



10 / THE EFFORT IT TOOK TO GET THE STARK GEOMETRY
OF WEST DEAN TO A STATE WHERE
IT REALLY PLEASES ME

On this page and the following pages, I show further pictures of the Visitor's Centre at West Dean, with some comments on the issue of what it meant for me to please myself throughout the work of making the building.

I started with a small sketch of the wall; then moved to construction experiments in which I was trying (in that instance with my own hands) to find out how to build a complex structure of poured-in-place concrete pieces, with herring-bone bricks laid on edge, in each panel. It took a great deal of work, first to find out how to make the wall structural, while maintaining these heavily disciplined centers. And it also took enormous care, over a period of many months, while the wall was later actually being built, to create the right balance of size, color, and material, so that these centers have a rhythm which maintains the distinctness of the centers, yet also fuses them to form larger centers.

In my view there is no doubt that this is the piece of wall where the deep quality and pleasing yourself are. They are successful because of the severity which I imposed on the arrangement. Each small window has a thistle-like shape above the arch to tie it into the brickwork. This special piece had to be drawn, cut, and shaped in brick material. But its function is to connect centers, on either side of the window arch, to connect these to the line of stone and concrete which runs over the panels, and comes in nearly tangent to the curve of the arch. That was quite a trick. It needed hard-edged, disciplined thinking about geometry to make it happen right. Yet it is just this arrangement of centers which finally allows a person to feel related to it. It is all this which is the embodiment of, "What must I do so it truly pleases me?"

That is the kind of work which must be done, every time, if a thing is truly to please —

first the maker, and then everyone. It has little to do with sweetness. What it does have to do with is stark arrangement — a geometry which is stark and simple, organized so that it creates this pleasure and relatedness in the beholder.

Some people have formed the opinion, during the last few years, that my work is aimed at "something sweet." Nothing could be further from the truth. The north wall of the building, shown in the photograph opposite, provides an excellent example. There is, in this wall, a great sense of pleasure and, I think, a sense of life. But it is caused, in this instance by a great severity and toughness in the centers which have been formed in the north wall.

Consider more carefully what I mean when I say that in the panels of the north wall, I worked and worked to bring them to the state where I could feel them pleasing me — truly pleasing me.

To start with, I think, we must acknowledge how unusual the process, how sensitive the problems are. Suppose I consider a simpler problem — the creation of a concrete frame for a very cheap house. A few columns, connected by beams, are to be filled with bricks or blocks. How shall we make that poured-in-place, cast-concrete frame? I want to make it so that it truly pleases me. But what is to like, or not like, in a concrete frame? It is a subtle business, it is hard work. The column can be five inches or six inches, or perhaps thicker, or more slender. The spacing of the columns can change. The beam can be with profile, or without; there may be a connection at the column's base, or at the place where the column meets the beam; then that connection needs a shape, or a design. And all this must be done so that it is cheap, not fancy, as cheap as the most primitive frame. And above all, I want to find the one which pleases me.



The West Dean Visitor's Centre, West Sussex, Christopher Alexander and John Hewitt, 1996

This is a huge effort. You cannot really tell from a drawing what is good and what is bad. To do it, you need perhaps, a cardboard mock-up, as big as the real members, before you begin to see it. Someone has to hold them for you. It takes two persons, not one. And it is a subtle business. The increase or decrease in feeling is slight; it slips through your fingers. Yet it is this very slight kind of difference you are looking for. Gradually, you see that one is a little better than the other. Gradually, you expose yourself to the fact that even the stubborn, raw geometry

of a concrete frame, in its cheapness and simplicity, can please you more, or please you less. You tune your sensitivity to it; gradually you make enough discriminations so that the column and the beam, their thickness, their spacing, the connections, the base — all please you a little more, rather than a little less.

Now go back to West Dean. In the north wall alone, the one I have illustrated, John Hewitt and I made subtle judgments of this kind — towards the thing which pleased me more, away from the thing which pleased me less, perhaps



The Entrance Porch, under construction, West Dean Visitor's Centre, 1995



Dining Room, West Dean Visitor's Centre

five hundred times — just to draw, test, and build that one wall: the thickness of each line of stone, the size of the concrete members, the lay of the bricks, the width of the panels, the rise of the arch above the window, the shape of the keystone at the head of the arch, the relative proportion of brick and flint, the relative amount of concrete, the height of the base, the number of small steps in the plinth, the shape of the cornice, the number of small steps in the cornice, their overhang, the measure not in inches but in quarters of an inch of each bit of the overhang.

And of course the larger centers were even more important: the shape of the horizontal panel below the windows, the shape of the group of fifteen panels, the centers formed by the plinth together with the cornice, holding the panels, in their proportion, just right to increase feeling, so that it pleases me.

Inside the same! Look carefully at the photograph of the interior (page 291). The two people here are somewhat at ease. The shot is not posed. I just photographed them, quietly, while



The north wall: windows, herringbone-brick panels, flint.



View of the West Dean Visitor's Centre from the garden. Christopher Alexander and John Hewitt, 1996



Two people at ease in the dining room, on a rainy day.

they were talking, and I was having lunch at the next table. Their ease was caused by the same kind of work indoors.

To do it, I once again made five hundred separate judgments, each one extracting that version of a thing which pleased me more within

the whole, never — at least trying never — to allow one which pleased me less to stand!

Just the geometry, the lines, the rectangles, their shapes. That is what it takes to make a building which truly pleases you. It is immensely hard work. You need the patience of Job to do it.



11 / EMIL NOLDE'S SUNSET AND PAUL GAUGUIN'S COW

Some painters from the early 20th century did achieve this quality. They made things which they liked.

These two pictures (pages 292–93), each painted near the beginning of the 20th century, show what I mean by pleasing oneself, in the very last and deepest sense. The cow, so ordinary, so beautiful — the golden green around its head, the black and white, the soft curve — a construction in which Gauguin was free to please himself. The sunset — how bold, how wild, how

extraordinary, quite different from the cow. Yet what is the same is that here, too, Nolde pleased himself, was free to paint such an outrageous painting, because he reached a state where he could say I don't care, where the restraints were taken from him, he only allowed his brush to do, autonomously, what blazes of color he really saw when that sunset was shining in on him.

If we look at a sunset, we have all seen one; what more basic, more primitive response is there, than to dip the brush in yellow, scrawl yel-