

Wood foundations becoming more popular

The strong home building industry has meant plenty of construction work.

But it's also caused difficulties for building companies getting timely service from busy subcontractors.

Otto Binggeser, president of Bing Construction in Bloomfield Hills, was frustrated by the delays. With limited control over scheduling, he was unable to build houses in a time period that satisfied his customers.

At the same time, one of his suppliers, Erb Lumber in Birmingham, was investigating the feasibility of Permanent Wood Foundations, an alternative

building system with growing popularity in the Great Lakes area.

This foundation, which uses pressure-treated wood instead of block or poured concrete, can be installed by carpentry crews rather than masonry subcontractors.

Impressed with PWFs many benefits - comfortable living environment, relative humidity, energy savings, easier finishing and greater usable space - Erb decided to seek out one receptive builder to try the concept on a model home.

The proposal was pitched to Binggeser, who was looking for

such an aggressive idea.

After testing several custom homes with PWFs, Binggeser decided to start out by building his own house with a permanent wood foundation.

"Construction can continue in weather that doesn't permit proper curing of concrete, and builders can keep carpenter crews busy from basement to roof," said Robin Green, vice president for purchasing at Erb.

"Also, the warmth of a permanent wood floor is a desirable homeowner feature," he said.

Wood foundations originally were introduced in 1969 following test work by government and

trade associations.

It's estimated that more than 300,000 houses have wood basements, with the greatest concentration in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan and Ohio where wood foundations give builders an edge on inclement weather.

About 2,000 are in southeast Michigan. The foundations consist primarily of framing lumber and plywood walls, all pressure treated with wood preservatives for protection against damage from termites and rot.

Even under severe weather conditions, permanent wood foundations are warranted

against leaks. Wood's elasticity enables the foundations to withstand pressure from expanding soils that would crack cement.

The cost is comparable to or a bit less than poured concrete, Erb reports.

However, Mark Miller, Bing vice president and Binggeser's son-in-law isn't so sure. He figures it may cost more - but maybe not when factoring in time savings using carpenters rather than waiting for masonry contractors.

Miller, however, likes the concept. "With a walk-out, you'll probably finish the basement. It

makes it so much easier, better. The walls are already studded out and the floor will seem like upstairs," he said.

Based on 40-year test stakes in Wisconsin and Mississippi, experts agree that permanent wood foundations should last over 100 years.

PWFs are approved by building codes, federal housing agencies, lending institutions and insurance agencies.

Binggeser likes the his permanent wood foundation, Miller said, adding that it probably will take some education - and time - before the typical buyer jumps on the bandwagon.

Wet basements can be corrected inexpensively

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Wet basements can often be corrected easily and inexpensively. The main exception is when the culprit is ground water. In that case, the only sure solution is to install drainage tile around the outside of the wall and sump pumps inside.

Bear in mind that water - not basement walls - causes leaks, and the presence of water is almost always the result of poor drainage and poorly maintained gutters. Problems like these must be corrected first.

There are two kinds of basement waterproofing materials. The first are masonry patch items. These products work well when the basement is not leaking at the time of repair. They range from mortar caulk to pre-mixed mortar to hydraulic putty.

Adding a latex bonding agent to a standard masonry mix will improve bonding. Hydraulic putty works well if you're repairing a continuously seeping hole. The product bonds extremely well and cures quickly, even when wet and under pressure.

The second category includes a variety of rubberized coatings, which usually contain portland cement. As

these products are expensive (more than \$20 per gallon), cover only 75 to 125 square feet per gallon and produce noxious fumes while they cure, they should only be used when drainage improvements and wall repair come up short.

Highlights of the operation begins with checking the perimeter of your foundation for depressions in the fill-soil. Especially check areas around window wells. Add soil to build up these depressions, and tamp the soil firmly into place. Then plant grass seed.

Remove any blistered paint from the interior of your foundation wall with a wire brush and coarse sandpaper. Scrub mildew with an

abrasive pad and a white chalky substance that is actually crystallized mineral salts that have leached from the concrete or mortar. Caulk small leaky cracks

with a silicone-mortar caulk and smooth with a putty knife dipped in mineral spirits. If the cracks are larger, enlarge the crack with a tapered mason's chisel, clean the joint and wet with a mix of water and latex bonding agent.

Blend the premixed mortar with water and bonding agent until the mortar will stand up when you slice through it with a trowel. Then, stack a little mortar on the back of a small trowel, place the trowel against the crack and push the mortar into the joint with a pointing trowel.

Pack the entire joint, then scrape away the excess and smooth the joint with a joint-striking tool. Use the same

methods to fill any gaps or cracks around utility pipe holes.

Before deciding to paint a wall

with waterproofing, wait a few weeks. If it rains and your basement stays dry, chances are you won't need

it. If you don't see any obvious leaks, but the masonry surface is damp, then a sealer is a good idea.



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