



# Stucco:

**A closer look at what could be hiding behind your client's home**

When Jenny Beverage bought a stucco home in Bluffdale, she didn't expect her windows to start leaking water only two weeks after she moved in.

The water came through the inside of Beverage's second-story wall, down the inside of the first-story window, through the wall again and finally cascaded down the basement window.

"Basically, the water came in like a waterfall," Beverage recalled.

Beverage contacted about 18 contractors, but many refused to repair the house because they could not discover why the windows were leaking. Finally, one contractor told her the problems were caused by poorly installed stucco.

"I wish someone would have advised a stucco inspection," Beverage said. "Neither [the real estate agent nor the home inspector] suggested a stucco inspection. The [agent] said the leaky window was no big deal. He didn't even want to put the leaky window in the contract."

And this problem is not uncommon. Thousands of stucco homes in Utah have potential stucco problems.

Dennis McCoy, CEO of Ram Builders, Inc., has repaired hundreds of stucco homes along the Wasatch Front and says thousands more probably have dry rot and mold damage from poorly installed stucco. And many times, the owners are unaware that this costly problem even exists.

Beverage's leaky stucco will cost about \$8,500 to repair, but some homes have repairs costing thousands more.

"Depending on where the home is and what [needs repair], it can be a \$1,500 problem or a \$150,000 problem," McCoy said. "We've repaired homes upwards of \$160,000 because even though they look fine from the outside, underneath them, the wood's turned to potting soil."

## About Stucco in Utah

Stucco is an exterior cladding that has been around for almost a hundred years and has been popular in Utah for about 15.

Before the late 1980s and early 1990s, stucco didn't work well in Utah's climate. However, stucco became popular almost overnight after the development of new synthetic stucco systems, McCoy said.

One-coat or hardcoat stucco is where a base coat is applied in one layer. The base and finish coats in this system have synthetic additives that help the stucco withstand Utah's freeze/thaw conditions.

Because of the additives, people have perceived that one-coat stucco completely repels water at the surface, which is incorrect, McCoy said. A secondary water management system of building papers and properly installed flashings is needed so any water that does enter the stucco can escape. Problems occur when this drainage system is improperly installed.

"A one-coat system with an acrylic finish will be less forgiving of any defect in the proper placement of building papers, flashing and lathing staples," McCoy said. "If water reaches the wood structure of the house, it is less able to escape by evaporation."

Another stucco system in Utah, exterior insulation and finish system (EIFS), consists of a thin, cement coating with synthetic additives applied over mesh which is then placed over foam panels. In this system, unlike with one-coat stucco, the water is intended to travel on the outside surface of the stucco, McCoy said. However, if the penetrations are not properly sealed, water can get trapped behind the foam.

"There's nothing to keep water from going behind them," he said. "There's no secondary water management so the water goes into the wood structure of the home."

Although people can sometimes use visual indicators like bulges, cracks or discoloration to identify problems, much stucco damage remains unseen.

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## Stucco

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“Utah’s stucco problem is not the [homes] that leak,” McCoy said. “It’s the thousands of them that have all that water being held in the wood framing promoting mold growth and organic decay that people don’t know about.”

### Tips for REALTORS®

Many of these problems were the result of builders unfamiliar with how stucco works as well as cities failing to provide third-party inspections.

Most homes with defects were built between 1993 and 2000 when many cities did not have third-party inspections, McCoy said. The pullout box, “What are the chances your client’s stucco home has a problem?,” provides greater detail about what stucco homes are at risk.

“We show that [chart] to real estate agents

because it gives them an awareness of ‘I’ve got a buyer who wants to buy a home built in 1997 in West Jordan,’” McCoy said. “It doesn’t mean you’re going to find that but you’ve got a better chance, so therefore, let’s be a little more concerned.”

Although there’s no absolute way to predict if a home is going to have a problem or not, an intrusive stucco inspection can help buyers and sellers determine a home’s condition.

Stucco inspections include a visual inspection of the stucco, the flashings and other components. Probing is also done to determine if the wood is wet or deteriorated, said home inspector Kurt Salomon.

Even though the price of stucco inspections is two to four times the cost of a standard home inspection, Salomon says all stucco homes should have one.

But not all home inspectors can complete stucco inspections. Only about 10 inspectors in the state are qualified to conduct these kinds of intrusive inspections.

Furthermore, stucco inspections are not just for homebuyers.

You may want to have sellers with stucco homes built during high-risk times have an intrusive inspection, McCoy said. This proactive approach will allow a seller to contact a remedial company if there is a problem. On many systems, the company will be able to make localized repairs that will make the stucco system work. Then when the buyer’s inspector comes, the red flags will already be taken care of, he said.

“We’re seeing more and more sophistication in this market when it comes to stucco,” McCoy said. “It’s not like you can pretend it doesn’t exist.”

McCoy says this approach will also help minimize the real estate agent’s liability.

“Real estate agents sit in a position to help put this behind us and retribute this [problem] that took place along the Wasatch Front better than anyone else,” McCoy said. “When it comes to the past, the only hope is really through real estate agents.”

Furthermore, real estate agents shouldn’t try and cover up problems because that can actually accelerate the damage, McCoy said.

“We’re not saying every house is bad,” McCoy said. “But the potential is there if a house is built within these certain periods of time. Stucco can work in Utah. But the potential is huge for major structural damage.” **■**

*The information in this article is for educational purposes only and is not intended to represent specific legal advice.*

## What are the chances your client’s stucco home has a problem?

The following chart will help you determine what stucco homes have the greatest likelihood of having a stucco problem. Choose the city where the house is located; determine whether the home has either one-coat or EIFS stucco; then find out the year in which the house was built. For example, a one-coat stucco home in Sandy built in 1999 has 50 percent chance of having a stucco defect.

City	One-Coat '88 and '98	One-Coat '98 and '00	One-Coat '00 and '03	EIFS '88 and '00	EIFS '00 and '03
Salt Lake City	90	75	50	95	75
Taylorsville	90	90	75	95	95
Murray	75	50	10	95	50
Midvale	75	50	10	95	50
Sandy	90	50	10	95	50
Draper	90	90	50	95	75
West Valley/South Jordan/ Riverton/West Jordan/ Alpine/Highland	90	90	90	95	95
Lehi	90	90	10	95	50
Saratoga Springs			10	95	50
American Fork	90	90	75	95	95
Lindon	90	90	75	95	95
Orem	75	50	10	95	50
Provo	90	75	75	95	75
Springville	90	90	75	95	95
Spanish Fork	90	90	90	95	95
Payson	90	90	75	95	95
Salem	90	90	90	95	95
Clearfield	90	90	75	75	75
Farmington/Layton Centerville/ Bountiful/Farwest/Ogden/Roy	90	90	90	95	95

Source: Ram Builders