AWCI has been pitching for the exterior insulation and finish systems industry since its introduction in the United States three decades ago, developing and publishing application practices, articles and technical documents, as well as conducting seminars throughout the United States. For the last two years, the association has been running EIFS education and certificate programs to improve the level of application in new construction.

When we checked with some graduates to find out how the program had worked for them, we found they all thought the seminars were very good or even vital. Most of them were highly experienced and felt that, while the course was more appropriate for those with less experience, they still came away refreshed on what they already knew, updated on what has changed, or were reminded to get back to proper methods and forego some shortcuts that could be risky.

A North Carolinian whose company sent three foremen to the course says “it turned out to be a learning experience, and I’ll go to the next one [class]. Someone who knows little about EIFS can learn a lot from it.”

A Californian agrees, noting that “as a project manager professional I was given a different perspective on a lot of information I was already aware of, like standards that had evolved. It was encouraging to see others receiving the same information, including inspectors who, prior to taking the course, probably didn’t know much about EIFS, not having practiced with or even seen it.”

One drywall contractor from Florida, who knew little about
EIFS but wanted to expand into the field, “managed to understand most of what was covered because EIFS is related to plastering, and I have a good grounding in physics and chemistry” What really impresses him about the course was “how many top people were present who really knew their stuff—guys from forensics, from the insurance industry big contractors from all over the country providing their input.”

He adds that, “The most valuable benefit was finally being given generalized rules to follow in case of a problem that ties EIFS Industry Members Association guidelines to industry standards. I didn’t realize there were any rules that covered all the technical information needed to do an EIFS job properly. It’s good to know there’s something out there we can refer to in addition to EIMA.”

Another Californian relays how he had been able to put the information to immediate use. “The seminar clarified several things that I used the first day I returned to the office—how to patch reveals (a depression in the foam to create architectural details), for instance. I arrived to find a job that had so many reveals that one had been missed. The crew had to fix it at its own expense and was thinking about re-coating the whole area. But I had learned at the seminar how to cut in and patch new reveals so they blended with the existing area. We did that instead, hot-knifing out the section and tying the mesh in the laminate behind, thereby saving us a lot of money.”

He also notes that “perhaps the most useful aspect of the seminar was the attention to detail. So often, when you take EIFS out in the field, you only have a feel for how things should be and look. You don’t have specific measurements, such as the thickness of your laminate or the minimum requirements for the foam. The seminar gave me that certainty Both novice applicators and professionals should take the course to know more about the system.”

A third-party inspector from Virginia reports that the instructor had “pulled together many issues that people take for granted, as well as consolidating the standards of the different manufacturers.”

Echoing a sentiment of many that the ability to network was one of the best features of the seminar, he adds that, “I met so many people during the seminar that whenever I had a question later, it was easy to get their opinion.”

“The course was well presented, taking us through all the potential pitfalls of installing an EIF system,” said another Californian. “Everything that was discussed had value to
me, nothing was a snoozer. I am not a complete novice to the EIFS industry, but even if you’d written the book, you’d want to revisit the data to keep it fresh.

“I recommend the EIFS training to anybody who listens to me. Even as an industry expert, I found the class to be very strong. It is vital to send at least the lead man of every crew, and, if possible, anybody who is going to be up at the wall.

“A shark has to keep moving so water flows across its gills, or it will die. The same goes for contractors. If you stand still, you die. You’ve got to keep moving ahead, and part of that process is education.”

How Things Look from AWCI

Nancy Roylance is the program director at AWCI for the EIFS training. She notes that “300 EIFS mechanics, foremen, superintendents, distributors and
results, according to the evaluations we received from each one.

“The two- and three-day courses are run by expert instructors and include slides, real-life scenarios, graphics and other presentation media to make it easier to assimilate information. They particularly enjoy having the networking opportunities and open forums where they can rub elbows with others in the trade from around the country.

“A common comment from mechanics is that they know the techniques being taught, but they do them differently back home. Our instruction is based on ASTM 1397 and the accepted way of applying EIFS. We can’t make them change the way they do it, but we suggest that this is the proven way, and that’s what they’ll be tested on during the certification process.

“Others have said they know the way we teach it is correct, but until they did the course, never knew why it was so. They leave the seminar being able to use their judgment in dealing with different situations they encounter on the jobsite.

“Sometimes mechanics say they are willing and able to follow the proper methods, but if their foremen direct them otherwise, or to take shortcuts, they have no choice. Sadly, this is counter-productive to AWCI’s objective of raising the bar with good education.”

The end result has been a greater standardization in application and conformity with workable EIFS procedures in the field.

Ironing out the Bugs

Without any other courses as a basis to rely on, AWCI continued to make improvements after each of the first few seminars, developing a successful formula. This is evident from feedback received from the earlier graduates: “The instructor who gave the seminar was very good. He’s been in the trade nearly as long as the product has been around, but he didn’t cover all the issues that we wanted to hear. We did learn a few tricks
of the trade because there’s always something new to learn-like techniques he had for installing the foam or cleaning a mixing bit, which were better than the way I did them.

“But we’re in such a hostile environment for [EIFS] here in North Carolina that we need very specific answers. We wanted to go deeper than the seminar was designed to go, to get some help in dealing with the problems we were facing here, and the course fell short for us.

“I figured, since it was an EIFS seminar and AWCI was supporting EIFS, these questions should have been asked and answers provided. The kind of questions I am talking about are the fact that manufacturers say all substrates have to be no less than a quarter inch out of plumb or level. That’s a nice idea, but it’s not realistic. In the building industry, especially in a town that’s moving up fast, you have mass production sites and, I have to tell you, the men on the site don’t care. They don’t even use lines. So the person putting on the outside cladding is stuck with all the problems. I mentioned that to the instructor and he replied, ‘You write a memo and don’t come back until they have it right.’ Well, that’s not realistic business-wise.

“Another question was how to back-wrap the window openings before the windows are put in, when you never get to the job until after they are put in. If you could take your time and leave the job whenever you wanted and come back when things were ready, then the instructor’s solutions would be good. But in the real world, you’ve got to get in and get out fast. There is a fine line between being a half-ass about doing things right and getting it done.

“Our company owner preached to us to ‘Do it strictly by the book and do it right, or we’ll get out of it.’ We have tried to do that, and it has paid off in the long run, but we never made much money. You lose your money moving men and equipment around from place to place.”

Other comments from graduates included a request from a Californian for “more hands-on instruction, seeing a proper corner window or flashing being done, with details blown up for all to see.”

“The course could have had more illustrations,” adds a Virginian, “but this may have been improved since I took the course a year and a half ago.”

According to Roylance, the content and illustrations have been improved since the first course was conducted.

Finally, a Californian comments that “this program has much good information for someone who doesn’t have years of experience, because they start at the beginning and walk you through with EIFS 101. I would love to see EIFS 2 with a little more depth, providing new techniques and products to save money and improve performance.”

Roylance points out that “the course was not intentionally designed for people with little understanding of EIFS. We require mechanics to have a year on the wall, but often independent inspectors,
who are not that familiar with EIFS, and those new to the trade, drag the instructor down into answering very basic questions, such as: “What is portland cement?”

“What instructors do now is give a simple and brief answer, and then tell the person he’ll talk with him or her during the break or after the class to bring him or her up to speed. We also send advance materials to registrants who have little EIFS knowledge.”

Currently, the mechanics’ category is the only one available in an alternate format. We’re looking at putting the Industry Professional/Independent Inspector categories online for distance learning. All categories are still offered as live session.

A Better Estimation of Effort

“One thing that has become clear,” Roylance continues, “is the need for an additional tool to reach EIFS players throughout the country. It’ll take far too long to do it at 50 students per seminar. So we are providing the course materials on video with a workbook that’s available in both English and Spanish. It’s called, EIFS—Doing It Right. The video format has its benefits, as does the live seminar: It doesn’t take people off the wall, is flexible in terms of scheduling and removes any financing issue.

“In some cases, the live course may still be the preferred option for people who need structure and discipline, or to escape distractions at work and home, in order to make it through the subject.

There still is interest in and a need for the conventional way, where you can meet other students and the instructor during the breaks to network and ask them how they do things in their part of the country.

“In the final analysis, even though everybody is busy dealing with demands and responsibilities on the job, it is still important to take time to learn. There is always a payback when one trains.”

Positive Action, Positive Results

A couple of the graduates interviewed had a couple of other points to make. First, the North Carolinian talks of the EIFS scene in the “war zone.” “We have been doing a lot of tear-offs and replacing with conventional stucco or hard coats. Most of them because of resale values, not because the houses had anything wrong with them. The whole EIFS mess has a created media attack that still hasn’t wound down fully. From the repairs I have been doing, what EIFS problems there were trace back to poor workmanship in two areas: windows leaking because caulk joints are missing, and the lack of one small piece of step flashing or kickout, where a roofline terminates, to direct water away from the wall.

“My advice from the front lines to anyone doing EIFS is to cover your behind on flashing and windows. If you see something wrong, write it down, even if you’re going ahead with the work, and have somebody from another company sign it. That way you’re better protected in any subsequent disputes.”
One of the Californians highlights the fact that “if you follow manufacturer recommendations exactly and don’t let water in, you don’t have to let it out. Use proper termination fill, make sure everything is monolithic, and there won’t be any holidays (bare spots).”

“The problems in the Carolinas has impacted the industry here too. Architects are scared. We reassure them that if it’s done right, they won’t have a problem.”

In the same vein, the Virginian adds, “The industry as a whole should be licensed rather than just let anybody apply the trade from the back of their pickup.”

A fellow Californian agrees, pointing out that, “the seminars give credibility to some of the perceived problems that the EIFS industry has faced in the past. It’s beneficial to have a central organization certifying professionals and providing validity to their training, a resource for people to refer to rather than doing it however they want. The most important thing is to build the stuff right. If the system is built correctly, it works. That’s true of any system. It’s people taking shortcuts who give the system a bad name.”

If there is one tribute to the power of the AWCI course, and a good example of how folks in the field can be proactive about pushing the application and public perception of EIFS in the right direction, it is the comments of this Californian: “I sit on the Board of Appeals and Advisors for my city on code issues. Based in no small part on the information that I gained from the AWCI EIFS class, I’ll soon be giving the building inspectors in my area a primer on EIF systems. I came away from the course with a background in EIFS that is deep enough that I feel very comfortable teaching it.

“Obviously it won’t be at the level that AWCI taught me, but you’d be sur-
prised how little building inspectors know about EIFS—most of them don’t even know to inspect it. They are required to make sure a building is watertight. Normally, they inspect the lathing used in a wood siding or a stucco application. Since EIFS is a barrier system, it relies on the outside as opposed to the building paper, so the same does not apply.

“Inspectors therefore need to know to look for things like the EPS board being installed so as to minimize any potential cracking through the laminate. The more they know, the better they can work, and the easier it’ll be on the contractors. When inspectors are comfortable around the product, they are less likely to delay things, looking for problems that don’t exist—they can hone in on the important issues.”

“Right now, people are scared to death of EIFS,” reports the inspector from Colorado. “So, the more information you can give them, the more you can set their mind at rest about using EIFS products. The biggest problem we have in the industry isn’t with the products but the lack of good application. If everybody sticks to all the rules and follows the directions of the application, then the products we would have out there wouldn’t run into trouble. We are all taking a hit because there are so many contractors out there who are cutting corners and doing things improperly.”

A key solution to this problem is training on a grand scale, which is why the Virginian’s message to AWCI seems appropriate: “Keep up the good work!”

About the Author
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