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Stucco - EIFS or Real?

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The Real Estate Commission recently determined that the presence of "exterior insulating and finishing system" (EIFS - a type of synthetic stucco) on a property is a material fact and must be disclosed to prospective purchasers. EIFS has been associated with high moisture readings in the structural wood components of properties clad with this product. And high moisture levels often lead to problems such as rot damage and termite infestation. The problem is aggravated by the fact that the damage occurs behind the EIFS siding and can be difficult to detect.

But how do you tell if what appears to be stucco is really EIFS, so that you can make the necessary disclosure?

EIFS is relatively light, and sounds hollow when tapped...Real stucco is relatively heavy and feels and sounds solid when tapped.

EIFS siding is created by affixing a styrofoam panel to the wall sheathing. The styrofoam is covered with reinforcing mesh, followed by a base coat and a finish coat. Both the base and finish coats include an acrylic resin. The resin is water soluble in its liquid form, but once applied and dried, it becomes waterproof.

Typically, EIFS - from styrofoam to the finished surface - is only about 3/8 of an inch thick. It is relatively light, and sounds hollow when tapped.

The use of EIFS and other products has become increasingly popular in recent years. Because it is easily cut and applied, it is often used for decorative architectural features. In general, the newer the home, the more likely it is to have been sided with EIFS rather than real stucco.

Real stucco, on the other hand, is composed of cement and water, along with inert materials such as sand and lime. Galvanized wire lath may be attached to the exterior of the structure, and the cement mixture applied onto it. Sometimes, the cement mix is applied directly to specially prepared masonry surfaces. It is porous, and not waterproof. Thus, although it will absorb moisture, especially when unpainted, it also will dry easily, without damage to the structure.

Real stucco is relatively heavy and feels and sounds solid when tapped. It is a much harder material than EIFS, and is more resistant to injury by a blow or impact.

EIFS and real stucco may look similar, but a simple comparison of the two quickly reveals their differences. If you are uncertain whether the stucco siding on a property is EIFS, recommend that the parties have it inspected by a qualified inspector. Advise them of the available information about EIFS and other synthetic stucco products and refer them to building inspection offices and other experts for more information.

NOTE: There are synthetic stucco products other than conventional EIFS. These include DEFS or EFS ("Direct-applied Exterior Finish Systems") and "drainable EIFS." DEFS or EFS is a system that involves the use of cement board panels rather than styrofoam panels. "Drainable EIFS" systems incorporate drainage channels behind the styrofoam panels which may be visible at the bottom of the exterior synthetic stucco wall. These systems have been used less frequently than conventional EIFS. Because of the variety of stucco products, and the difficulty identifying some of these lesser known systems, it is especially important to involve qualified inspectors and other experts in transactions involving stucco.