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# It's Time to Defend Ourselves

By Frank Morsilli  
Dryvit Systems Inc.

*Editor's Note: Frank Morsilli, who founded the EIFS industry in the U.S., remains deeply devoted to the plastering industry even though the company he founded, Dryvit Systems, Inc., has recently been sold. He presently serves as Chairman of Dryvit. In these remarks recently made at the general membership meeting at AWCI's Convention in Toronto, he asks the industry to pay heed to the very serious threat posed by the competitive material interests and others which could affect the income of all plastering contractors as well as all EIFS manufacturers.*

**T**he Exterior Insulation and Finish Systems industry needs to defend itself against spurious and specious claims that have been made to code agencies in North America by competitive material interests. The time has come for action from all contractors using EIFS systems.

The Brick Institute of America, the Portland Cement Association, the Prestressed Concrete Institute, and other groups representing brick, block, precast, and cement are working together in an effort to stop EIFS penetration of their markets.

Why are they fighting EIFS? Because of the size of the EIFS industry. With manufacturers now producing \$250 million in product and contractors installing \$750 million, EIFS has grown to a billion-dollar industry. At the same time, the brick industry has suffered a decline.

#### Consider:

In 1908, when the United States had a population of about 75 million people,



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the brick industry annually produced approximately 20 billion standard brick equivalents (SBEs). There are about seven standard bricks per square foot of wall area, so this represents 2.85 billion square feet of wall area.

In 1970, when the United States had a population of 210 million people, the

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brick industry's production had dropped to seven billion SBEs, representing one billion square feet of wall area.

In 1990, with the U.S. population at around 250 million people, the brick industry produces four billion SBEs, representing 570 million square feet of wall area. That's a decline of nearly 60% in just 20 years!

At about the turn of the century, in 1900, there were around 7,000 large and small brick factories in the United States. In the 1960s the number of brick factories had dropped to about 500. In 1990, there are about 100 brick factories in the United States.

One reason for the drop in brick production has been the aesthetics, design flexibility, satisfactory services, and cost effectiveness offered by EIFS. The EIFS industry in the United States started in 1969. Since that time, it has grown to in excess of 200 million square feet of wall area per year in 1990.

The design profession, and the American public, have come to the realization that brick is too expensive and inflexible—brick exteriors just don't do what they're supposed to do. The brick industry itself has admitted that the brick curtain wall is not all it was reported to be when it was introduced several decades ago. Brick may be fireproof, but it is not fire safe (this distinction requires a fuller explanation below).

The design profession realizes that brick facades offer, for the most part, only flat, dull, monotonous walls with some variation in color and texture and that is all. And, once again the cost is extremely expensive.

EIFS, on the other hand, affords energy conservation, form, shape, color, texture, design flexibility, and prefabrication on renovation and new building construction projects—all at reasonable cost.

The brick industry has been unable to compete with the aggressive marketing of the EIFS industry and, therefore, they along with the Portland Cement Association, the Prestressed Institute, and others have been making spurious and specious claims to the various code agencies in North America. Their goal is to severely restrict the use of EIFS and

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recapture lost markets; in effect, to legislate EIFS out of business.

How are they trying to legislate the EIFS industry out of business? By

making claims about the safety and performance of EIFS installations. Lies are easy to disprove, but misinformation is far more subtle and difficult to deal with. Our clever competition doesn’t propose a ban of EIFS—that would be restraint of trade. Every day, thousands of people from the competition go into the marketplace and tell their stories to architects, builders, developers, contractors, building officials, building inspectors, and others.

They have proposed several limitations and restrictions on EIFS, including height limitations, setback restrictions, and others. They have proposed that the codes treat EIFS like wood. If they succeed, they could critically injure the industry.

There are three major code bodies that establish the model building codes in the U.S. They are BOCA, the Building Officials and Code Administrators International in suburban Chicago, Illinois; ICBO, the International Conference of Building Code Officials in Whittier, California; and SBCCI, the Standard Building Code Congress, Inc., in Birmingham, Alabama. The model codes work like the Congress of the United States. They use the committee system. Committees sit and listen to the pros and cons of issues and evaluate proposals. The committees then recommend to the entire voting body to approve or reject a particular proposal. For example, a nine-man committee might make a recommendation to 500 or more voting delegates. The voting delegates are building inspectors who may or may not be technically qualified to understand the issues. Also, they can be influenced in the same way politicians are lobbied.

What we’re dealing with is perception in the minds of the voting delegates to any of these three major code bodies. We’re not dealing with truth—we’re dealing with the perception of truth, and there’s a difference. The truth is, we all know our systems and products for exterior insulation systems perform well, and we know that they are no threat to safety. But that’s the truth, and it may not be enough. The human mind deals in its own perception of the truth.

I’m suggesting that if the voting delegate to one of the code bodies thinks there’s a threat to life safety, then yes, he will vote along with the opposition and severely restrict and limit the use of EIFS.

That’s why it’s incumbent on all of us to go to the grassroots level to seek out these voting delegates and enlighten them to the truth. We’ve got to insure that they do not believe the

egregious allegations that are being put forth by the competition.

In the past, when BIA, PCA, or the Prestressed Institute made proposals to restrict EIFS, we would always win by votes of nine to zero in the committees. Then the margin dropped to six to three. The last vote was five to four in favor of EIFS, and that is too close. If any of these proposals are brought out of committee, the consequences could be damaging to all of us.

What can you do?

If a big portion of your business is in EIFS, it will cost you time and money, but you can help. If we lose in the code arena, we're dead. So take the time to find the voting building code

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***“[tests] have shown the EIFS neither improve nor detract from the fire ratings of wall assemblies to which the EIFS are applied”***

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official in your region, whether it is BOCA, SBCCI, or ICBO. Explain the issues. Point out the size of the EIFS industry, and help them see the truth.

Make sure the building code official understands that no other industry has been tested at the same level, particularly for fire and life safety. In the 20 years EIFS has been used, there have been no fatal fires.

I mentioned above that brick is fireproof. But it is not fire-safe. Brick is heated in a kiln to a temperature of 2000 degrees F, and is compressed under pressure of 10-15,000 p.s.i. It is fireproof, yes, But in a wall held together with a 300 p.s.i. mortar joint, the brick wall can tumble down in a fire.

The same is true for glass. Glass explodes at 650 degrees F.

These are some of the things voting delegates to code bodies have to be told.

All concerned—every contractor, every journeyman mechanic, every distributor and supplier of EIFS, and every manufacturer of EIFS—should be active in this effort.

In 20 years almost one and a half billion square feet of walls using EIFS have been installed. There have been a very

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***“Explain the facts, spread the story, and don't let the competition legislate you out of business.”***

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few failures in that time—a small number because the materials are so good and the applicators who install EIFS are so good.

There have been no fatalities in fire with EIFS in more than 20 years. This is an impeccable record, but there is always the chance that a fire may occur in the future. For this reason, we have to be pro-active now to be ready for the people who will say EIFS buildings are unsafe.

So find out who the local voting code official for your code body is. You all know a building inspector. Call on him—he may be the voting delegate to the code agency. Also, talk to architects, builders, developers, contractors, and anyone else you might know who has a handle on this situation. Explain the facts, spread the story, and don't let the competition legislate you out of business. Don't let them devour the industry you have created.