometry. In the formation of solids it is the coalescence and crystallization of periodic arrangements of molecules that provides this tendency. In the formation of plants it is the successive unfolding of symmet-

rical leaf structures round the growing stem that provides the source of the order. In the case of buildings (if the process is a living one) the fountain of geometrical order comes, above all, from building *structure* (columns, walls, beams, vaults, and so forth), specifically from the aperiodic, tartan-like grids which form the abstract underpinning of the building structure. I will show in this chapter how it is ultimately the powerful formation of this structural core that provides a living building with its geometrical substratum.



2 / FORMATION OF BRUTAL AND MASSIVE CHUNKS IN THE VISITOR'S CENTER AT WEST DEAN



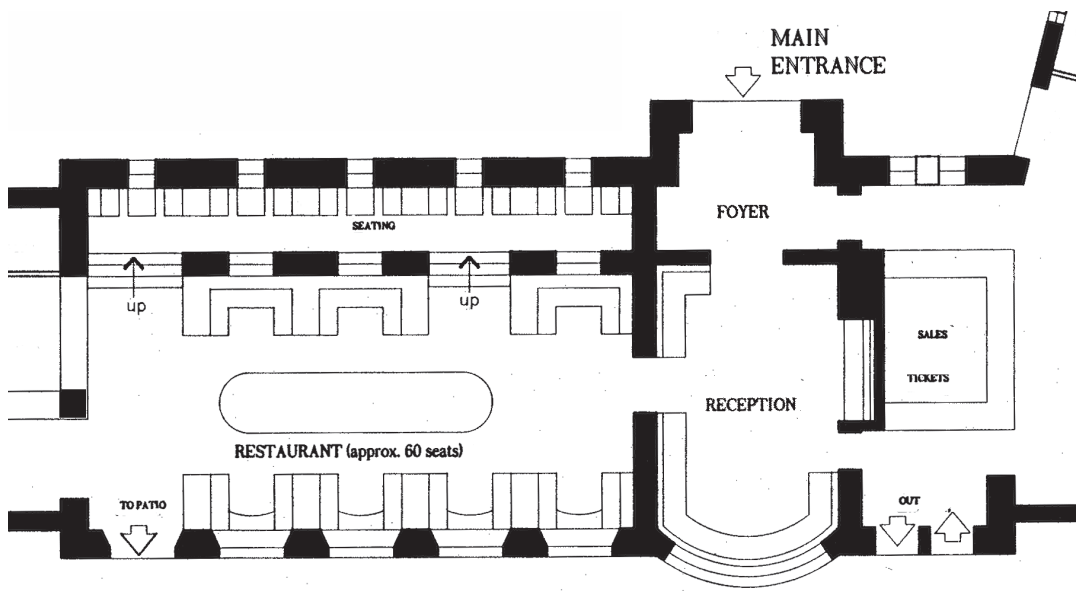
The transformation of the structure during construction. Starting from a plain rectangle with long walls pierced by windows, I introduced four massive cross-walls to make the final structure of the West Dean building.

I can show a very simple instance, from my building at West Dean: the Visitor's Centre of West Dean Gardens in Sussex. I had begun the building with a carcass, a simple one-story rectangle, with massively thick walls eighteen inches to two feet thick. It was crowned by a single very high roof. Windows were set into the walls in the right places, and at the right size with a bay system that corresponded to the beam-spacing of the roof and ceiling members. It was a powerful, though rather simple conception.

However, at the drawing stage, and during the early engineering and building stages, this conception remained incomplete. I was aware of something vital still missing, some element that would transform it: All I knew was that I was not yet quite there.

Once the walls were partly built, and one could feel the exterior volume and interior space, and also feel the weight of the massive walls, I began to see that what was missing was sufficient transverse structure, which had weight compa-

THE PROCESS OF CREATING LIFE



The plan of the Visitor's Centre at West Dean, showing the massive walls



The emerging order of the West Dean structure and its massive walls

EMERGENCE OF FORMAL GEOMETRY



The order of the details confirms the order of the whole.
Visitor's Centre, West Dean College, West Sussex, England. Christopher Alexander and John Hewitt, 1996.



The emerging order of the West Dean structure seen in one of its arched cross-walls

rable to the already-built longitudinal structure. I saw the arched openings of the windows in the long walls, by then already existing. But the cross walls were not yet comparable. I recognized that the *ends* of the main rectangle, especially, were not yet coherent or experienced because they were still weak and too poorly defined. So, in a space of a few days, I determined that the hull of the building must be supplemented with a series of massive transverse walls, pierced by arches. These walls can be seen in the drawings on pages 403 and 404.

You can see that the force of the building, as it was finally built (photographs on this page and the three preceding pages) lies in this nearly brutal effort to seize hold of the rectangular bays, bring them to order, make each rectangle continuous with the others, yet distinct. They are simple, and all in a row. Yet the spacing of the walls is unequal. The syncopated spacing and the

thickness of the transverse walls are not arbitrary, but caused by necessary positions which relate to the structure. And, all in all, what has happened is that now we have a system of positive entities — the main rectangular volume, the smaller rectangular volumes, the space, the walls themselves — forming a series of levels of scale. All very simple, yet as a whole, complex, and having a certain majesty.

It gets its weight as a building because the conception of the arrangement has been intensified, and made into something emotionally real, by the injection of the structure, and its beauty, its main massive elements. The transformation that took place was that the carcass, the building structure in itself, was made into a beautiful thing, not merely a structure, but a beautiful structure, guided by the process of its making as a beautiful thing in itself. That is a huge statement, and is the essence of the transformation.