



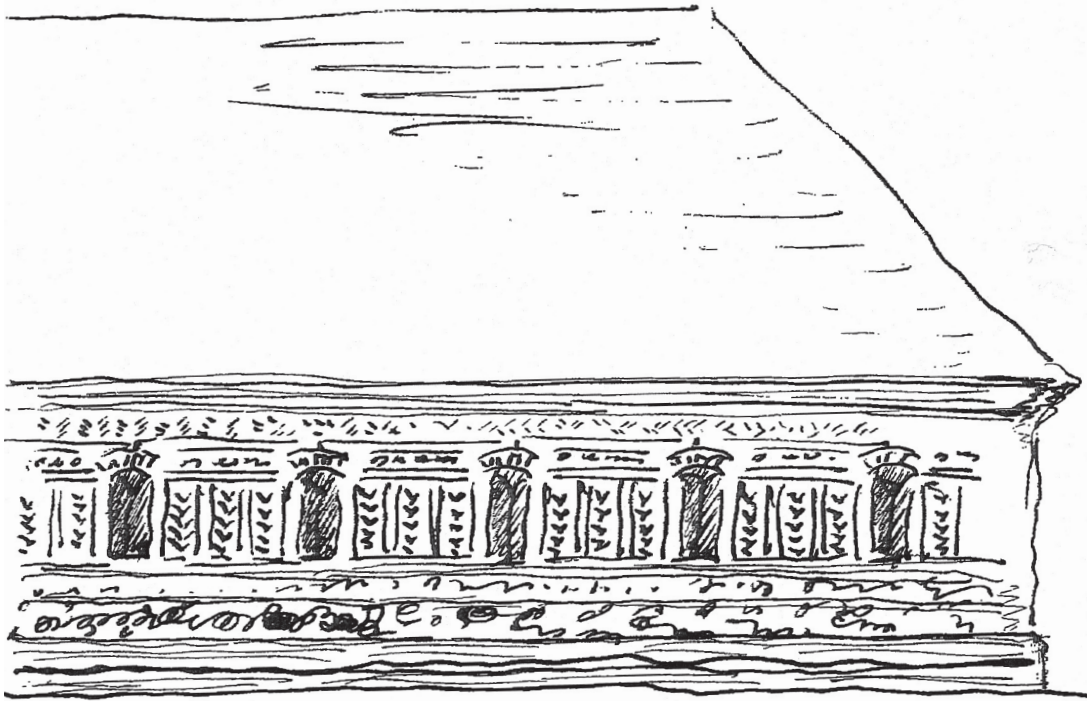
4 / BEINGS IN ARCHES, SPACES, AND COLUMNS:
THE EXAMPLE OF WEST DEAN



The site in the distance, and the river Lavant



The site, two flint cottages, and, on the right, my earliest mockups of brick and flint where I first tried to find combinations of material that felt right on that land



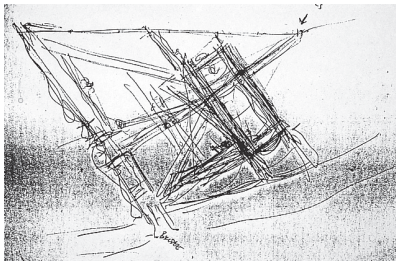
West Dean Visitor's Centre: my first detailed sketch of the brickwork on the north face of the building, 1994

I now describe the West Dean Visitor's Centre, a public building I built in England, where some of these concepts are visible. The upper photograph on the left-hand page shows the character of the site before I started work. All that arose later originated from the feeling and wholeness of this site as it was then.

After I had only the roughest idea of where to place the building (see lower sketch) I then began, within no more than two or three days, to build assemblies of bricks, flints, block, concrete, and stone, to find out what kind of structure, and what kind of colors, would best preserve and extend the quality of light that dominated the



Shown here are some of the early samples we made, while I was trying to grasp the true being nature of materials, on the site, and to find what balance of materials would best create the whole.



An early site sketch, working out building position

feeling and wholeness of the site. Some of these early tests are visible in the lower photograph on the left page opposite (right-hand side of picture), others in the photograph shown here.

What began with a few very light sketches drawn on the site, was followed by a period of experiment in which we built very ordinary mock-ups on the site itself to find out what assemblies of brick, mortar, and flint had the capacity to feel harmonious in that place. That was followed by

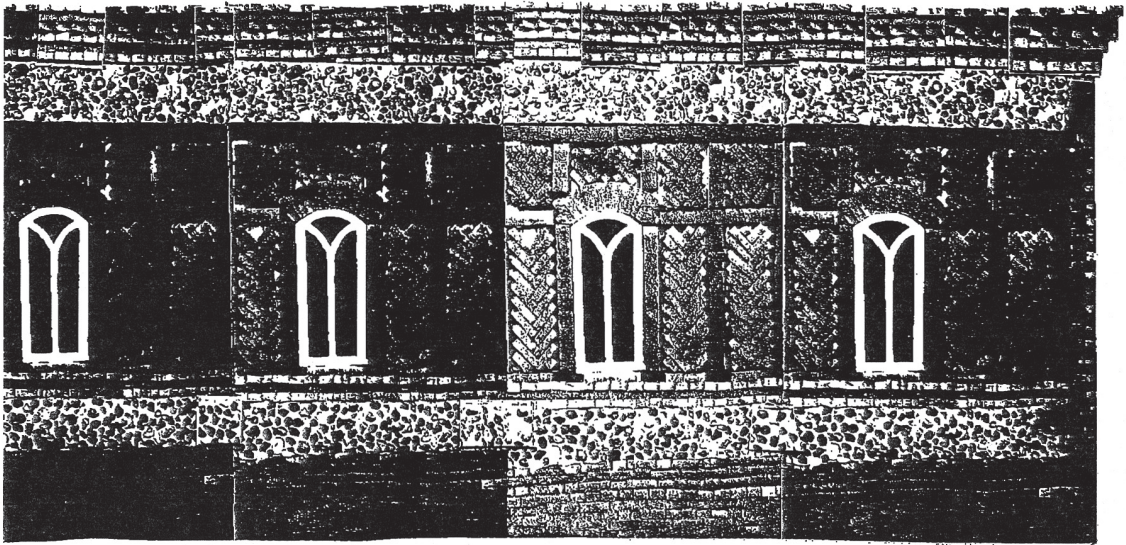
THE LUMINOUS GROUND



Standing on the open slab, one could already feel the character of a bay window, looking towards the view. On page 127, one sees the later development of this window as it slowly took shape.



Getting a first fix on the position, size, width, and splay of the large southern windows. By placing chairs, and sitting down as if one were in the finished building, it was possible to give the window opening the being-character that emerges most naturally from this situation (middle left). Testing the size, width, position, and extent of the tiny stairs that come from the gallery into the main dining room—looking, once again, for the exact proportion and size which would make these stairs connect us with the I (lower left). Sitting in a mockup of the upper gallery, and testing the splay and depth of the window reveals, to get their shape and character just right (bottom right).



Our only remaining photo of this model. This first wood and cardboard study model of the Centre was made brick by brick—each brick a separate piece of balsawood—allowing us to visualize and work out a coherent structure pattern which would also be harmonious and beautiful.



Here we see the handling of brick, headers, flint, and stone, that we worked out, course by course, to give the cornice at the top of the north wall a true I-like character. It took many experiments, and every course had to be placed by eye, in mock-ups, to make the whole thing come out right.

an intense period in which students made models for me to find out the physical possibilities of making a structure which captured the feeling I had shown in the sketches.

Then the real work began. We built that building and — step by step, board by board, stone by stone — we learned what it meant to make that building solid, and to make the structure congruent with the space.

I can hear someone saying to himself as he lays out the structure of a building, “Here I am doing just what it says in Alexander’s book. Every column is a center. Every bay is a center. The structure is working just fine. But the result I am getting from this process is just the same dead stuff! What should I do?”

The key, of course, is whether you work hard enough to make each element have its life. Does each column have life? Does each beam have life? Is the shape of the bay just that one which makes it have life? Does the volume of the bay have life? Is it true, when you stand in the room and look at the result, that you are met and overwhelmed, and left in peace, by an overarching subtle life which exists in the volume, in the space, and in the members?

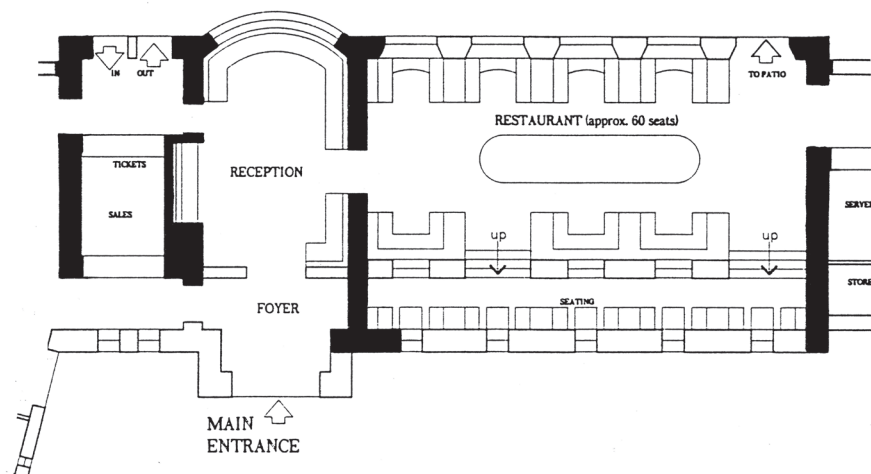
The issue that this will — if done faithfully — produce the goods is not in doubt. What might be in doubt is whether you have the stam-

ina, the sheer will, and stick-to-itiveness, to make sure this happens, *because you keep rejecting every version where it doesn’t happen, until it does happen*. Do you keep throwing away versions because they do not have enough life? Do you wait, at each step, until you get the best life in the member that you *can* get?

Ultimately, the internal coherence of the building as a structure is what counts above all else. The space and structure, dark and light, form interlocking systems of centers. Often, towards the end of the fiddling around, the spaces are adjusted so that the pattern as a whole becomes beautiful. Deep coherence within the whole, and the feeling of the whole pattern, ultimately gives life to the building. That is far more important than any too-detailed consideration about any one part.

At each moment in the West Dean project we were dealing with the solid mass of the concrete, brick, flint, and raw poured concrete. These materials were, in our hands, day to day on the site, like clay which we molded to form the next small piece.

During some parts of the work I was in California six thousand miles away. John Hewitt, my partner and the engineer in charge, was on the site with two apprentices. Nearly every day we exchanged fax messages, phone calls, and



The plan of the building, with the four cross-walls shown in black. These four cross-walls, when pierced with arches, would begin to get a being-nature in themselves.

sketches, going through the possibilities of the next step in painstaking detail. Often we sent faxed pictures and photos of our next step — samples of how the brick would look if it were two and a half inches high, or two inches high; what the corner would look like if the brick arrangement went three then one then three then one, and all the other possible combinations. There was not one piece of stonework on the

building we did not discuss like this as the project evolved, and where we did not use the fundamental process to choose the thing which made the greatest — and best — impact on the whole.

To give the reader some idea how extreme this plastic treatment of the building was, this nearly sculptor's attitude towards every bit of brick, I will describe the emergence of the arches in the interior.

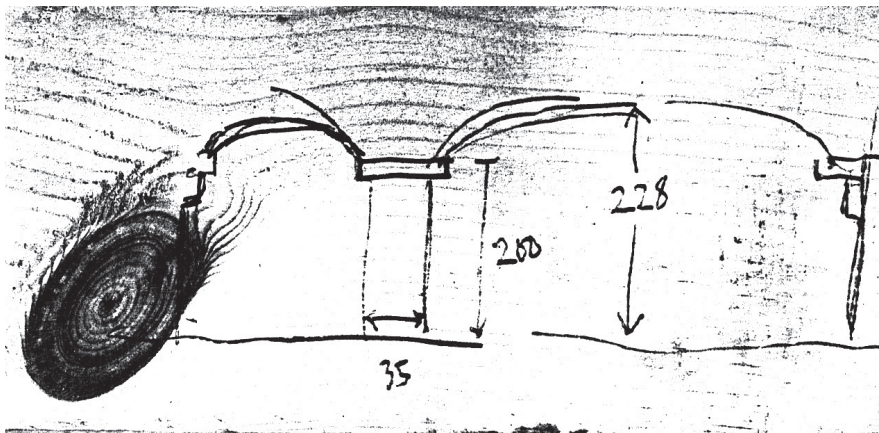


5 / EMERGENCE OF THE ARCHES

When we made the initial drawings of the building for a building permit, I found myself unable to visualize just how the cross-structure of the building worked. I could visualize the space rather clearly, and the structure, I knew, was a big thick wall, with a ring beam, surmounted by a wooden truss and rafter roof.

But I also knew that there was some missing thing, something I had not visualized. I found out what it was only at a relatively late stage, when the walls were already going up, after we had the exterior walls up to about three meters and could experience the rooms, interior space, windows, gallery, and the smaller

rooms. Walking about inside, I saw a tremendous lack of coherence in the cross-walls. They did not make sense. Structurally they were OK, but as space, the rooms did not end properly. In fact, all the cross-walls of the main building, four of them, were missing something. I had sensed that this problem might be coming. During the design phase I had wondered how the cross-walls were going to work, but at that early stage there wasn't enough information to make a realistic judgment about what to do. Intentionally, I left it as an open question to be solved when we could experience enough to make a realistic judgment.



Early sketch of a cross-wall, made on a piece of scrap wood, after it first became possible to judge the presence, scale, and effect of the arches in these walls.