

EIFS SYSTEM SELECTION

Make sure you're covered!

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We are seeing an emerging trend in the industry over the past few years: insurance companies refusing to cover EIFS construction due to excessive claims. If unchecked, the result could be the elimination of EIFS as an exterior wall cladding system. If insurance companies continue to limit the percentage of the contractor's EIFS business for that contractor to qualify for coverage, EIFS could very well be an endangered cladding.

EIFS, sometimes called synthetic stucco, also goes by the brand names Parex, Dryvit, Senergy and others. It is a wall cladding system developed in Europe more than twenty five years ago. The product was widely hailed as an innovative, and relatively inexpensive, approach to exterior architectural finish. It is lightweight, provides nearly unlimited design flexibility, is easy to shape and color, and can provide an additional thermal barrier in colder climates.

One of the principle differences between EIFS and other cladding systems such as brick, metal and wood siding is the way water intrusion is dealt with. Most traditional wall claddings provide a mechanism to allow trapped water to escape from within the wall system. EIFS, on the other hand, is a barrier or "face-sealed" system. It is not intended to drain moisture that might find its way behind the face barrier; it relies on the absolute integrity of the coating as well as the flashing and joint sealant systems. If any of these systems fails, it is only a matter of time before the water destroys the substrate and possibly the supporting wall structure.

This limitation can be managed as long as all members of the design, construction and maintenance teams are aware of this fact and plan accordingly. The workmanship of the waterproofing trades that are integrated into the EIFS system must be of the highest standard. A caulking joint that lets water penetrate a brick façade may never even be noticed, as the brick is installed over a drained cavity which will release the water at the base of the wall. This same substandard joint on an EIFS façade will almost certainly result in significant damage to the substrate. Sealant and mechanical flashing joints are a critical part of the system and must be installed and maintained according to the manufacturer's specifications and details. This high quality installation must be followed up with a comprehensive inspection and maintenance program by the building owner.

Manufacturers are responding to the issue on several fronts. One of the most important is the proper training of installers. When EIFS systems were introduced into the market most installers were drawn from the interior trowel trades, primarily plasterers and drywallers. While they were skilled at applying the coatings, they knew little about flashing and waterproofing. Today, every manufacturer of EIFS products has at least some level of training and certification required for installers of their product.

Manufacturers have also responded with new product offerings that provide an integral moisture drainage system. These systems are referred to as "water managed" or "drainable", and are designed to provide an outlet for incidental water that may leak behind the barrier layer. These systems typically have a weather resistive barrier installed over the sheathing, with openings flashed and protected, and a drainage mechanism installed between the exterior finish and the weather resistive barrier. This provides a direct outlet for water that finds it's way behind the exterior finish.

Despite the current controversy, EIFS is not going away now or in the future. Manufacturers, designers and contractors have recognized the problems and have responded with solutions to most of the problems associated with EIFS installations. Fulcrum has successfully installed thousands of square feet of EIFS without problem. We have limited our exposure by taking a few precautionary steps when the design calls for EIFS.

- Make sure the subcontractor is insured for EIFS installations. You can't determine this from their insurance certificate, you will need to see a copy of their declarations page.
- Specify that the subcontractor use materials from a single supplier. In the event of a claim you don't want to give the product manufacturer an easy out, blaming the defect on another manufacturer's product.
- Specify a drained system in lieu of a barrier system.
- Make sure windows, doors and other openings are approved for use with EIFS. Many are not.
- Require that the subcontractor be certified as an installer for the brand of EIFS you are considering. Do not allow brand substitutions unless the subcontractor is certified as an installer of the proposed alternate.
- Require the EIFS subcontractor to perform a job readiness inspection prior to installation and issue corrective actions to the general contractor when nonconformance's are identified.
- During construction and upon completion, have the job inspected by a manufacturer's representative for conformance with their standards.
- Inspect all caulked joints and flashing annually.