Looking the

EIFS Industry Considers Future, Certification

By David Hunt
Exterior insulation and finish systems have captured a growing portion of the construction market over the past decade. But in 1995, a nationwide string of negative media reports spun from moisture intrusion problems that were detected in Wilmington, N.C.

Whether the reports were fair or unfair, the industry has sustained damage, and it is now taking steps to minimize the loss.

EIFS originated in Europe, where they were first installed in the 1950s. The systems took longer to gain acceptance in the United States, even though the market has now taken hold.

**Industry Growing**

EIFS has currently captured 3.5 percent of the U.S. residential market and 17 percent of the commercial market, according to the EIFS Industry Members Association. The group has seen sales growth of 12 percent to 18 percent per year over the last decade.

“Increasingly, EIFS is the cladding of choice with homeowners,” says Mark Nabity, president of Grayhawk, LLC, of Lexington, Ky.

Nabity sees continued growth in the use of EIFS, partly because of the systems insulation value and also partly because of design flexibility. He favors EIFS because it provides a continuous blanket of thermal insulation around the envelope of a building. In fact, EIMA reports exterior insulation systems do reduce air infiltration by much as 55 percent over between-the-studs insulation.

“EIF systems give you the freedom to design and achieve whatever look it is that you’re trying to achieve,” says R. Gabe Reitter II, president of AWCI and Reitter Wall Systems of
Columbus, Ohio. He says that the design flexibility of EIFS can be gained at a relatively inexpensive price, making the system attractive to consumers and contractors alike.

EIMA also believes the product has gained popularity in recent years because of its 100 percent acrylic binder that provides a high degree of resistance to fading, chalking and yellowing.

“As an industry, we fully expect another strong year in 1998,” says Stephan E. Klamke, executive director of EIMA, which represents the manufacturers of between 80 percent and 90 percent of all EIFS sold in this country.

Reports Target EIFS

But if a boom market appears on the horizon, it does not necessarily mean the industry hasn’t weathered its share of problems. Bad publicity dealt some damage beginning in mid-1995, after the chief building inspector in Wilmington, N.C., began singling out EIFS homes in a search of high levels of moisture in residential walls. The local investigation yielded a nationwide series of media reports that targeted EIFS.

“EIF systems give you the freedom to design and achieve whatever look it is that you’re trying to achieve,” says R. Gabe Reitter II, president of Reitter Wall Systems. EIF systems also provide design flexibility at a relatively inexpensive price.
EIMA mounted a sweeping counter-offensive to the negative press by hiring the public relations firm of Al Paul Leifton, based in Philadelphia. “I have seen about 25 to 30 balanced to negative stories on television or in newspapers,” says Bernie Allmayer of the public relations firm.

Allmayer says EIFS homes in Wilmington were unfairly singled out in the local investigation and that other types of construction were not examined in this moist, wind-swept coastal area. He also points out that the task force in Wilmington concluded EIF systems were not responsible for the moisture intrusion.

The task force that studied the homes in Wilmington found other deficiencies in the following areas:

- Leakage from window frames.
- Improper sealant around doors, decks and windows.
- Inadequate roof flashings.
- Lack of proper flashing above windows and doors.
- Improper head flashings over windows and doors.
- Lack of seals around windows, doors and other penetrations.
- Lack of kick-out flashings around chimneys.
- Inadequate kick-out flashing around chimneys.

“In some cases, the roof or windows were not properly flashed and, in other cases, some components were not compatible,” Allmayer says, “but the task force in Wilmington found no deficiency with the insulation system itself.”

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Mike Boyd, president of Ray Boyd Plaster & Drywall, Inc., of Garland, Texas, says that the moisture intrusion in Wilmington was caused by people other than those who actually installed the EIF systems.

He says the region’s moist coastal climate, building envelope performance problems caused by a lack of caulking, flashing, diverters and the use of windows created the problem.

"EIFS is a subset of the wall composite and must work with other building materials to form and envelope. You must also have applicators available who can properly install each component of the system."

— Stephan Klamke
Executive Director, EIMA

Nabity says the solution lies in installing the entire wall assembly properly. “It is very important to keep moisture from getting to the substrate,” he says. He adds that when all the components of an EIFS home are properly applied, homeowners should not experience a moisture-intrusion problem.

“EIFS is a subset of the wall composite and must work with other building materials to form an envelope,” Klamke says. “You must also have applicators available who can properly install each component of the system.”

Klamke welcomes an effort by the Northwest Wall and Ceiling Bureau to train building inspectors who examine EIF system installations.

“When qualified people inspect the systems, the end user will be the beneficiary,” he says. Klamke adds that the effort to train building inspectors will continue to reinforce the quality of EIFS.

Certifying Quality

Robert C. Drury, executive director of the Northwest Wall and Ceiling Bureau, explains that a regional effort to train building inspectors began in the spring of 1997. He says that training courses have educated 70 qualified building inspectors.

The training course for inspectors consists of background on substrates as
well as the structure of a building. They also learn about the components that make up and surround the EIF system.

Building inspectors also learn the importance of sealants and flashings, as well as the proper mix of a base coat. After the training course, inspectors must pass a test in order to become qualified to inspect EIFS structures.

“Most inspectors are not educated about the proper installation of EIFS,” Drury says. “They’re looking at this course as a chance to broaden the scope of their business, while the general contractor gets some reassurance about their level of expertise.”

Drury says that the effort to train inspectors has also reassured the insurance industry about the quality of EIFS installation.

Reitter explains that the AWCI board of directors has already moved into the beginning stages of expanding on this regional effort. The AWCI board of directors formed a task force, which is divided into two subgroups, that will report back this April on a proposal to certify all construction industry personnel.

“This two-pronged effort should increase the construction community’s confidence in EIF systems,” Reitter says.

Boyd heads one of the subgroups that is looking into the certification of inspectors who examine EIFS structures. The other subgroup is looking at certification for EIFS applicators and contracting firms. The overall task force will report back to the AWCI board of directors with their findings in April.

Boyd sees benefits in taking a proactive
step toward certification. He says the action by AWCI will provide the industry a voice in shaping the program on a single scale.

“The model code bodies were looking at certification for EIFS construction without input from the industry.” Boyd says. “AWCI has responded by saying we can make this happen on a universal level.”

Nabity feels that the industry needs to provide more input on how a certification program should be structured.

After all, he says, it is the industry, not code bodies, that have developed hands-on experience in actually installing the EIF systems. He also talks about the importance of training building inspectors to thoroughly examine EIFS structures.

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Garland, Texas

Nabity adds that the self-policing effort should ensure quality control, while providing the industry a continued path for growth and success in the future.

About the Author
David Hunt of Harrisburg, Pa, is a photographer, freelance writer and government relations consultant. He has worked with the construction industry for the last 11 years.