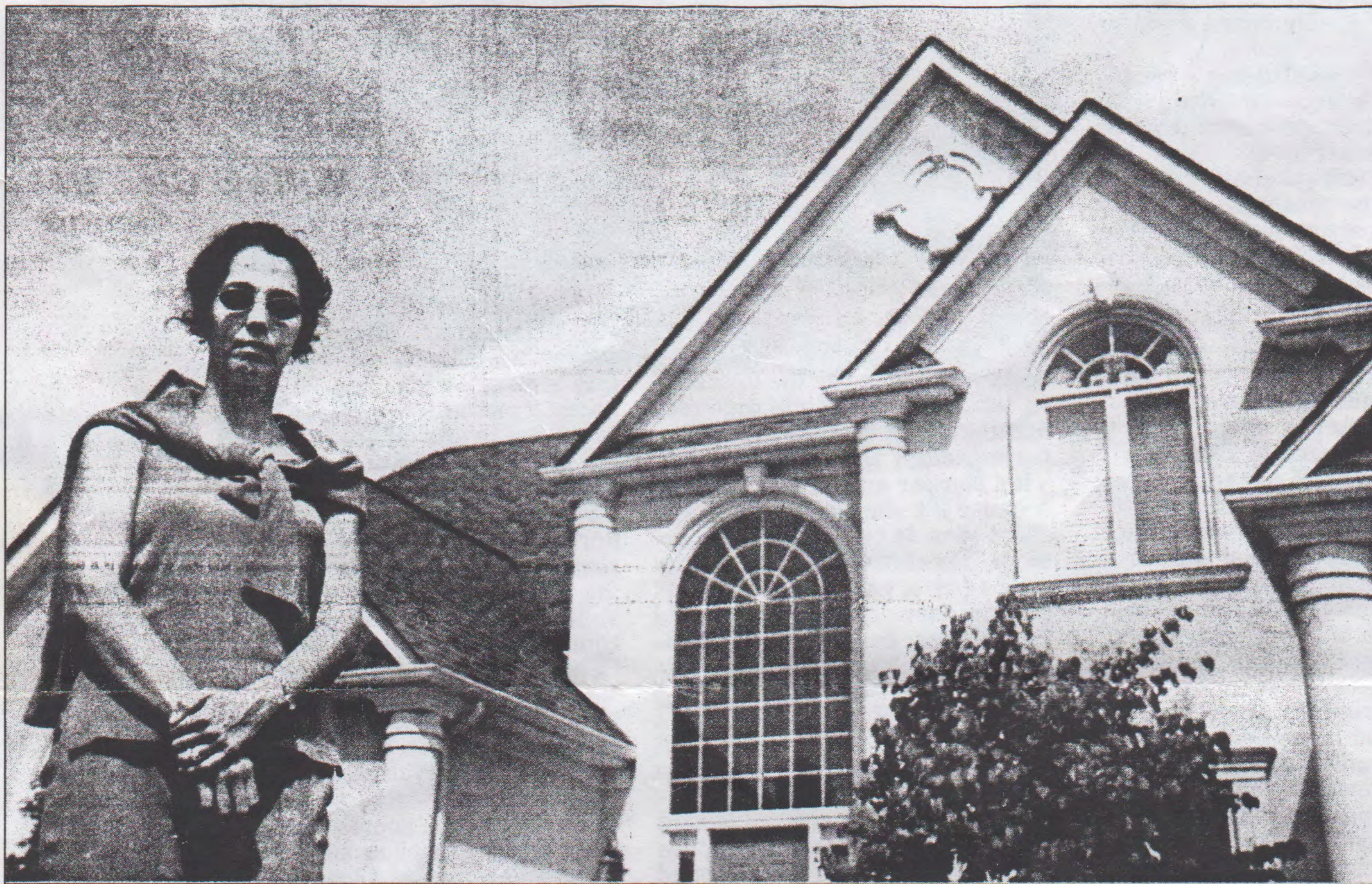


Toni Palan's home north of St. Charles looks like a dream, but she says there's water trapped inside. She and her husband, Jeff, are plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the manufacturer of the synthetic stucco on the five-year-old house.

Daily Herald Photo/  
Laura Stoecker



## Is it the siding or the installation that's at fault? Synthetic stucco and water don't always mix

BY DEBORAH DONOVAN  
AND S.A. MAWHORR  
Daily Herald Staff Writers

**T**oni Palan lives in her dream home complete with a large lot, plenty of room for her three children and a master suite for her and her husband, Jeff.

Now she's facing perhaps \$75,000 worth of repairs on a house that's only about 5 years old.

"My dream has turned into a nightmare," said Palan.

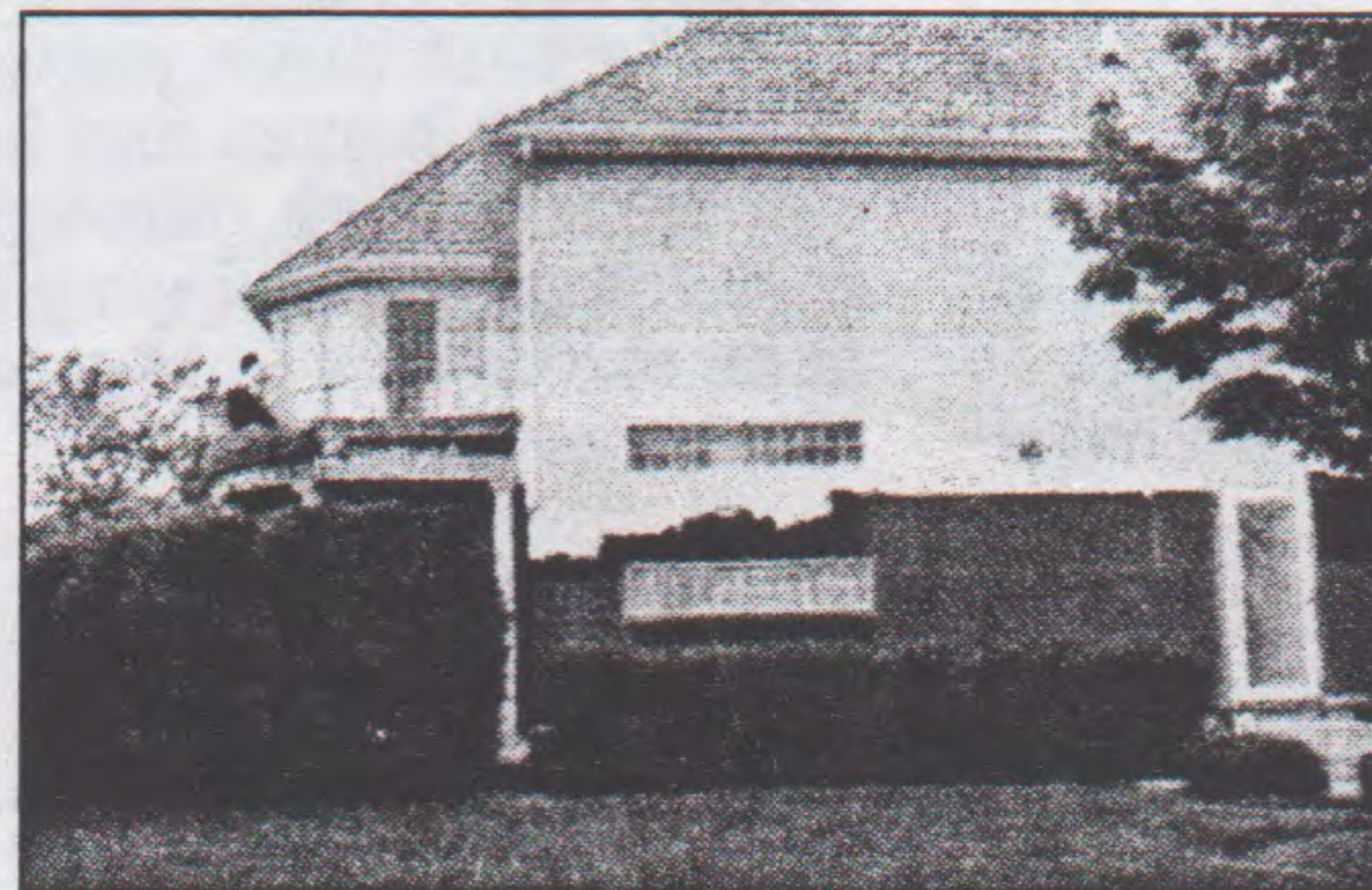
She believes part of the wood structure of her \$500,000 home near St. Charles has rotted because water has been trapped behind the waterproof synthetic stucco exterior.

The Palans are plaintiffs in a lawsuit seeking restitution from Dryvit, a manufacturer of synthetic stucco.

And they're not alone.

A class action lawsuit filed in 1996 in North Carolina resulted in agreements from seven manufacturers of synthetic stucco systems to pay homeowners there claiming damages. One of those manufacturers, Senergy Inc., also agreed to pay up to \$20 million for homeowners across the nation.

Synthetic stucco is popular today in several upscale subdivisions around Chicago's suburbs, where homeowners wade through conflicting advice on when and if the rot might begin and how to stop it.



**This Naperville house, above, is being stripped of its synthetic stucco. It will be re clad in old-fashioned stucco. Cliff Kapson of Northbrook demonstrates a moisture meter, right.** Daily Herald Photo/Tanit Jarusan

The exterior walls of a Naperville house currently being stripped of its synthetic stucco are soft in several spots. Gently poke the wood studs behind those areas with a finger, and the wood fibers simply flake away, too soft to even leave behind a splinter.

The homeowners, who are spending \$70,000 to refurbish their house with traditional stucco, refused to allow their names to be published. They don't want to alienate neighbors, who worry their property values will plummet if word gets out about the problems.



See DAMAGE on Page 2



# DAMAGE: Owners face huge repair bills

Continued from Page 1

Manufacturers of the synthetic stucco maintain their products are foiled by improper installation and leaky windows that allow water to get behind the system.

"These products work, but they have to be installed properly and you have to have good windows or you will have a problem," said Bernie Allmayer, spokesman for the national association of the synthetic stucco industry.

The only thing wrong with synthetic stucco is the bad publicity, according to Orren Pickell, a Bannockburn-based builder known for his million-dollar houses.

Regardless of cladding — brick, synthetic stucco or siding — a home will have problems if water leaks in it, said Pickell.

"Rotting will go about twice as fast with the synthetic stucco as with brick if you don't arrest the moisture," said Pickell. "The stucco doesn't breathe as well."

Dryvit Systems Inc., spells out in bold letters on its Web page that the synthetic stucco is not "the source or cause of water entry."

True enough.

The fake stucco is known as a "barrier" system because water can't penetrate the exterior sheathing. The trouble occurs when water finds its way behind that sheathing and can't get out again.

"There's no escape route," said Cliff Kapson, a Northbrook inspector of synthetic stucco under the name EnviroSpec.

In fact, concerns are forcing builders and home buyers to turn from the traditional "barrier" system to a newer synthetic stucco system labeled "drainage," which allows water that gets behind the exterior to drain out.

The synthetic stucco is formally known as exterior insulation and finish systems, or EIFS — although people often refer to it as Dryvit, which is a brand name of just one of the manufacturers.

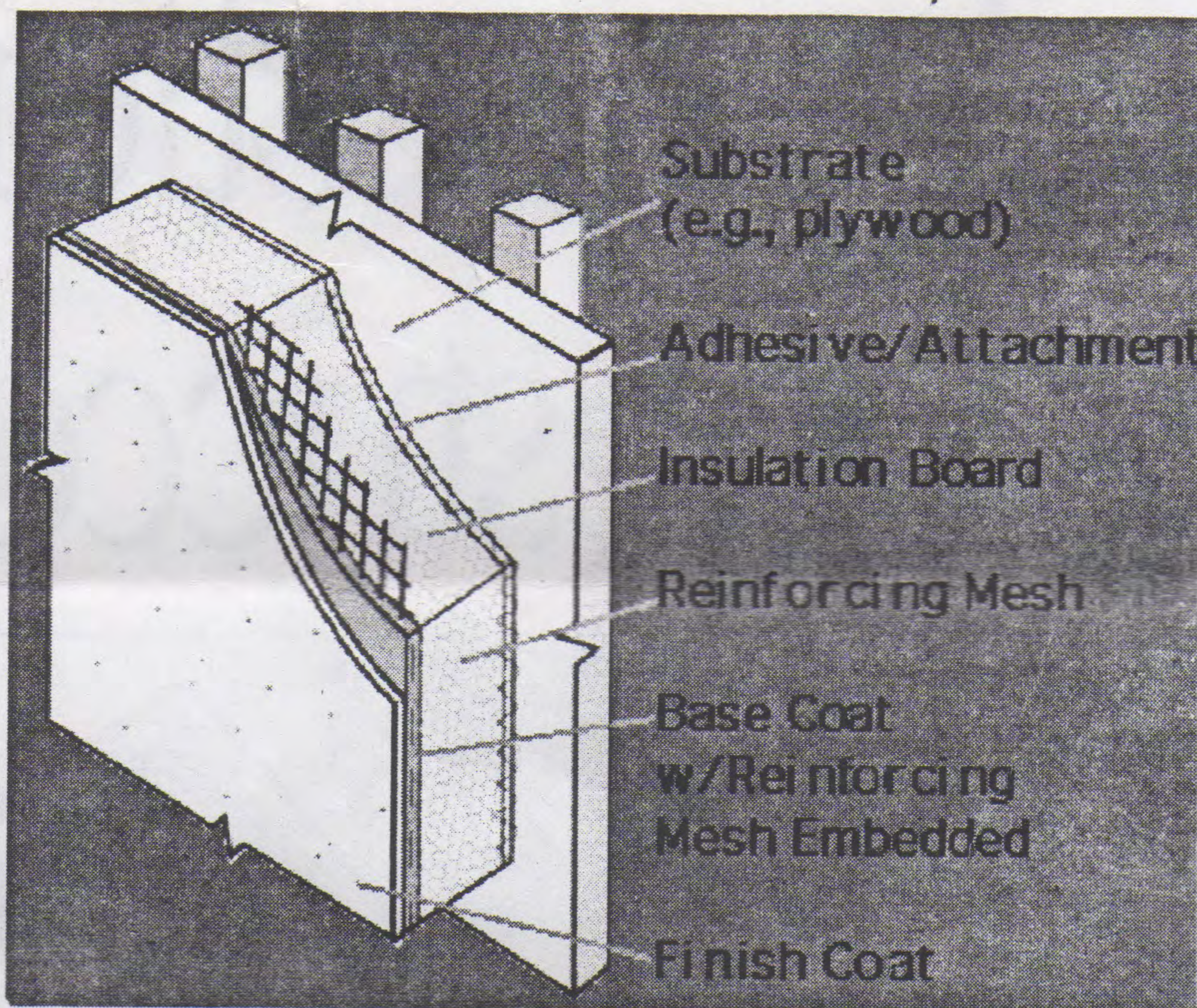
With the barrier system, the first layer is a thin sheet of waterproof insulation similar to Styrofoam that is glued or nailed to the exterior walls of the house. A fiberglass mesh is laid over the insulation, and the acrylic stucco is spread out on top of that. Traditional stucco is made of cement or limestone.

When water gets trapped behind the waterproof sheathing, the walls begin to rot, critics say.

Leave the water there long enough and the wooden 2-by-4s that make up the house's frame also rot.

About 30 percent of commercial buildings going up today are clad in synthetic stucco, Allmayer said.

Moisture isn't a problem because those buildings usually are framed with cement, steel and brick — not



Less than 2 percent of houses being built today use the fake stucco, which first came into wide residential use in the late 1980s, Allmayer said.

It's popular among home buyers because it's cheaper than brick at about \$5 or \$6 per square foot, provides insulation and is easily shaped to mimic stone accents around doors and windows, said Peter Klyachenko, of Winfield-based Savenok Construction, who's installed the systems for 10 years.

It wasn't until the mid-1990s that problems with moisture in residential structures first cropped up in North Carolina.

Senergy's out-of-court settlement includes \$4 per square foot and can be claimed by homeowners around the nation. The cap is set at \$20 million.

Five manufacturers agreed to pay \$6 per square foot to North Carolina homeowners, including Dryvit Systems Inc., Parex Inc., United States Gypsum Co., W.R. Bonsal Company and Continental Stucco Products. And Sto, Corp., will pay \$2.5 million to North Carolina homeowners.

Minneapolis attorney Kent Williams, who represented North Carolina homeowners, also hopes to turn the lawsuit against Dryvit —

filed this month in Madison County in southern Illinois on behalf of the Palans and a downstate couple — into a class action. And Williams recently met with dozens of owners of synthetic stucco homes in the Aurora neighborhood of Stonebridge.

Several homeowners in the Naperville neighborhood of White Eagle registered complaints about the fake stucco last fall when Dan Voiland was city's acting assistant community development director. He met with 70 to 80 homeowners having problems.

Now Voiland, assistant fire chief, and other officials are pondering changes to Naperville's ordinances. They are considering additional warranties on the houses with synthetic stucco as well as inspections of the stucco before allowing anyone to move in, Voiland said.

The Chicago City Council is expected to approve a ban on barrier stucco systems this month.

Stucco inspections are a growing business in the Chicago area.

Cliff Kapson spends most of his days looking for moisture in homes around the Chicago suburbs.

In the past three years, he's inspected 200 homes and found only two with enough damage to warrant completely stripping the house of its stucco sheath to repair extensive water damage.

## Where to find out more

Homeowners interested in finding out more about synthetic stucco, which has been in residential use since the 1980s, can check out these Web sites:

■ Click on "hot topics" on

[www.dryvit.com](http://www.dryvit.com).

■ The national association for the EIFS, or synthetic stucco, industry, is at [www.eifs-facts.com](http://www.eifs-facts.com).

■ Information about the North Carolina lawsuit can be