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Design of Flexible Pavements

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Module 1: Fundamentals of Flexible Pavement Systems

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Define** the scope of flexible pavements within the context of composite structures.
- **Evaluate** how local conditions (climate, material availability, and subgrade strength) dictate structural design choices using international case studies.
- **Analyze** the relationship between base course confinement and stiffness in heavy-duty pavement designs.

Executive Summary: In this course, a “flexible pavement” is defined broadly as any pavement structure not classified as cement concrete or small element (block) pavement. This definition includes composite structures with stiff, cement-treated bases. Successful design is not universal; it is strictly dependent on local constraints. Engineers must tailor designs to available aggregates, climatic evaporation rates, subgrade bearing capacity (CBR), and maintenance philosophies rather than replicating designs successful in other regions.

Defining the Flexible Pavement

Before performing stress and strain analysis, we must establish the boundaries of our design object. For this module, **flexible pavements** include:

- All pavements **excluding** cement concrete slabs or concrete block elements.
- Composite pavements that utilize relatively stiff, cement-treated subbases or bases, provided the surface layer behaves flexibly.

Comparative Analysis of Structural Designs

The following table details four distinct structural approaches adapted to specific local conditions (South Africa, The Netherlands, and Airport infrastructure).

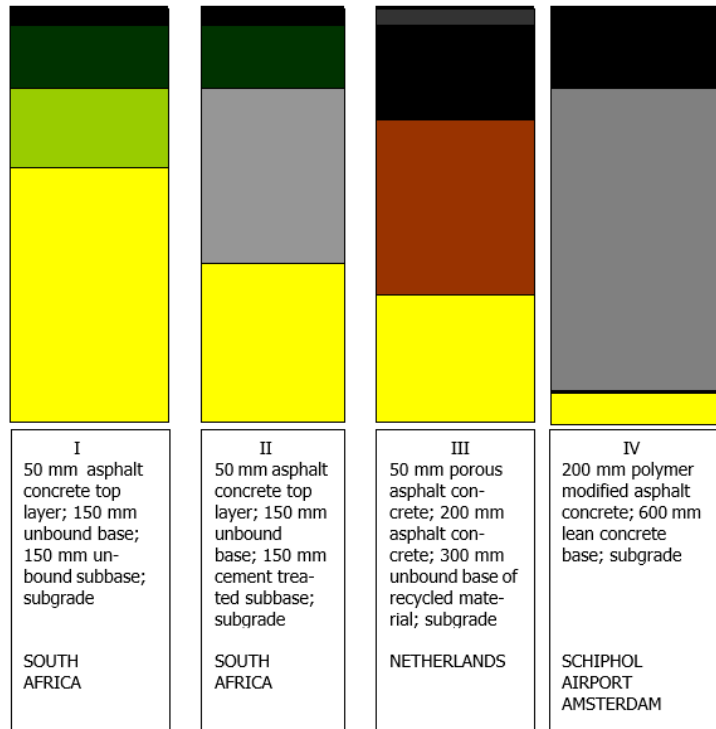


Figure 1: Different types of flexible pavement structures (Cross-sections I through IV).

Table 1-1: Structural Design Philosophies

Structure Type	Region / Application	Structural Composition	Primary Design Rationale
Structure I	South Africa (Moderate Loads)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 mm Asphalt • 150 mm Unbound Base • 150 mm Unbound Subbase 	Relies on high-quality crushed materials and high compaction levels. Requires Subgrade CBR \geq 15%.
Structure II	South Africa (Heavy Loads)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 mm Asphalt • 150 mm Unbound Base • 150 mm Cement-Treated Subbase 	The cement-treated subbase provides a working platform and induces horizontal confining stresses in the unbound base, increasing its stiffness and strength.
Structure III	Netherlands (Highways)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 mm Porous Asphalt • 200 mm Asphalt Concrete • 300 mm Recycled Base 	Designed for poor subgrade (CBR \leq 10%) and noise reduction. Uses recycled concrete/masonry due to lack of local quarries. Thick asphalt prevents structural maintenance disruptions.

Structure IV	Schiphol Airport (Runways)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 200 mm Polymer Modified Asphalt • 600 mm Lean Concrete Base 	Built on extremely poor subgrade (CBR \approx 2%). Thick polymer asphalt and pre-cracked base reduce reflective cracking risks while maximizing runway availability.
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The Impact of Local Conditions on Construction

A critical engineering lesson is that construction methods must align with environmental realities. You cannot simply export a design specification from one climate to another.


Case Study: Compaction Strategies


- **South Africa (High Evaporation):** Engineers achieve high density in granular bases by soaking the material and applying heavy compaction energy. The excess water evaporates quickly due to the hot climate.
- **The Netherlands (Low Evaporation):** The South African method fails here. Low evaporation rates mean excess water remains trapped. Additionally, the recycled base materials (containing soft masonry) will crush under heavy compaction, degrading the material.

Maintenance Philosophies

The design thickness is often governed by the owner's tolerance for maintenance:

- **Zero-Structural Maintenance:** In the Netherlands, high traffic intensity makes deep reconstruction unacceptable. Pavements are designed with significant thickness so that maintenance is restricted to the surface layer (porous asphalt) only.
- **Planned Rehabilitation:** Other regions may accept thinner initial structures with planned strengthening interventions.

 **Design Tip: The Confinement Effect** in Structure II (South Africa), the cement-treated subbase does more than support the load. It creates a rigid boundary that increases **horizontal confining stresses** in the unbound base above it. Recall from soil mechanics: unbound materials become significantly stiffer and stronger as confinement increases.

 **Safety Constraint:** Subgrade Bearing Capacity Strict limits apply to subgrade support. For standard South African granular designs, if the subgrade **CBR is less than 15%**, you **shall** improve the subgrade before constructing the pavement layers. Conversely, Dutch designs account for CBR values as low as 10% by increasing total pavement thickness.

Design Tip: Reflective Cracking Mitigation: When using a stiff base (like lean concrete at Schiphol Airport), shrinkage cracks can reflect through the asphalt surface. To mitigate this, consider:

1. **Pre-cracking** the base to control crack location and width.
2. Using a **thick, polymer-modified asphalt** layer to absorb strains.

Checkpoint Quiz

1. Which of the following best explains why Schiphol Airport uses a 200 mm thick polymer-modified asphalt layer?

- a) To support heavy aircraft loads on a high-CBR subgrade.
- b) To reduce noise pollution for surrounding communities.
- c) To reduce the risk of reflective cracking from the lean concrete base.
- d) To allow for rapid water drainage during storms.

Answer: (c) The airport uses a lean concrete base on poor subgrade. The thick, modified asphalt is specifically designed to mitigate reflective cracking from the underlying rigid base.

2. Why is the “South African method” of soaking base materials during compaction unsuitable for the Netherlands?

- a) The Netherlands lacks sufficient water resources.
- b) Low evaporation rates prevent water dissipation, and recycled masonry aggregates may crush under heavy compaction.
- c) The subgrade in the Netherlands is too stiff to require such compaction.
- d) Dutch environmental regulations prohibit water use in construction.

Answer: (b) The Netherlands has low evaporation rates, meaning soaked materials stay wet. Furthermore, the recycled masonry used in bases is softer than natural stone and destroys easily under the heavy compaction required by the SA method.

3. In the context of this course, how is a “flexible pavement” defined?

- a) Only pavements consisting entirely of asphalt and unbound granular layers.
- b) Any pavement that is not a cement concrete slab or concrete block pavement, including those with cement-treated bases.
- c) Pavements with a structural number less than 5.0.
- d) Pavements designed primarily for light-duty traffic.

Answer: (b) The course defines flexible pavements by exclusion: any pavement that is not a concrete slab or small element pavement. This explicitly includes structures with stiff, cement-treated bases.

Module 2: Pavement Defects and Distress Analysis

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Diagnose** major flexible pavement distress types including cracking, deformation, and disintegration.
- **Evaluate** the root causes of failure (traffic loading vs. environmental factors) based on visual evidence.
- **Identify** the mechanism of reflective cracking in composite pavement structures.

Executive Summary: Effective pavement design relies on preventing specific failure modes. Defects are categorized into three primary groups: Cracking (structural or thermal), Deformation (rutting or subgrade movement), and Disintegration (material loss). Recognizing the specific geometry and location of distress (e.g., wheel path vs. edge) is critical for determining the failure mechanism and appropriate design countermeasures.

Cracking

Cracking is the most common indicator of pavement distress. The pattern and location of the cracks reveal their origin.

Table 2-1: Types of Cracking and Causes

Crack Type	Visual Characteristic	Primary Cause	Mechanism
Fatigue (Alligator)	Interconnected cracks resembling chicken wire/alligator skin in wheel paths.	Traffic Loading	Repeated tensile strains at the bottom of the asphalt layer due to wheel loads.
Longitudinal	Cracks running parallel to the pavement centerline.	Edge Loading or Construction Joints	High stresses near the pavement edge or poor joint density.
Low Temperature	Transverse cracks perpendicular to the centerline.	Environment	Thermal contraction of the asphalt binder during extreme cold events. Tensile stress exceeds mixture strength.
Block Cracking	Rectangular pieces of asphalt.	Environment	Volumetric shrinkage of the asphalt binder due to aging or temperature cycling.
Reflective Cracking	Cracks mirroring joints/cracks in the underlying layer.	Structural Geometry	Movement of an underlying rigid base (cement-treated or concrete) transferring stress through the asphalt overlay.



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