

Chicago
Sun-Times
Jan. 14 2000

Bill
RUMBLER
House Sense



Insulation 'improvement' damaging some homes

It started out as a rust stain on the ceiling over a balcony in a new house. It will end up costing Silvana Ierullo and her family tens of thousands of dollars to remedy. We're not talking about a leaky roof or faulty plumbing. The exterior wall covering on her expensive Naperville home allowed water seep in, saturating the wood inside her walls.

Her home is clad in artificial stucco, often called Dryvit, but that company is only one of several manufacturers. Its technical name is EIFS for exterior insulation and finishing system. It's a multilayer system using resin compounds, foam insulation sheets and plywood or OSB. Its makers tout it as a no-maintenance, air-tight system that keeps the weather out and the heat in.

Its detractors claim that, as applied, it sometimes fails to keep out the rain, allowing it to seep in via seams or at flashing around windows. Once inside, there's no way for it to escape, and the moisture can rot plywood and framing, as well as induce unhealthy fungus, mold and mildew. Critics like to cite a photograph of mushrooms growing out of a windowsill at a home where EIFS failed. The moisture also can attract insects and vermin.

EIFS has been used widely in home construction this decade, primarily on more expensive homes.

Cliff Kapson of EnviroSpec Inc. in Northbrook, an EIFS inspection company, has been called in by 150 or so EIFS homeowners in the Chicago area. Virtually all the homes had a problem of one kind or another, he said.

In some, there was no significant subsurface damage, and it's just a question of properly resealing seams and flashings. In others, the damage was deep and widespread. Wide areas of covering would have to be ripped off and replaced. Repair costs can run from a couple thousand dollars up to \$40,000 for major patching jobs, Kapson said.

The most insidious thing about a malfunctioning EIFS house, he said, is that the damage almost always is hidden: "People think if they don't have a mushroom on their windowsill, they don't have a problem."

Ierullo didn't have mushrooms, but she's thinking of ripping off the entire EIFS and replacing it with traditional cement stucco. Cost: \$60,000.

Who pays? The builder and the subcontractor who installed her EIFS refused. The Ierullos joined a national class action suit against Senergy, the manufacturer of her EIFS, and got an award of \$17,500.

None of this should be construed to say all EIFS homes have problems. Maybe only homeowners who know they have a problem call Kapson. Some builders who've used EIFS, including those with a reputation for high-quality homes, say it's an excellent product and they've gotten no complaints from owners. Also, it's widely accepted in commercial construction.

And this is not to say all EIFS are the same. A new system called "water-managed" EIFS is in common use. It's designed to allow any penetrating water to drain out weep holes without causing damage.

What it does mean is that EIFS is controversial, and the controversy is coming to a head in this area as Chicago is considering banning EIFS over frame residential construction. North Carolina and Georgia already have banned the original "barrier" EIFS but permit the new drainable type.

The sponsor of the measure, Ald. Tom Allen (38th), said homeowners with failed EIFS have been refused damage claims by insurance companies, and their houses have lost market value. Allen said the public needs to be protected.

Ban the barrier type that keeps water inside? What about the water-managed system that solves this problem? Are there alternatives to a ban?

More on EIFS next week.