



## 6 / DETAILED DESIGN OF THE STRUCTURAL COLUMNS

In order to understand the character of this one act — that of being guided by the emergence of a being nature in the elements that are physically created — it is useful, perhaps, to follow it through a step or two further. Having decided that these arches and columns were to be in the building, we began to try and visualize the columns which might support the arches. We did this using cardboard columns, made at full size, and placed in the building.

My greatest surprise came when I began to notice that the heavy, friendly character of the building led to — and seemed to need — very low, squat columns. As we made our experiments, I noticed that the columns that were actually best in feeling were so low that the capital of the column was literally grazing your face, at head height, no higher. It seemed insane at first.

How could a column capital be so low that a person would bang their head on it? But in fact, it was a correct intuition. Even though the arches are low, there was just enough lift in them to carry each arch well above head height, from the capital at some 1.70 meters to about 2.10 meters in the middle. And it is this low column capital that makes the arches seem so intimate, that make the whole building intimate, because it is literally in a position where you can touch it, smell it, see it right in front of your nose. All this is reinforced by the squat, thick character of the columns themselves and by the rather heavy capitals, all cast in concrete.

Here the feeling of intimacy in the building, the correct carrying-through of the building's emerging feeling, created the size, weight, and position of the columns — and their almost ani-



*While trying to work out the column capital with the most being-quality, we made a series of full-size cardboard mock-ups, and looked at them in the space where they were going to be built. In the end, all of these shown here were rejected, and the much simpler shape shown on page 128 was chosen as the one which had deep life most profoundly.*

THE PRACTICAL MATTER OF FORGING A LIVING CENTER



*The bay window and its many subsidiary centers beginning to develop*



*A being-quality finally appears in the windows themselves.*



*Early cardboard and wooden mock-ups of the furniture we were designing for the building. After reconciling the feeling of the furniture with the actual place while it was still in construction, we then built the tables and chairs according to these mock-ups.*





*Arched entrance to the main dining room. The column capitals as finally decided, and built.  
West Dean Visitor's Centre, Christopher Alexander and John Hewitt, 1996.*

mal character. There is a stubborn smallness, just right for the building, seeming big and grand, yet intimate.

The emergence, then, visible in the photographs, is of a being-like unity, both in each part of the building—to an extent—and in the whole. Just as I have written in chapter 4, there are now ten thousand beings in the buildings. And because of the patient effort in each individual entity, the centers became, in some cases, not only living centers that carry some emotional weight and character.

The arches have a little of this quality. I show one of them on pages 124–5. The columns have something of it. The squat, rugged capitals have a little of it. The steps and the windows, splayed, did manage to reach something of this character.

What we reached falls far short of the great beings in the history of art: the stones of St. Mark's, the window glass of Chartres, the brass rubbings of Thailand, the domes of Isphahan. Nevertheless in some small measure, by reaching for the I, we did manage to pluck, from that ground, some small portion of a thing which is like self, which speaks back, which makes one feel one's ordinary association with the brick, and tile, and concrete, and with the gravel on the ground.

If you look at the arches, the capitals, the rooms, the terraces, the ornaments, the windows, and the ceiling of the main dining room, I believe you will feel some measure of the I was reached in some of them. And because of this, standing in the building, you do feel relatedness with much of it.



*The finished West Dean Visitor's Centre, West Sussex, England,  
seen from the park, 1996*