Learning Earthquake Design and Construction
24. How to Reduce Earthquake Effects on Buildings?

Why Earthquake Effects are to be Reduced

Conventional seismic design attempts to make buildings that do not collapse under strong earthquake shaking, but may sustain damage to non-structural elements (like glass facades) and to some structural members in the building. This may render the building non-functional after the earthquake, which may be problematic in some structures, like hospitals, which need to remain functional in the aftermath of the earthquake. Special techniques are required to design buildings such that they remain practically undamaged even in a severe earthquake. Buildings with such improved seismic performance usually cost more than normal buildings do. However, this cost is justified through improved earthquake performance.

Two basic technologies are used to protect buildings from damaging earthquake effects. These are Base Isolation Devices and Seismic Dampers. The idea behind base isolation is to detach (isolate) the building from the ground in such a way that earthquake motions are not transmitted up through the building, or at least greatly reduced. Seismic dampers are special devices introduced in the building to absorb the energy provided by the ground motion to the building (much like the way shock absorbers in motor vehicles absorb the impacts due to undulations of the road).

Base Isolation

The concept of base isolation is explained through an example building resting on frictionless rollers (Figure 1a). When the ground shakes, the rollers freely roll, but the building above does not move. Thus, no force is transferred to the building due to shaking of the ground; simply, the building does not experience the earthquake. Now, if the same building is rested on flexible pads that offer resistance against lateral movements (Figure 1b), Keywords

Earthquake, base isolation.
If the gap between the building and vertical wall of the foundation pit is small, the vertical wall of the pit may hit the building when the ground moves under the building. (a) Hypothetical Building

Building on rollers without any friction – building will not move with ground

Forces induced can be up to 5-6 times smaller than those in a regular building resting directly on ground

(b) Base Isolated Building

Building on flexible pads connected to building and foundation – building will shake less

Forces induced are large. Large movement of building

(c) Fixed-Base Building

Building resting directly on ground – building will shake violently

Figure 1. Building on flexible supports shakes lesser – this technique is called Base Isolation.

The flexible pads are called base-isolators, whereas the structures protected by means of these devices are called base-isolated buildings. The main feature of the base isolation technology is that it introduces flexibility in the structure. As a result, a robust medium-rise masonry or reinforced concrete building becomes extremely flexible. The isolators are often designed to absorb energy and thus add damping to the system. This helps in further reducing the seismic response of the building. Several commercial brands of base isolators are available in the market, and many of them look like large rubber pads, although there are other types that are based on sliding of one part of the building relative to the other. A careful study is required to identify the most suitable type of device for a particular building. Also, base isolation is not suitable for all buildings. Most suitable candidates for base-isolation are low to medium-rise buildings rested on hard soil underneath; high-rise buildings or buildings rested on soft soil are not suitable for base isolation.

Base Isolation in Real Buildings

Seismic isolation is a relatively recent and evolving technology.
It has been in increased use since the 1980s, and has been well evaluated and reviewed internationally. Base isolation has now been used in numerous buildings in countries like Italy, Japan, New Zealand, and USA. Base isolation is also useful for retrofitting important buildings (like hospitals and historic buildings). By now, over 1000 buildings across the world have been equipped with seismic base isolation. In India, base isolation technique was first demonstrated after the 1993 Killari (Maharashtra) Earthquake [EERI, 1999]. Two single storey buildings (one school building and another shopping complex building) in newly relocated Killari town were built with rubber base isolators resting on hard ground. Both were brick masonry buildings with concrete roof. After the 2001 Bhuj (Gujarat) earthquake, the four-storey Bhuj Hospital building was built with base isolation technique (Figure 2).

Seismic Dampers

Another approach for controlling seismic damage in buildings and improving their seismic performance is by installing seismic dampers in place of structural elements, such as diagonal braces. These dampers act like the hydraulic shock absorbers in cars – much of the sudden jerks are absorbed in the hydraulic fluids and only little is transmitted above to the chassis of the car. When seismic energy is transmitted through them, dampers absorb part of it, and thus damp the motion of the building. Dampers were used since 1960s to protect tall buildings against wind effects. However, it was only since 1990s, that they were used to protect buildings against earthquake effects. Commonly used types of seismic dampers include viscous dampers (energy is absorbed by silicone-based fluid passing between piston-cylinder arrangement), friction dampers (energy is absorbed by surfaces with friction between them rubbing against each other), and yielding dampers (energy is absorbed by metallic components that
Figure 3. Seismic Energy Dissipation Devices—each device is suitable for a certain building.

(a) Viscous Damper

(b) Friction Damper

(c) Yielding Dampers

yield) (Figure 3). In India, friction dampers have been provided in a 18-storey RC frame structure in Gurgaon (See http://www.palldynamics.com/main.htm).

Suggested Reading

