

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Do You Side with Siding or Stick with Stucco?

If you have traditional cedar or redwood siding on your house, you're surrounded by something of an anachronism. Wood siding, with its relatively high cost and vulnerability to termites and dry rot, is on its way out today in this area. All but the highest-end homeowners are beginning to opt for lower-maintenance, higher-durability alternatives like stucco and cementaceous board.

Stucco has been around a long, long time – it's been widely used in Europe for centuries and remains the traditional siding for Mediterranean-style homes in the US. A cement-based product made with sand and lime, stucco is essentially fire-resistant and bug-proof, although earthquakes can crack it. Stucco has always appealed to budget-conscious homeowners because the only real maintenance cost is painting it every few years.

Most people will want to hire a pro to stucco their homes, but experienced do-it-yourselfers can go solo with the right preparation. You start by lathing – installing two layers of tarpaper and a layer of galvanized chicken-wire mesh. The mesh is held by furring nails that hold the mesh out away from the wall so it can act as a form and strengthening structure for the cement.

After lathing, two to three coats of stucco are applied – they're called the brown coat, the scratch coat and the final coat. Each layer requires cure time of at least a week, so it's completely dry before the next coat is applied. The slow cure is vital – insufficient cure time almost guarantees cracking. After the final coat, wait at least three weeks before painting.

Certainly traditional wood siding is still in widespread use, particularly among people who want a natural wood stain look for their homes. But here on the coast, more and more homeowners are choosing cementaceous board, a siding material that looks like traditional wooden planking but is made of cement. (Hardiplank is one well-known brand.) When painted, cementaceous board has the look of wood siding, but it's fire resistant, rot-proof and termite-proof, which makes it worth the higher initial cost to most people. Leading manufacturers offer 50-year warranties, which is one reason we're installing a lot of it right now.

There are a couple other decent siding alternatives – vinyl and brick – but neither is seen much in the Bay Area. Vinyl siding is a lot more attractive than it used to be, but in a high-end market like ours, it's not popular. Brick, of course, is gorgeous – anybody who grew up in Chicago or Philly has fond memories of entire neighborhoods of brick bungalows – but it's quite expensive and labor-intensive, and it doesn't do very well in earthquakes.

A couple of lower-cost siding fashions have come and gone, for good reason. Hardboard siding was popular for decades – Masonite was the best-known manufacturer – and synthetic stucco appeared on the scene about 20 years ago. Both, unfortunately, have been really good for my business and for that of anyone else who does residential re-siding, because they're prone to water penetration, and that's not good. Remember, as vital as the look may be, the most important role of your siding is to protect your home against the elements. Choose wisely.

Bruce Turner is president of TurnerBuilt, Inc. He can be reached at bturner@turnerbuilt.com.