

# Facelift cuts heating costs

By Penny Wright  
special writer

The dark-tinted glass facade of Arbe Electric Co. looks like the curtain-wall treatment on many commercial buildings.

But the surprise is that the recently modernized glass front at 20550 Eight Mile, Southfield, doubles as a solar heating system.

"The solar system turned out to be cost competitive with standard building treatments," said owner Bob Bruning, "and could bring heating gains along with the exterior treatment."

Although it is too early to enjoy the heat-gathering elements of the system, Bruning is pleased.

**CALLED "SOLARWALL,"** the 580 square feet of air-type collector represents a new dimension in solar space heating applications.

Its primary purpose is to provide a pleasing facelift for the worn concrete building. Providing heating was a secondary factor.

Bruning believes the first aim has been achieved. Before deciding on the solar system, he looked into other ways to improve his building, including aluminum siding. He made the final decision in favor of air wall for two reasons: "aesthetics and cost."

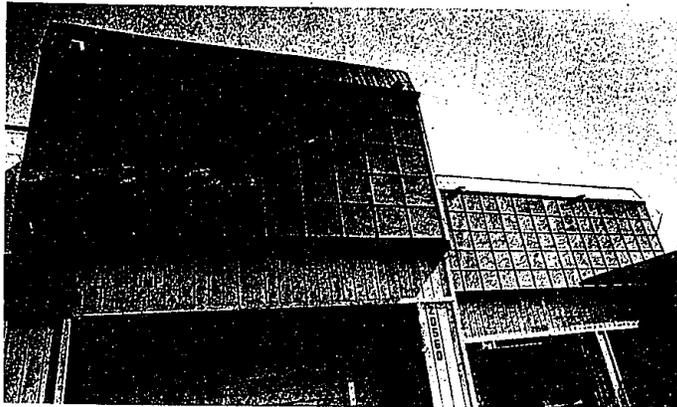
Tom McMurtrie is pleased, too. He heads Energy Research Inc., the Novi company that manufactured and installed the solar system.

The project proves a point McMurtrie has been making for years: There is no reason why solar cannot be architecturally compatible with a building.

"People think that solar has to be ugly," said McMurtrie. "What we are doing with a project like this is showing that solar-air collectors — particularly Solarwall — have a strong architectural potential besides just providing heat."

**McMURTRIE DESCRIBED** the solar heating system as a cross between a site-built collector and a premanufactured module.

Once the framework and back insulation are attached to a wall, the factory-built, two-by-two-foot collector panels are clipped together and dropped into place, forming a single-skinned



MINDY SAUNDERS/staff photographer

Arbe Electric Co.'s new glass facade not only spruced up an old Southfield building but also doubles as a solar heating system.

ray. Sheets of tempered glass form the outside glazing.

Even multi-storied buildings could be fitted with such solar heating systems, McMurtrie said. "It's just a matter of using scaffolding, since these modules are lightweight compared to other collectors."

**WHEN THE collector is operating,** cold room air enters the modular array through wall vents at the bottom of the system. The cold air, circulates up through the unit, aided by a fan and baffles.

The sun-warmed air then enters the building by way of vents near the top of the collector.

The Arbe installation will contribute 80,000-80,000 BTUs of heat per square foot of collector over the heating season, McMurtrie said.

"It's not to be seen as a total heating system," he said, "but it will cut the heating bills substantially."

**WILL OTHER companies** along Eight Mile jump onto the solar bandwagon? Some have expressed an interest.

Southfield planner Carol Steinger said the city would be delighted if they did.

The Bruning project was financed through a locally-administered federal rehabilitation loan program geared to encouraging exterior building improve-

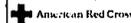
ments, Steinger said.

"If these improvements are linked with energy conservation measures, so much the better," she added.

"We have a low-interest loan fund especially targeted for the Eight Mile commercial strip. By upgrading buildings and making exterior improvements, we hope to make the area more viable."

About \$150,000 is left in the fund. The department of planning and economic development will work with any business planning to seek a loan, she said.

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