Q I have in the past seen ads for a wallcovering that is designed to cover old plaster walls. It’s an alternative to tearing out the lath and plaster. These were not simply wallpaper, rather I remember them as a thick material that came in rolls that were paintable. Do you know of any companies that deal in these types of materials?

A Most vinyl wallcovering manufacturers offer such a product. It is also used to smooth out paneling or block walls prior to installing the final wallcovering. It is generically referred to as a “heavy-duty wall liner” and is sold with names like “Cover Wall” and “Wall Over.” Your local wallcovering supplier should have several to choose from. The paintable version may need to be special ordered; however, I was able to recently buy some at a variety store here in Virginia. Keep in mind that the plaster may be beyond the point of no return. If the occasional 3-inch by 3-inch chunk of the final coat of plaster is letting go, but for the most part the plaster is otherwise sound, you may succeed with this approach. But if by knocking on the wall you can tell that the layers of plaster are really starting to separate from each other or the plaster letting go of the lath, you may be throwing good money after bad.

As I have mentioned in several previous columns, it is most important to carefully read the directions on whichever of these products you wind up with. Some come pre-pasted, others require pasting. It is just as important that the wall be pointed up and then given a good coat of wall sizing or wall prep compatible with the paste being used, otherwise you may have some spots where the paste is soaked up or chemically burned by the patching material. Some of these liners, typically the pre-pasted ones, can go right up once the paste has been activated with either water or a special pre-paste activator. The heavier types that resemble stiff white felt require a heavy-duty paste and 10 minutes or more of soak time to allow the paste to thoroughly work its way into the liner material. Once applied, allow a couple of days for the paste to dry before painting.

As far as buying this material directly, wallcovering manufacturers almost invariably deal through a distributor network, so getting what you’re looking for directly from the manufacturer—unless you’re looking for a truckload of material on a regular basis — in my experience, is not very likely.

Q Is fiber cement tile backer sheet (smooth, half-inch thick) suitable for use as EIFS substrate or sheathing? As you know, the other materials normally specified are gypsum sheathing, OSB, plywood, fiberboard or cement boards with fiberglass mesh faces. It seems that fiber cement would perform as well as these materials, or better.

A According to AWCI’s EIFS mechanics’ education program manual, fiber cement sheathing conforming with ASTM C 1186 is a recognized substrate for EIFS. ASTM C 1186 describes type A and type B as being exterior-grade products. Type A is for surfaces directly exposed to the elements, and type B is for surfaces not subject to direct exposure. So, if your tile backer board meets ASTM C 1186, type B, you’re probably okay. But it is best to check the intended EIFS manufacturer’s recommendations before buying the board. Also, at almost 100 pounds per sheet (3 pounds per square foot), you would be well advised to have an engineer calculate the necessary framing before proceeding . . . and plenty of healthy, good-size laborers to situate the boards properly.

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