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Termites don't attack adobe, but beware straw, moisture

By Forrest M. Holly JULY 17, 1981

Q. A contractor surprised me by saying he would not consider using adobe as a building material because it attracts termites. True or false? If true, do adobe manufacturers mix in a poison to inhibit insects? William A. Ayres Escondido, Calif.

A. For more than 4,000 years adobe blocks have been made and used as a wall material in arid or semiarid countries around the world. Moisture was the major enemy of earthen bricks. When straw was used as an adobe binder, it sometimes provided access for insect attacks. When horse droppings were used to harden the blocks, mushrooms infrequently appeared on the inside walls in dark rooms.

As long as ancient adobe walls were protected from moisture, they stood for centuries, despite bugs or mushrooms. But let ancient adobe get wet and it disintegrates back into its original mud or unstable earth. Your contractor friend's report on the cause of ancient adobe's destruction is wrong. Termites prefer munching on wood, not earth.

A half century ago one of the large oil companies discovered how to make asphalt soluble in water through a process called emulsification. Emulsified asphalt mixed with water and clay-bearing soil results in a modern adobe block that is stabilized and waterproof without straw or horse manure.

Modern adobe does not appreciably erode even when exposed to water and is far more water-repellent than concrete. There is nothing in a hard, dry, modern asphalt-impregnated adobe block to attract insects, rodents, termites, vermin, or mushrooms. Poison in a modern adobe mix to deter termites is neither used nor useful.

Having once lived in a California modern adobe home, I am spoiled for almost any other kind of wall material. Modern adobe is an excellent thermal as well as sound insulator. Those living in an adobe home hardly know what the weather outside is like. Further, adobe has incomparable charm, beauty, and grace.

Besides, what other building material can equal the romance of adobe?