

# AFTERMATH OF THE QUAKE

*By Michael J. Major*



*Wall damaged from Northridge earthquake/Stucco Rite sheets used. Please note that the stucco adhered to the lath even though the stucco was cracked, compare with picture on page 20.*

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*Over six months later, confusion still reigns!*

**T**he Jan. 17, 1994, Northridge, Calif., earthquake was a disaster for its victims. But it might appear that the quake would have some positive results in terms of benefits that would go to the trades rebuilding the damage. But these benefits have been, at best, mixed, at least for the plasterers' trade. By July, six months after the quake, a good deal of confusion still existed.

First of all, both plaster and dry-wall came off very poorly as protection against seismic shock. "Both were very overrated," says Robert Harder, manager of the Van Nuys



*Extensive damage in Northridge earthquake showing stucco netting.*

Office, Department of Building and Safety, city of Los Angeles.

The result has been emergency laws passed by the city that radically cut down the shear value of these materials. Drywall, in particular, “performed homily and its shear value has been cut to zero,” Harder says. The shear value of plaster has been cut way back. For instance, on a two-story building, plaster will not be allowed on the ground floor for shear. The plaster used for shear must have a height and width value for one. In other words, if you have an eight-foot wall, you must have an eight-foot-long plaster panel to use as shear.

These changes will not necessarily decrease the use of stucco or drywall, but will increase the use of plywood for shear. “The buildings constructed with all plywood shear walls did beautifully,” Harder says.

Many of the problems have had to do not so much with the nature of the plaster itself as the fact that it has been improperly manufactured or applied. One manufacturer, Frank Hoang, vice president and general manager, K-Lath, Fontana, Calif., is working with the city to show that a plaster product can exceed the code requirements through proper furring and better attachments of the lath to the framing.

The difference between sheet and rolled plaster also is a consideration, Hoang says, especially since the furred

material is often left out of the rolled plaster at the time of application. Also, the sheet option has stronger wire. A major problem the city found is that the top and bottom plates were fastened improperly. Prior to the quake, stapling was an accepted fastener, but now screws or nails are required.

#### **BY THE BOOK**

One would think that more stringent regulations mean that plastering is now being applied more efficiently. Harder believes this to be true. “I think the repairs and construction are being done better than before because of the tougher standards,” he says. “I could be wrong, but everybody who pulls a permit it getting inspected.”

But Hoang says that, despite the best will in the world, the city is affected by severe manpower and budget restraints, and so can’t effectively police the new construction. This also is the opinion of Kevin Shields, president, K-Twice Plastering Contractors, a nonunion firm in Ventura.

Shields describes a situation in which ill-qualified and noncertified plasterers are discounting, leading to both shoddy work as well as diminished profits for certified plasterers. Insurance companies, homeowners and cheap labor are all part of the same syndrome, he says.

“In the first month after the quake I had 200 bids but never got an offer

back from a single person," Shields says. "Finally, when contractors like myself started charging \$200 for a bid, that stopped a lot of it." As Shields describes the situation, the insurance companies require the homeowner to ask for three bids. Shields was often asked to provide the very best job and materials possible to boost up the bid. Then the homeowner would go search for the lowest bid and pocket whatever he could save in the process.

For instance, if it cost Shields \$25 to \$35 per square yard of plastering, a homeowner might get \$20 per square

yard from the insurance company and pocket \$8 himself, then pay a worker \$12 to do the job. These uncertified workers range from a variety of people who might come from around the country with a pickup truck and a bag of tools, to Californians moonlighting another job, to a large number of illegal aliens.

"The insurance companies know exactly what's going on," Shields says. "They love to see a job done for nothing." And Shields finds it difficult to compete. "My workers' compensation is \$22 on \$100, plus insurance

and payroll taxes, none of which these people pay. I've done \$1 million worth of work since the quake, but have earned only half a million dollars."

Apparently, it's not only the discounting laborers who are unqualified. "I've had several confrontations with estimators on the job," Shields says. "Many have never seen a plastering job in their life, and they know nothing about construction. The insurance companies were also caught with a shortage of manpower, so they just put ads in the paper looking for anybody they could get. So you have ignorance compounded with bad policy. Homeowners are not getting qualified work and it surely is going to show up at a later time. Legitimate contractors can hardly compete. It's a sad situation."

### ***TOO LITTLE TOO LATE***

Shields also says there is now some public awareness of the problem, such as media stories pointing out the shoddy work and advising that people use licensed contractors. He does acknowledge a small trend away from unlicensed contractors, but, unfortunately, he says, "There is too little too late." Shields believes the various trade associations should do more to address the existing problems, and attempt to define policies that will minimize similar problems occurring from another disaster. He is attempting to form such an organization himself.

Marlow Barger, president, Construction Management Systems, in Morepark, also attests to some of the confusion that took place after the quake. "I heard of one guy who would go from house to house soliciting jobs. He asked for just \$250 and said he would go get the material and fix the house on the spot. Of course, he would never come back. But that's what happens in the aftermath of a disaster. Some people are out to exploit, and others are in a state of shock and will trust anybody who says he will help." Barger adds that he has also seen evidence of shoddy work, and says that unscrupulous people can go to the city and manipulate understaffed and overworked employees. "But the reputable contractors are playing by the rules," he says.

Barger says, however, that he has

not been directly hit by the same fraud and discounting as has Shields. "I suspect that the subcontractor trades are more attuned to that kind of thing, and, as a general contractor, I'm more protected from it."

Barger also says that for the first couple of months he just bid and bid, but now the insurance money is coming down to his clients and the work is starting to come in.

A different perspective is offered by Ron Wollard, spokesman for the Cali-

ifornia Wall and Ceiling Contractor's Association, a union based in Los Angeles. From his perspective, Wollard has noted that there is not so much discounting as gouging.

"A lady called our office for referral. She had gotten a bid from a nonunion contractor to fix plaster cracks for \$14,000. One of our people offered a bid for \$8,000. And I have a neighbor who got \$2,500 from an insurance company for a drywall job that should have cost less than \$1,000."

Wollard explains the difference in his perceptions from Shields in this regard as probably being due to different neighborhoods, which are affected differently.

Wollard also says his union contractors have experienced the aftermath of the quake in a way different from the nonunion contractors such as Shields. "There's been an increase in business for the contractors in our association, mainly damage repair, but we don't believe we've gotten into full swing even now? One of the reasons, Wollard says, is that his contractors deal with large commercial work, as well as the seismic damage at California State, UCLA and some major hospitals. These establishments, unlike homeowners strapped for cash, just want the repairs done right, and often they have long-term relationships with union contractors.

Since union contractors have more flexibility than nonunion ones, they are often at a disadvantage, Wollard says, but in this situation they should do well. "We monitor the number of hours worked by unionmen ... and there are not many people out of work. It's hard to find a drywall finisher in town, so the quake has been a kind of infusion for our industry and we hope it will create better things down the line. The situation is dismal in terms of commercial development. A healthy recession is our situation now; that's the normal economy, as opposed to the 1980s, which now appear to be an aberration."

Despite the many problems, plaster has been on an upward trend in popularity, says Shields. "It used to be that stucco was limited to the south, with wood in the north, but now everything is going to plaster, in part due to the fire hazards." He adds that the three most popular styles are all plaster.

In other words, plastering may again become a thriving industry in California, once the aftershocks of the quake have subsided. □

#### **About the Author**

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