 ISSN: 2349-6002

Substructure Design: Abutments and Piers: detailing for durability, serviceability, and constructability; consideration of seismic and wind effects

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I. INTRODUCTION

Substructure components like abutments and piers play a critical role in transferring loads from the superstructure (deck, girders, bearings) to the foundations and ultimately to the ground. Unlike the superstructure, substructures must manage not only vertical loads, but significant horizontal/lateral loads like earth pressures, wind, seismic, thermal movements, scour, while also providing durability, serviceability and allowing feasible construction. The design therefore must integrate structural, geotechnical, durability, and construction considerations.

- Abutments: the end supports of a bridge span, often acting as retaining structures for the approach embankment plus transfer vertical and lateral loads.
- Piers: intermediate supports (columns, walls, multi-column bents) between abutments, carrying vertical superstructure reactions and resisting lateral forces.

Design Philosophy: Durability, Serviceability and Constructability

A. Durability

a) Materials and detailing must be chosen to provide the required design life (often 75–100 + years for bridges) with acceptable maintenance.

b) For abutments and piers, this means concrete quality (cover, durability of reinforcement), protection against corrosion, freeze-thaw, exposure to water, de-icing salts, abrasion, scour, and scour-induced exposure of foundation elements.

c) Detailing should minimise ingress of water and chlorides.

d) Scour protection is critical: the design must consider potential depth of scour around piers/abutments in rivers; guidelines specify multiplier factors for scour depth for abutments and piers.

B. Serviceability:

a) Serviceability refers to conditions under normal loads (and combinations) where deformations, cracking, deflections, and vibrations must remain within acceptable limits for the structure to function without undue maintenance or loss of usability.

b) For substructures: control of cracking especially in abutment backwalls, wingwalls, pier caps, deflections or settlements of footings/piles that might affect superstructure alignment, movement control at bearings/abutments.

c) For integral abutments, the abutment/pier must accommodate superstructure movement (thermal expansion/contraction) without inducing excessive stresses or cracking in the substructure.

C. Constructability:

a) The design must allow for practical construction: formwork, reinforcement placement, cast sequencing, accessibility, tolerances, and interface with superstructure.

b) Detailing must consider ease of placing concrete around pile caps, drilled shafts, reinforcement congestion, embedment of bearing seats/anchor bolts, continuity of reinforcement, and positioning of movement joints.

c) The interface between structure and earth should be considered: backfill operations, settlement, compaction, drainage. Integral abutments often demand more careful backfill and drainage to avoid lateral pressure issues.

Abutment Design – Structural & Detailing Considerations

A. Functions and Loads:

- Abutments serve as vertical supports for the end of the superstructure and as retaining walls for the approach embankment/backfill.
- Loads to be considered:
  1. Superstructure reactions (vertical and longitudinal) transmitted via bearings or directly (in integral abutments).
  2. Earth pressures (active, passive) from backfill behind abutment backwall and wingwalls.
  3. Approach fill surcharge and live load surcharge from vehicles near abutment.
  4. Thermal/longitudinal movements of the superstructure (especially for integral/semi-integral abutments) causing horizontal loads on the abutment or axial loads on piles.
  5. Seismic lateral loads on abutment and foundation (to be discussed in section 5).
  6. Wind loads transmitted via superstructure to abutment, especially for long spans or towers near the abutment.
  7. Scour/hydraulic loads if abutment near watercourse.

B. Types of Abutments:

- Conventional abutments: separate bearing/expansion joint between superstructure and abutment. Allows movement. Simpler to design but more maintenance (joints) and potential leakage/ deterioration.
- Integral abutments: the superstructure is continuous with the abutment without expansion joint; movement accommodated by pile/shaft flexibility or special details. Advantages: no joints, lower maintenance, better behaviour in cold/heat cycles; challenges: detailing for movement and thermal loads, pile/shaft design for movement.
- Semi-integral: hybrid, e.g., abutment cap connected, but backwall or wingwall hinge separated; allows some movement but still reduces joint needs.

C. Structural Design – Stability, Strength & Movements:

- Stability Checks:

1. Overturning: due to earth pressures + surcharge + seismic + thermal loads. Ensure resultant intersects base within acceptable eccentricity.
2. Sliding: check horizontal force vs friction + passive resistance.
3. Bearing capacity: check base pressure under footings/piles.
4. Settlement: especially for footings on backfill/approach embankment; differential settlement may impair approach slab/structural alignment.

- Strength Checks:

1. Design the abutment cap, backwall, wingwalls and footings/piles for vertical and lateral loads, moments, shears. Use limit-state design principles. For instance, the Steel Bridge Design Handbook Chapter on Substructures covers this thoroughly.
2. The abutment cap may be treated as a beam spanning between springs (foundation lines) carrying superstructure reactions and earth loads.
3. Backwall may be treated as retaining wall subject to soil pressure, surcharge, possibly seismic earth pressure increment.
4. Pile embedment, anchor bolts, reinforcement detailing must be designed to resist moments, shears, axial loads.

- Movement / Serviceability Checks:

1. For integral abutments: check that the superstructure's longitudinal expansion/contraction can be accommodated without undue stress on the abutment or backfill. Detailing may provide sliding pads, hinge-like joints, compressible fill behind wall, etc.
2. Approach slab connection: detailing between abutment and approach slab must account for abutment rotation/settlement to avoid cracking or joint opening.

3. Crack control: in backwalls, wingwalls – ensure service-level stresses maintained within limits, proper reinforcement, sufficient cover, control joints provided.
4. Drainage: ensure water does not accumulate behind abutment causing hydrostatic pressure, frost effects, or reduce durability.

D. Detailing for Durability & Constructability:

- Reinforcement & concrete:

1. Provide adequate cover especially for parts exposed to weather, splash/salt. Use corrosion-resistant reinforcement.
2. Use durable concrete (appropriate w/c ratio, supplementary cementing materials, high quality aggregates) to reduce permeability and cracking.
3. Use construction joints where appropriate with proper seal and water-stop if needed.
4. In integral/semi-integral abutments: detailed reinforcement continuity from pile shafts or spread footings into cap; embedment of piles in cap with confinement reinforcement around such embedment.
5. Wingwall to cap connections: avoid wingwalls inadvertently restricting movement of cap. Separation joints or sliding plates may be used.

- Drainage/Backfill and earth interface:

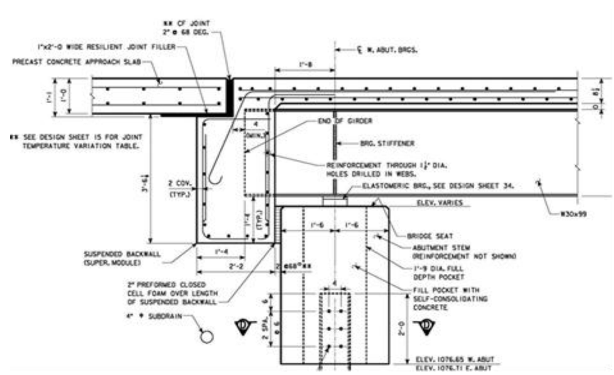
1. Provide drainage behind backwall and wingwalls: perforated pipe, geotextile filters, free-draining fill to reduce hydrostatic pressure and chemical attack.
2. Backfill compaction and selection: choose material with suitable properties and place in layers to reduce settlement differential. For integral abutments sometimes lightweight backfill or compressible material behind the wall is used to reduce lateral pressure from movement.

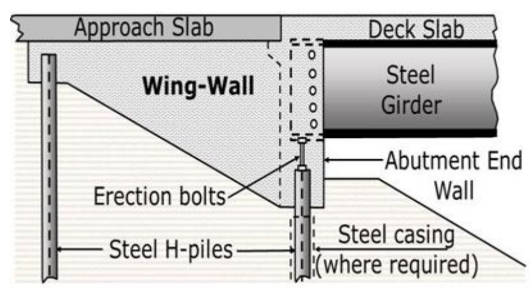
- Construction sequence & tolerances:

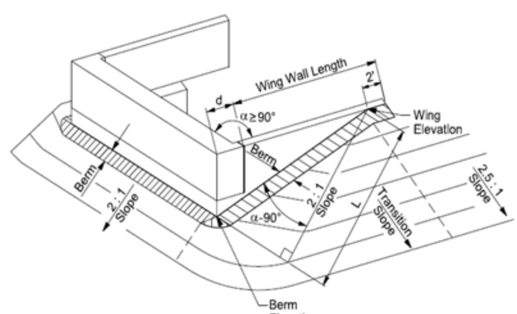
1. Abutments often require sequencing: cast footing/pile cap, then backwall/wingwalls, then approach slab connection, then superstructure. Proper sequence avoids undue settlement/rotation.
2. Tolerances: ensure the bearing seats are level and correctly aligned. For integral abutments, the connection to superstructure must be precise because movement is constrained differently.
3. Provide access for inspection and maintenance: e.g., weep holes, inspection chambers, cover plates where needed.

- Specific Considerations for Abutments in Seismic/Wind Zones:

1. Consider seismic-induced earth pressures (both active and passively mobilised) behind backwall during earthquake guidelines specify dynamic earth pressure models.
2. For wind: if abutment/wingwalls are tall, slender and exposed check for overturning & sliding under wind & also the loads transmitted from superstructure must be transferred suitably through bearings/abutment cap.
3. In skid-sensitive applications longitudinal forces due to braking or derailment may also load abutments/piles laterally design must consider these.







Pier (Bent/Substructure) Design Structural & Detailing Considerations:

A. Functions and Loads:

- Piers support the superstructure at one or more locations between abutments. They transfer vertical loads (dead + live) and bring down horizontal loads (seismic, wind, hydraulic, ship impact, thermal/lateral superstructure movements).
- Loads to consider include: superstructure reactions, wind on superstructure transmitted to piers, seismic inertial forces (both superstructure and substructure), longitudinal forces, hydrodynamic loads, scour/debris impact, thermal movements.
- Soil-structure interaction (SSI): pier foundation behaviour under lateral loads must be accounted for.

B. Pier Types & Geometry:

- Common pier types: single-column piers, multi-column bents, wall piers, hammer-head piers, straddle bents.
- The shape and geometry depend on hydraulic clearance, aesthetics, constructability (formwork), deck type, site constraints.
- Geometric considerations: slenderness (height/width ratio), resonance with wind/seismic, lateral stiffness. For seismic zones, lower slenderness and higher lateral stiffness are preferred.
- Pier cap design: when multiple columns, the cap distributes superstructure reactions and connects to columns; design of cap must account for vertical loads, moment transfer from columns, shear forces, possible uplift or torsion if unbalanced.

C. Structural Design – Strength, Stability & Movements:

- Stability Checks:
  1. For piers, check structural stability under combined vertical + lateral loads: overturning of cap/footing, lateral stability of columns or wall, bearing of footing or pile foundation.
  2. For tall piers, check buckling/slender-column behaviour under axial compression + bending due to lateral loads.
  3. Foundation stability: pile/shaft embedment, lateral passive resistance, base shear/stiffness of soil/in-pile.

- Strength Checks:

1. Columns/bents designed for combined axial + bending + shear. For seismic design, drift capacity and ductility must be considered. For single column piers, plastic hinge formation, over-strength factors, etc. are key.
2. Shear / moment demands at critical sections must be verified under ultimate load combinations (ULS) and serviceability (SLS) for lateral loads (wind, seismic) and vertical loads.
3. Pier cap and footings must transfer loads from superstructure and columns; design as beams or strut-tie model if geometry dictates.

- Movement / Serviceability Checks:

1. Pier drift under lateral loads: code-based limits on inter-storey drift may be applied or pier drift relative to superstructure must be controlled to avoid bearing/pad damage.
2. Settlement differential between foundations could impose additional bending in columns/caps – serviceability check needed.
3. Cracking in columns and caps: control reinforcement accordingly, especially in seismic zones where cyclic loading may cause damage.
4. Vibration: while less critical for piers than superstructure, resonance under wind or seismic should be assessed if pier is slender or lightly damped.

D. Detailing for Durability & Constructability:

- Reinforcement & Concrete:

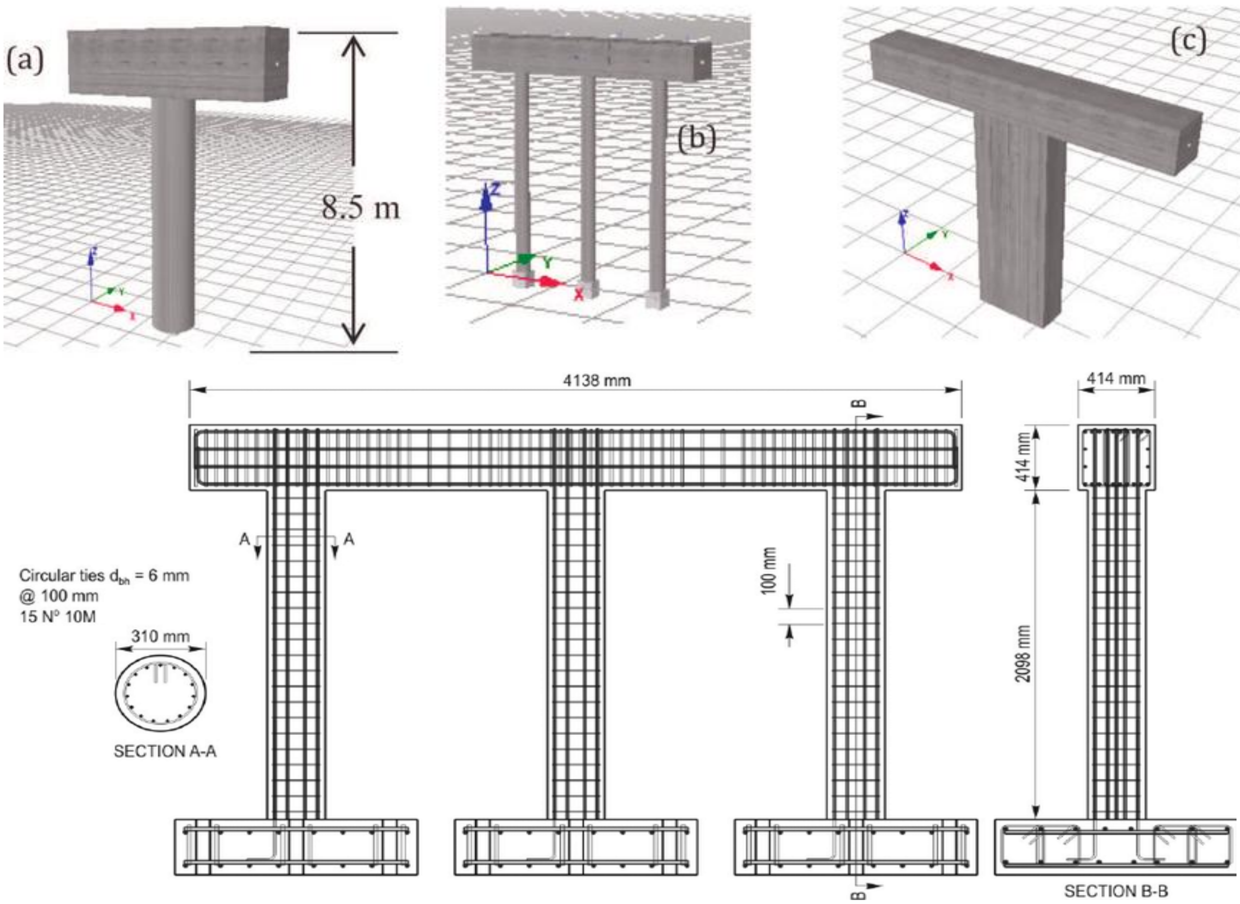
1. Use high-quality concrete, adequate cover for reinforcement, corrosion-resistant steel or protection in aggressive environments (marine/inland with de-icing salts).
2. For seismic zones: detailed transverse confinement (hoops/spirals) in columns to ensure ductile behaviour. The framing and detailing of piers must follow ductile design principles
3. For cap/footing: sufficient embedment of columns/piles, detailing for anchor bolts, dowels, post-tensioning if used.

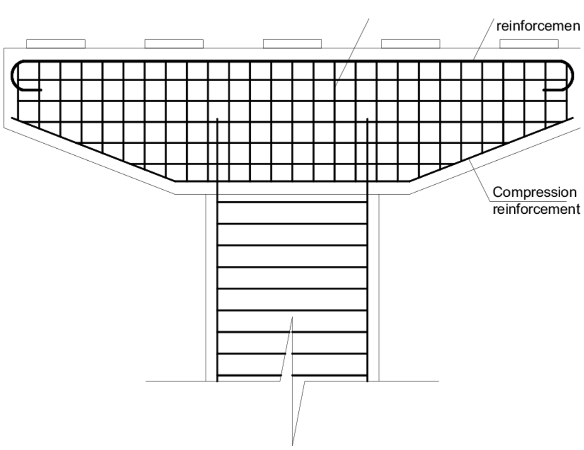
- Construction sequence & tolerances:

1. During erection, temporary loads (construction loads) must be considered (e.g., deck placement, false-work, crane loads) and the substructure must be designed/constructed accordingly.
2. Access for inspection/maintenance: include access around pier, weep holes (if hollow), monitoring instrumentation if necessary.

- Durability-specific detail: For piers in waterways: scour protection, debris shield, sacrificial zone, or sacrificial concrete.

1. Provide drainage at footing/pile head, protection of piling from exposure due to scour.
2. Joints between pier cap and superstructure: bearings must be accessible, allow movement, be protected from ingress of water/ salts.





Seismic & Wind Effects: Substructure Specific Issues

A. Seismic Considerations:

- Fundamentals

1. In seismic zones, substructures (abutments, piers) must be designed for inertial forces (from superstructure + substructure mass), and kinematic/geometric forces (from soil-structure interaction, foundation flexibility, differential movement). The design must aim for collapse prevention (ULS) and often damage limitation (SLS) depending on importance of bridge.
2. Soil-structure interaction (SSI) matters: flexible foundations (piles, drilled shafts) will alter

responses; embedment, pile group effects, and soil nonlinearity should be considered.

3. Earth pressure changes during earthquake: abutments behind backfill may experience increased lateral earth pressures (active, passive, dynamic) and, in piers with embedment, foundation inertia requires additional embedment or lateral capacity.

B. Substructure-Specific Design for Seismic

- Abutments:

1. Determine design seismic load combinations (e.g., ULS with seismic + dead + live + thermal + earth pressure). For Indian code (IRCSP:114) explicit combinations and partial factors are given.
2. For abutment backwalls: include inertial load from mass of backwall + cap + superstructure end reactions, plus dynamic earth-pressure increment. For embedded foundations: check base shear, overturning, sliding under seismic load.
3. For integral abutments: special attention to longitudinal movement of superstructure under seismic (and thermal) which may impose large horizontal loads on pile shafts. The detailing must allow for rotation/translation or absorb forces.

- Piers:

1. For piers, consider seismic design of bent frames: plastic hinge regions, ductility demand, pier drift limits, foundation uplift/rocking, and lateral load capacity. The codes emphasise that shear in substructure should be the lesser of (i) elastic shear demand divided by R (response reduction factor), (ii) shear at over-strength plastic moment capacity, (iii) shear when mechanism forms in multi-column frame.
2. For foundations: check lateral pile bending, axial load effects combining with lateral load, pile head moment capacity, group effects, pile-soil-pile interaction. Also check for liquefaction potential or ground failure.

C. Detailing for Seismic Performance

- Provide confinement reinforcement (hoops/spirals) in columns and other elements likely to form plastic hinges.
- Use capacity design: ensure strong foundation–strong cap–strong column (or properly designed weak column/strong beam in pier frames) so failure is ductile and controlled.
- Provide energy-dissipating devices or isolation if needed (in high-seismic/high-importance bridges).
- Ensure sufficient embedment length of piles/shafts into cap with developed reinforcement, and design for moment, shear and axial.
- Control brittle failure: for abutments and piers with potential for soil–structure interaction, avoid sudden failure modes (e.g., shear failure, sliding without warning).
- Inspection access for seismic damage: design so that after an earthquake the structure can be inspected and repaired easily.

D. Wind and Other Lateral Effects:

- Wind Loads:

1. While wind loads often dominate superstructure behaviour, the loads are transferred to substructure through bearings, joints, and connections. The substructure must resist wind-induced moments/shears from the superstructure (especially in long-span bridges, high elevation piers, towers near abutments).
2. The design needs to account for wind directionality, turbulence, local topography, and shielding effects of embankments or terrain.
3. For slender piers, check for vortex shedding, aeroelastic effects or galloping potentially causing dynamic amplification of lateral loads. While not always dominant in substructures, for tall slender columns these may be relevant.

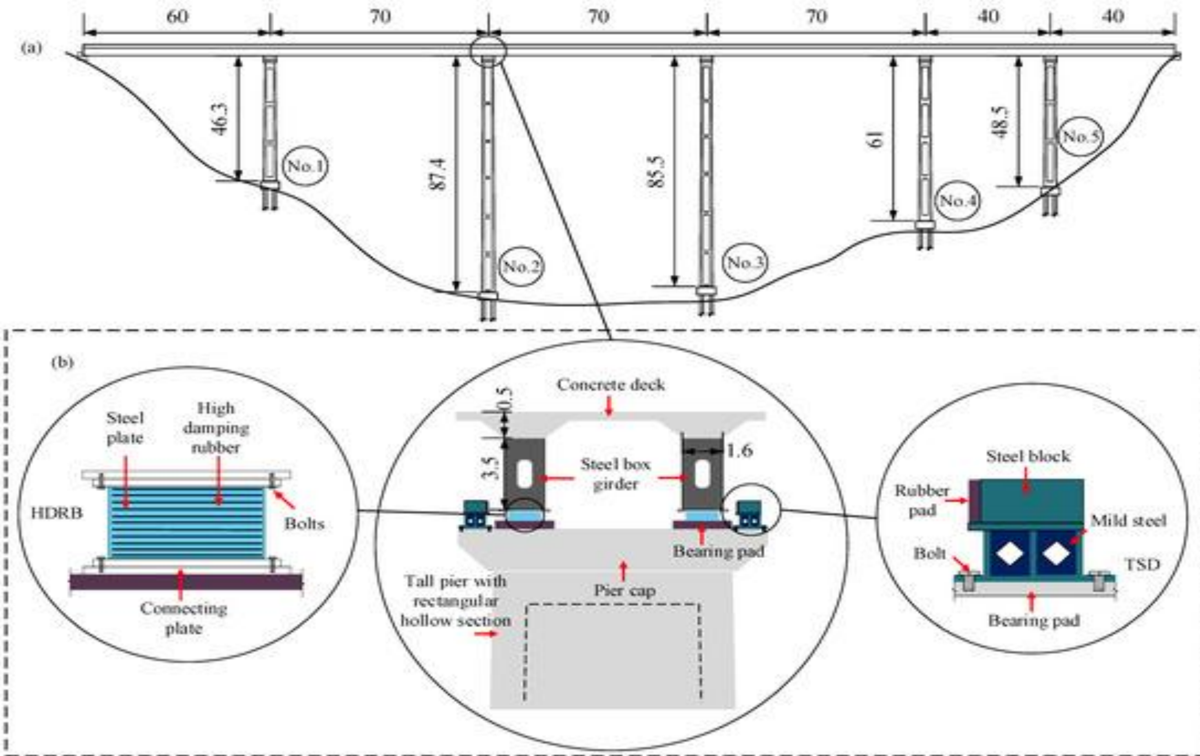
- Other Lateral Loads:

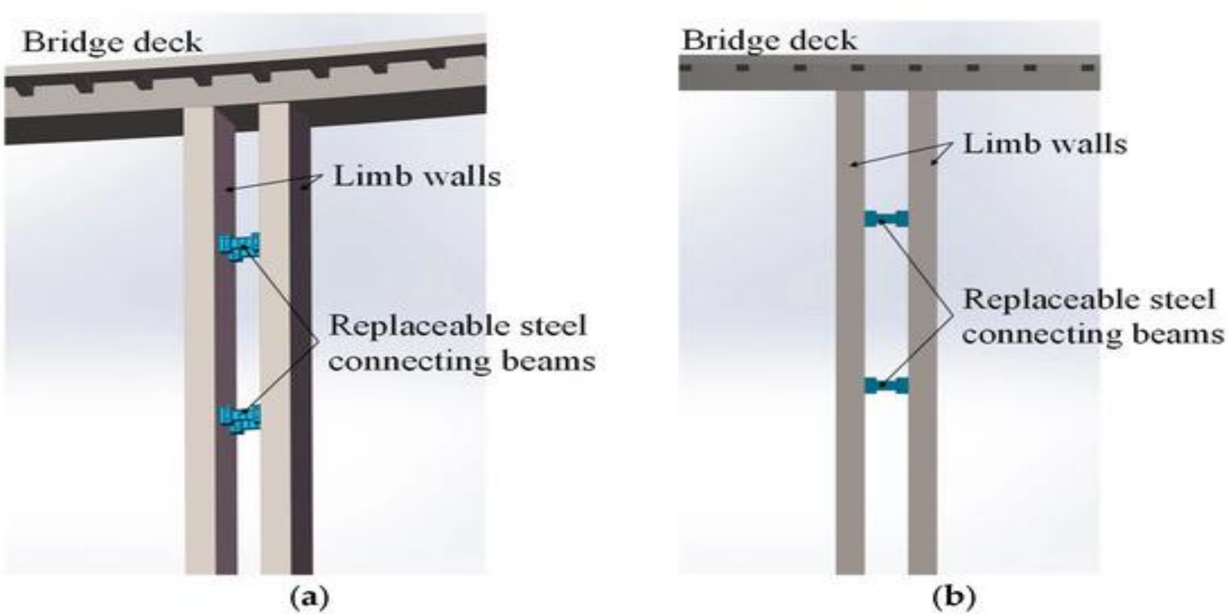
1. Hydraulic loads: flowing water, surge, debris impact, ice loads (in cold climates) acting on piers. These impose lateral loads and may create scouring which affects foundation capacity. Guidelines for scour depth at abutments/pier foundations exist.
2. Thermal/longitudinal expansion: for integral abutments, longitudinal movement of superstructure generates forces on abutment/pile which act horizontally and axially; design must account for these.
3. Braking/Impact loads: for railway bridges or heavy vehicle bridges, forces due to braking or

impact can impose longitudinal forces on substructures; design must include torsion or axial load combinations.

- Detailing for Wind & Lateral Loads:

1. For piers/abutments subject to wind/hydraulic loads: provide lateral load resisting reinforcement, shear keys, anchor bolts.
2. For scour prone foundations: provide protective aprons, riprap, cathodic protection or sacrificial zones, inspection platforms.
3. For longitudinal movement: ensure bearings and substructure allow translation/rotation; design sliding plates or elastomeric pads if needed; detail approach slabs to accommodate differential movement.





Soil-Structure Interaction (SSI) & Foundation Interface

Though the focus is on abutments and piers, it's essential to highlight how foundation and soil behaviour influence substructure design.

- The foundation type (spread footing, pile, drilled shaft) strongly influences substructure stiffness, displacement under load, lateral capacity, and. For example, the Steel Bridge Design Handbook discusses both shallow and deep foundations in substructures.
- For lateral loading (seismic, wind, hydraulic), pile group behaviour, shaft bending, soil stiffness, embedment depth, and group effects must be considered. The foundation may govern drift, settlement and load distribution.
- Scour and soil erosion may expose piles/shafts, reducing capacity design must account for worst-case scour depth and provide adequate embedment beyond scour.
- Settlement and differential settlement can cause extra loads in substructure elements so substructure design should include the expected soil settlement behaviour, and detailing should allow for movement where required.
- In seismic design, SSI may reduce or increase demands depending on soil-foundation interaction. The engineer must consider whether the foundation is rigid (fixed-base) or flexible (pile/shaft) and how the response spectrum or period of the system modifies loads. For example, comparative studies show SSI regulations can impact ductility demand.

Durability & Maintenance – Specific Detailing Notes

Here are key detailing items to enhance durability and reduce maintenance for abutments and piers:

- Provide minimum concrete cover as per environment (marine/coastal, inland de-icing salts). Exposed reinforcement should be protected.
- Use concrete with low permeability (low w/c ratio, supplementary cementitious materials like fly ash, slag, silica fume) to resist chloride ingress, carbonation, freeze–thaw, sulfate attack.
- For parts of substructure exposed to splash/salt (e.g., sub-waterline piles, abutment base behind embankment), consider protective coatings or cathodic protection.
- Provide drainage: weep holes behind backwall/wingwalls, perforated drainage pipe, free-draining backfill to prevent build-up of hydrostatic pressure and ingress of salts.
- Provide access for inspection: e.g., expose piles for periodic inspection, embed monitoring instrumentation if needed (particularly for high-importance bridges).
- Provide easy replacement/maintenance access to bearings/anchor bolts at abutments and piers.
- Ensure approach slab/abutment interface is detailed to avoid joint opening, water infiltration, and consequent deck/substructure deterioration. For integral abutments, approach slab connection is critical.
- At pier foundations in waterways: protect from scour, debris impact, allow for inspection and replacement of protective aprons or sacrificial concrete as needed.
- Avoid complex geometry that may trap water or debris, cause water stagnation, or inhibit inspection/repair.

Constructability & Practical Considerations

- Early coordination of substructure design with geotechnical findings: pile/shaft capacity, soil stratigraphy, scour potential, water table, staging of embankment/backfill.
- Abutments: ensure backfill and compaction sequences are aligned with substructure construction schedule to avoid differential movement or excessive loads on abutment/backwall.
- For integral abutments: ensure proper soil backfill, drainage, and movement relief from superstructure (e.g., compressible material behind backwall, isolation joints). Without proper constructability planning, movement may be restricted, causing induced stresses.
- For piers: formwork, scaffolding (especially in waterways) must be feasible. For tall piers, erection sequences must maintain stability. For multi-column bents, ensure cap column reinforcement detailing is constructible (avoid congested bars, allow concrete placement and compaction).

- Foundation construction: installing piles/shafts in water/soil conditions requires special techniques (casing, dewatering, scour countermeasures). The detailing of pile cap/pier connection must allow for embedment and confining reinforcement.
- Tolerances: misalignment of bearings, departures from design geometry may have more serious consequences in integral abutments or tall piers; hence design should allow reasonable tolerances and detailing should permit some “fit-up” flexibility (e.g., slotted holes for anchor bolts).
- Temporary loads: during construction, substructure elements may be subjected to loads different from design loads (falsework, crane loads, dewatering). Detailed construction load cases should be checked.
- Quality assurance and inspection: specify concrete maturity, reinforcement placement, welding/bolting quality of anchor bolts, curing of concrete in footings/pile caps, measurement of settlement and deflection during construction.