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BPA INTERNATIONAL

JLC's

Letters

Wood as "Green" as It Gets

To the Editor:

In response to the article "Green Building at the Lumberyard" (*Notebook*, 4/99), I am continually amazed by some of the reasons for purchasing so-called "green" building materials. A case in point is the comparison of the new plastic decking products to traditional wood decking materials. While plastic decking can be made from recycled materials, most use virgin polymers and other nonrenewable, non-biodegradable resources that involve toxic manufacturing processes and high energy costs. Combine this with the fact that once these plastic materials are buried in a landfill they will stay there nearly forever. I fail to see how synthetic decking, or any other plastic building products, can be touted as "green" alternatives.

I still prefer the use of wood. It is 100% natural, nontoxic, renewable (many lumber companies are now growing trees on a sustained yield basis), and requires little energy to produce.

Dan Kepon
Fortuna, Calif.

Design Loads Vary by Locale

To the Editor:

I enjoyed the article on calculating dead and live loads (*Practical Engineering*, 3/99). In Cleveland, some of the local building inspectors require a 20-lb. live load (attic storage) for any top-floor ceiling when the roof pitch is over 3:12, trusses included. This is in addition to the 25-lb. snow load, 15-lb. roof dead load, and 10-lb. ceiling dead load — a total of 70 lb. per square foot. Other cities require only the 25-lb. snow load and 20-lb. dead load for a total of 45 pounds — a big difference! The current code book doesn't differentiate between truss and stick-built roofs, so each city follows its own interpretation.

John Bacik, CPBD
via e-mail

Bridging Useless

To the Editor:

I'm glad to get more information on blocking and bridging (*On the House*, 4/99). I've read studies from as far back as the late '60s that show no appreciable benefit from blocking or bridging in floor joists. So why, when the needle of the compass points north, do so many builders follow the lemming leaders south? I haven't blocked or bridged for nine years and the only complaints I have are from other builders who claim I'm cutting corners.

Mike Guertin
East Greenwich, R.I.

Payback for Energy-Efficient Windows

To the Editor:

The article "Choosing Energy-Efficient Windows" (1/99) was enlightening, but it omited an important element: the cost/payback relationship. Using the graphs, the total annual energy savings in New York is approximately $442 for Type II windows and $408 for Type III windows — a net dif-

ference of $34 per year. I contacted my local window supplier and we calculated the cost difference for 300 sq. ft. of window area between Type II and Type III windows as $706. Dividing the cost difference by the annual savings differential yields a payback period of more than 20 years.

At this time, this wouldn't be a good investment, but we should continue to monitor the costs. As low-e glazing becomes more popular, the costs will probably come down and the payback period will be shorter. This has already happened with furnaces. Years ago, when furnace efficiencies increased from around 68% to around 80%, there was a 12-year payback period to upgrade from an 80%-efficient furnace to 90% efficiency — a marginal investment. A couple of years ago, the reduction in the cost of 90%-efficient furnaces reduced that payback period to only two to three years. I now install 92% furnaces as standard equipment in all of the houses I build.

Having built in south Texas for ten years, I know from experience that the climatic differences shown in your articles are real. Builders need to make their own calculations based on their local climate and window costs.

James E. McIntyre
via e-mail

Termite Concerns

To the Editor:

I read the article "Insect Infestations in Buried Foam" (10/98) with great interest. We are builders in the York, Pa., area and sometimes use Styrofoam insulation on our foundations. I am planning a home and was considering the Tuff-N-Dri system. Does the fiberboard insulation used with this system pose the same type of problem as foam board with regards to termites?

Kevin Sterner
via e-mail

Don Jackson responds: It depends whom you ask. According to Greg Baumann of the National Pest Control Association, the NPCA is "not aware of any data that would prove that Tuff-N-Dri would prevent termite activity." That means that professional pest control applicators are not likely to give you a warranty if you have Tuff-N-Dri's board (called Warm-N-Dri) in place, because it would prevent them from getting the insecticide against the foundation where it's needed.

Michael Drake of Koch Materials, manufacturer of Tuff-N-Dri, insists that the system poses no termite problem, and points out that the CABO ban on below-grade rigid foam insulation in southern states does not apply to Warm-N-Dri, which is a compressed fiberglass product. He provided JLC *with a summary of testing done at Owens-Corning, in which six 12x12x1/2-inch samples of the board were exposed to soil containing 300 termites per cubic inch. Wood debris was provided to feed the termites. Three of the samples were treated with insecticide, three were untreated. The termites in the container with the treated board all died within the first week. After four weeks, the untreated samples showed no visible signs of tunneling; one of the samples was sawn apart to inspect for tunnels, and none were found. While the report concludes that "initial testing would appear to indicate that Warm-N-Dri is resistant to termite damage," the study should not be considered definitive. More rigorous testing would be welcome — perhaps a test in which the food source was placed on the opposite side of the insulation board.*

Meantime, given the persistence of termites, Drake suggests that a 6-inch vision strip is probably a good idea when using Warm-N-Dri.

Green Building Resource

The green building software mentioned in the March '99 *Notebook* column was developed by CREST (the Center for Renewable Energy and Sustainable Technology), *Environmental Building News*, and Design Harmony. The CD, which works on both IBM and Mac operating systems, costs $179 and is available at 888/442-7378 or www.crest.org.

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