

1 What is structural engineering?

Introduction

In this chapter you, the reader, are introduced to structures. We will discuss what a structure actually is. The professional concerned with structures is the structural engineer. We will look at the role of the structural engineer in the context of other construction professionals. We will also examine the structural requirements of a building and will review the various individual parts of a structure and the way they interrelate. Finally you will receive some direction on how to use this book depending on the course you are studying or the nature of your interest in structures.

Structures in the context of everyday life

There is a new confidence evident in major British cities. Redundant Victorian industrial structures are being converted to luxury apartments. Tired old 1960s shopping centres are being razed to the ground, and attractive and contemporary replacements are appearing. Public housing estates built over 40 years ago are being demolished and replaced with more suitable housing. Social shifts are occurring: young professional people are starting to live in city centres and new services such as cafés, bars and restaurants are springing up to serve them. All these new uses require new buildings or converted old buildings. Every building has to have a structure. In some of these new buildings the structure will be 'extrovert' – in other words the structural frame of the building will be clearly visible to passers-by. In many others, the structure will be concealed. But, whether seen or not, the structure is an essential part of any building. Without it, there would be no building.

What is a structure?

The structure of a building (or other object) is the part which is responsible for maintaining the shape of the building under the influence of the forces, loads and other environmental factors to which it is subjected. It is important that the structure as a whole (or any part of it) does not fall down, break or deform to an unacceptable degree when subjected to such forces or loads.

The study of structures involves the analysis of the forces and stresses occurring within a structure and the design of suitable components to cater for such forces and stresses.

As an analogy, consider the human body, which comprises a skeleton of 206 bones. If any of the bones in your body were to break, or if any of the joints between those bones were to disconnect or seize up, your injured body would 'fail' structurally (and cause you a great deal of pain).

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Fig. 1.1 Lower Manhattan skyline, New York City.

This is one of the largest concentrations of high-rise buildings in the world: space limitations on the island of Manhattan meant that building construction had to proceed upwards rather than outwards, and the presence of solid rock made foundations for these soaring structures feasible.

Examples of structural components (or ‘members’, as structural engineers call them) include the following:

- steel beams, columns, roof trusses and space frames
- reinforced concrete beams, columns, slabs, retaining walls and foundations
- timber joists, columns, glulam beams and roof trusses
- masonry walls and columns.

For an example of a densely packed collection of structures, see Fig. 1.1.

What is an engineer?

As mentioned in the introduction, the general public is poorly informed about what an engineer is and what he or she does. ‘Engineer’ is not the correct word for the person who comes round to repair your ailing tumble dryer or office photocopier – nor does it have much to do with engines! In fact, the word ‘engineer’ comes from the French word *ingénieur*, which refers to someone who uses their ingenuity to solve problems. An engineer, therefore, is a problem-solver.

When we buy a product – for example, a bottle-opener, a bicycle or a loaf of bread – we are really buying a solution to a problem. For instance, you would buy a car not because you wish to have a tonne of metal parked outside your house but rather because of the service it can offer you: a car solves a transportation problem. You could probably think of numerous other examples:

- A can of baked beans solves a hunger problem.
- Scaffolding solves an access problem.
- Furniture polish solves a cleaning problem.
- A house or flat solves an accommodation problem.
- A university course solves an education problem.

A structural engineer solves the problem of ensuring that a building – or other structure – is adequate (in terms of strength, stability, cost, etc.) for its intended use. We shall expand on this later in the chapter. A structural engineer does not usually work alone: he is part of a team of professionals, as we shall see.

The structural engineer in the context of related professions

If I were to ask you to name some of the professionals involved in the design of buildings, the list you would come up with would probably include the following:

- architect
- structural engineer
- quantity surveyor.

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list. There are many other professionals involved in building design (e.g., building surveyors and project managers) and many more trades and professions involved in the actual construction of buildings, but for simplicity we will confine our discussion to the three named earlier.

The architect is responsible for the design of a building with particular regard to its appearance and environmental qualities such as light levels and noise insulation. His starting point is the client's brief. (The client is usually the person or organisation that is paying for the work to be done.)

The structural engineer is responsible for ensuring that the building can safely withstand all the forces to which it is likely to be subjected, and that it will not deflect or crack unduly in use.

The quantity surveyor is responsible for measuring and pricing the work to be undertaken – and for keeping track of costs as the work proceeds.

So, in short:

- 1) The architect makes sure the building looks good.
- 2) The (structural) engineer ensures that it will stand up.
- 3) The quantity surveyor ensures that its construction is economical.

Of course, these are very simplistic definitions, but they'll do for our purposes.

Now I'm not an architect and I'm not a quantity surveyor. (My father is a quantity surveyor, but he's not writing this book.) However, I am a structural engineer and this book is about structural engineering, so in the remainder of this chapter we're going to explore the role of the structural engineer in a little more detail.

Structural understanding

The basic function of a structure is to transmit loads from the point at which the load is applied to the point of support and thus to the foundations in the ground. (We'll be looking at the meaning of the word 'load' more fully in Chapter 5, but for the time being consider a load as being any force acting externally on a structure.)

Any structure must satisfy the following criteria:

- 1) Aesthetics – it must look nice.
- 2) Economy – it mustn't cost more than the client can afford; and less if possible.
- 3) Ease of maintenance.
- 4) Durability – this means that the materials used must be resistant to corrosion, spalling (pieces falling off), chemical attack, rot and insect attack.

- 5) Fire resistance – while few materials can completely resist the effects of fire, it is important for a building to resist fire long enough for its occupants to be safely evacuated.

In order to ensure that a structure behaves in this way, we need to develop an understanding and awareness of how the structure works.

Safety and serviceability

There are two main requirements of any structure: it must be **safe** and it must be **serviceable**. ‘Safe’ means that the structure should not collapse – either in whole or in part. ‘Serviceable’ means that the structure should not deform unduly under the effects of deflection, cracking or vibration. Let’s discuss these two points in more detail.

Safety

A structure must carry the expected loads without collapsing – either as a whole or even just a part of it. Safety in this respect depends on two factors:

- 1) The **loading** that the structure is designed to carry has been correctly assessed.
- 2) The strength of the **materials** that are used in the structure has not deteriorated.

From this it is evident that we need to know how to determine the load on any part of a structure. We will learn how to do this later in the book. Furthermore, we also know that materials deteriorate over time if they are not properly maintained: steel corrodes, concrete may spall or suffer carbonation, and timber will rot. The structural engineer must consider this when designing any particular building.

Serviceability

A structure must be designed in such a way that it doesn’t deflect or crack unduly in use. It is difficult or impossible to completely eliminate these things – the important thing is that the deflection and cracking are kept within certain limits. It must also be ensured that vibration does not have an adverse effect on the structure – this is particularly important in parts of buildings containing plant or machinery.

If, when you walk across the floor of a building, you feel the floor deflect or ‘give’ underneath your feet, it may lead you to be concerned about the integrity of the structure. Excessive deflection does not necessarily mean that the floor is about to collapse, but because it may make people feel unsafe, deflection must be ‘controlled’; in other words, it must be kept within certain limits. To take another example, if a lintel above a doorway deflects too much, it may cause warping of the door frame below it and, consequently, the door itself may not open or close properly.

Cracking is ugly and may or may not be indicative of a structural problem. But it may, in itself, lead to problems. For example, if cracking occurs on the outside face of a reinforced concrete wall, then rain may penetrate and cause corrosion of the steel reinforcement within the concrete, which in turn leads to spalling of the concrete.

The composition of a building structure

A building structure contains various elements, the adequacy of each of which is the responsibility of the structural engineer. In this section we briefly consider the form and function of each. These elements will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3.



Fig. 1.2 Roof structure of Quartier 206 shopping mall, Berlin. Quite a 'muscular' roof structure!

A roof protects people and equipment in a building from weather. An example of a roof structure is shown in Fig. 1.2.

If you plan on buying a house in the United Kingdom, be wary of buying one which has a flat roof. Some roofing systems used for waterproofing flat roofs deteriorate over time, leading to leaking and potentially expensive repairs. The same warning applies to flat-roofed additions to houses, such as porches or extensions.

Walls can have one or more of several functions. The most obvious one is **load-bearing** – in other words, supporting any walls, floors or roofs above it. But not all walls are load-bearing. Other functions of a wall include the following:

- partitioning, or dividing, rooms within a building – and thus defining their shape and extent
- weatherproofing
- thermal insulation – keeping heat in (or out)
- noise insulation – keeping noise out (or in)
- fire resistance
- security and privacy
- resisting lateral (horizontal) loads such as those due to retained earth, wind or water.

Consider the wall closest to you as you read these words. Is it likely to be load-bearing? What other functions does this wall perform?

A **floor** provides support for the occupants, furniture and equipment in a building. Floors on an upper level of a building are always **suspended**, which means that they span between supporting walls or beams. Ground floor slabs may sit directly on the ground beneath.

Staircases provide for vertical movement between different levels in a building. Figure 1.3 shows a concrete staircase in a multi-storey building. Unusually, the staircase is fully visible from outside the building. How is this staircase supported structurally?



Fig. 1.3 A very visible staircase. How is it supported?
You'll learn more about cantilevers later in the book.

Foundations represent the interface between the building's structure and the ground beneath it. A foundation transmits all the loads from a building into the ground in such a way that settlement (particularly uneven settlement) of the building is limited, and failure of the underlying soil is avoided.

On a small sandy island in the Caribbean, a low-rise hotel was being constructed as part of a larger leisure resort. The contractor for the hotel (a somewhat maverick individual) thought he could save money by not constructing foundations. He might have got away with it were it not for an alert supervising engineer, who spotted that the blockwork walls did not appear to be founded on anything more rigid than sand.

A furious argument ensued between the design team and the contractor, who not only readily admitted that no foundations had been built but also asserted that, in his opinion, none were required. In a developed country the contractor would have been dismissed instantly and probably prosecuted, but things were a little more free and easy in this corner of the Caribbean.

But nature exacted its own retribution. That night, a tropical storm blew up, the sea washed over the island ... and the partly built structure was entirely washed away.

In a building it is frequently necessary to support floors or walls without any interruption or division of the space below. In this case, a horizontal element called a *beam* will be used. A beam transmits the loads it supports to columns or walls at the beam's ends.



Fig. 1.4 A conventional building enclosed in a glazed outer structure. The two structures appear to be completely independent of each other.

A *column* is a vertical load-bearing element which usually supports beams and/or other columns above. Laymen often call them pillars or poles or posts. Individual elements of a structure, such as beams or columns, are often referred to as *members*.

See Fig. 1.4 for an unusual pairing of two separate structures.

A few words for students on architecture courses

If you are studying architecture, you may be wondering why you need to study structures at all. It is not the purpose of this book to make you a fully qualified structural engineer, but, as an architect, it is important that you understand the principles of structural behaviour. Moreover, with some basic training there is no reason why architects cannot design simple structural members (e.g. timber joists supporting floors) themselves. On larger projects architects work in inter-disciplinary teams which usually include structural engineers. It is therefore important to understand the role of the structural engineer and the language and terms that the structural engineer uses.

How does the study of structures impinge on the training of an architect?

If you are on a degree course in architecture, you will have formal lectures in structures throughout your course. You will also be assigned projects involving the architectural design of buildings to satisfy given requirements. It is essential to realise that all parts of the building need to be supported. Always ask yourself the question: ‘How will my building stand up?’ Remember – if you have difficulty in getting a model of your building to stand up, it is unlikely that the real thing will stand up either!