I have attended many trade shows in the past but had never been to one outside of North America. Being able to visit a show in Germany this spring provided me with an interesting opportunity to compare the state of our exterior insulation industry with its ancestral counterpart in Europe.

“Color 90” is a major trade show held every three years in Germany. It features building products, primarily from the paint and plaster industries.

Obviously, one of the key topics of discussion this year was the rapid transition going on in Europe today. The Berlin Wall had come down only four months earlier and the East was coming closer to unification with the West every day. In fact, in order to assist in the smooth national transformation, the show I attended had one special day dedicated only to giving a special rate to people from East Germany.

As I wandered through the trade show, I found that the size of the show would rival that of our annual home builders show, and many of the booths were significantly larger than those you saw at the recent AWCI convention. The typical booth space for the major companies was approximately 60 ft. x 60 ft. Traffic in the aisles was often very congested due to the high volume of people in the hall. Anyone can visit this show, and whole families paraded through.

In Europe they call their trade shows “fairs,” and the shows have the feeling of a state or county fair in many ways. Many exhibitors had open bars where they served beer, food and other refreshments. They even used games to attract visitors into their exhibits.

Professionally, however, I was most interested in observing what the European manufacturers of exterior insulation and finish systems are doing with their products today. I wanted to see what we have in common, what they do differently, and compare our different market conditions.

In Europe today exterior insulation is over 30 years old, and it continues to be a very popular surfacing material for both new and old construction. Since this show contained both paint and plastering type companies, only companies that market the dual lines chose to exhibit. Although 15 manufacturers of exterior insulation exhibited their products, I was told that many more manufacturers were not represented at the show because they are only involved in the EIFS business and are not involved in the painting trades. It seems that there is even more competition in Europe than in the U.S.

As I went through the booths and talked with people from our German affiliate company, I discussed topics which are of importance in the United States. From a technical point of view, I found once again that the basic technology now available in Europe is no different from that currently used in the United States. Since I can only compare our own company’s involvement in Europe and in the states, it was very beneficial for me to see that not only are our products identical to the ones that are used in Europe, but the specifications are also the same.

The big difference in Europe is the appreciation of quality which the craft has. The owner, general contractor and subcontractor have a much higher regard for quality than you normally find in North America. The reasons for this are natural. For one thing, they have more experience with EIFS and understand more about the differences in quality from one product to another. But more importantly, they intend the structures they build to last for very long periods of time, whereas we normally think of a 20-year useful life.

I asked several people, “Why is exterior insulation still popular after 30 years?” In Germany, according to some experts I met, the exterior insulation business is double the size of the present U.S. market, even though the overall construction market is less than half as large. The reason for its greater popularity in Europe is a very simple one; the benefits of EIFS cannot be duplicated by any other type of building construction. Since the Europeans are more energy minded due to the higher cost of fuel there, the conservation benefit alone is a major drawing point.

EIFS is also very complimentary to other types of building materials used in Europe today. A vast number of buildings in Europe continue to be constructed with stucco in conjunction with masonry. EIFS is considered to be compatible with this architectural look.

There are other benefits of EIFS which are of more interest to Europeans than American. Since space and land are so scarce there, the ability to save even six inches in a wall is a big advantage. When insulation can go on the exterior of the structure rather than on the interior, the increase in usable floor space is an important gain.

Most of the EIFS used in Germany today is in renovation work—about 60%. New construction, though increasing represents about 40% of all EIFS usage. Several years ago this trend

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was in a 70-30 ratio. In the United States the reverse is estimated to be the case, although we’ve seen a great increase in the use of EIFS in renovation here since that is a growing market for which our product is ideally suited.

Masonry is also a common building material in Europe. It’s ironic that in Europe today the masonry people see exterior insulation as providing an advantage to their building materials, whereas in this country today they perceive EIFS as a threat. In Europe the brickmasons see the benefits gained by adding to the thermal mass of a building through the use of EIFS in conjunction with masonry. The lesson in North America is that both industries should begin to work together to conserve energy and promote the thermal mass concept.

The issue of safety and the performance of EIFS in fires has been discussed in this country for years. It is also a subject which I discussed with my hosts. When I brought it up, my hosts responded that it is not an issue, that these systems are not a threat in the fire environment. Many series of tests have been performed, and all supported EIFS as being safe in fires. Europeans seem to believe that the benefits which exterior insulation offer far outweigh any concerns they have regarding EIFS performance in fires. I was told that there was no record of excessive fire damage in EIFS-clad buildings in the entire 30-year history of exterior insulation usage in Europe.

In Europe today the use of exterior insulation is still increasing, both in volume and in varieties of application. The reasons for the growth in Europe are similar to those we offer as reasons for its growth here: energy savings, affordability, the multitude of design options, achievable promotion of thermal mass and so forth. What are the disadvantages? There are none.

Some people in this country try to paint exterior insulation as a life threatening material in fires. In Europe today, after 30 years, there is no instance or experience which would indicate that it is a serious threat to human life, nor in 20 years in this country has there been any evidence that it is a fire problem. The fire issue in the US. is not one that can be solely resolved within a technical arena. It remains an emotional topic which continues to pop up in spite of proof and a history of safety and great benefits. Although the safety of EIFS is accepted as fact in Europe, it still faces voices of negativism from vested interest groups here.

Some will say that the environment may be an issue with EIFS. We also discussed this topic while I was in Europe. The expanded polystyrene boards which are the predominant product being used today do not contribute to any ozone depletion. It is felt in Europe that their advantages far outweigh their disadvantages in providing an inexpensive, energy conserving building material that is virtually free of environmental hazards.

In summary, exterior insulation is alive and well and gaining popularity in Europe today. Our own company is expanding into every market in Europe, and tremendous interest is being shown in this type of building construction. Even in markets where brick and other materials dominate, EIFS is now enjoying a great popularity.

We in the United States should start to see the advantages of EIFS as our environmentally conscious and more experienced friends in Europe do. EIFS allows us to conserve more energy and gain a higher fuel efficiency that is possible using any other building product available. EIFS allows us to build low-maintenance, beautiful buildings at a reasonable cost. And in wind, rain, fire and earthquake EIFS is safer than any other building material available.

My European visit confirmed my beliefs.