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Law menaced adobe industry

by Kathlyn Russell

From late February to April, an industry in the Escondido area was in a state of animated suspension.

A new state law went into effect with which people who build with adobe — and people who retain a lasting interest in what they build — were much in sympathy. Yet it threatened to put them out of business.

The bill was SB 277 and was passed in November 1972 to go into effect in January 1975. This later was changed to Feb. 22, 1975, by which date no cities or counties were to approve any building permits that did not meet new minimum energy-saving standards.

The standards were set mechanically, measuring "heat loss coefficient" in British Thermal Units (BTUs). The idea was that no new buildings were to go up in California that wasted energy to keep them warm in winter and cool in summer — a theory that many people, with the possible exception of the speculative developer, approve.

The problem was the law made no exceptions for special building materials, such as adobe, and required insulation on all walls, ceilings and under floors (in colder areas, as well as limiting the ratio of glass windows to 15 per cent of floor space unless the windows were of bronze glass (expensive) or of double-insulated glass (more expensive).

One thing you don't do with an adobe wall is to lay insulation material over the inside and plaster over that. Not only is it unnecessary, since adobe walls are from 16 inches to four feet thick, but according to Mike Goodbody of Southwest Adobe in Escondido, adobe is the greatest naturally-insulated building material available.

Adobe, Goodbody said, is the material that best meets the needs of the energy crisis. An adobe building stays cooler in summer and warmer in winter. It insulates so well that it retains the coolness of the summer evening well into next day, and by the time the walls are giving off the day's heat, it is cool evening again. The reverse takes place in winter with the artificial heat inside a home. The exterior walls of an adobe are more temperate than other outside areas in winter, he said.

Adobe is usually used for large, custom-built homes in which the trend is towards high-beam ceilings and huge picture windows that make the most of views. High-beam ceilings and huge picture windows were exactly what SB 277 threatened. It required insulation in the ceilings expensive in the open-beam concept and limited the amount of glass to 15 per cent of the gross floor area.

Goodbody said he spent at least a month, full-time, working on getting



an amendment to the legislation that would recognize the natural insulating qualities of adobe and not change a centuries-old California tradition (the missions are built of adobe) and a beautiful, natural medium for building.

The adobe industry — which in California is almost synonymous with Escondido's Southwest Adobe, the only remaining large-scale manufacturer of bricks — retained Richard Palmer, an Irvine mechanical engineer, to run a series of tests on the adobe equivalent of the BTU factor and get the California Department of Housing to recognize that adobe meets the energy requirements.

As of last Monday, Palmer was still in active touch by telephone with Calvin Jepson, senior civil engineer in

the California Department of Housing. Each group is having tests made, Palmer on adobe and Jepson (or his agents) on a lighter weight material. When the tests are complete, if the adobe measures up (and Goodbody is sure it will), credit will be given, Jepson said in a telephone interview, for the mass of the material to show that in certain areas of the state, with a mild climate, adobe meets the energy conservation standards.

In April, a public hearing in Sacramento brought forth enough protests from the building and related industries to have certain modifications made to SB 277. One allowed adobe houses to continue to be built on a temporary amendment to the bill, pending results of the engineering tests, and another raised

Thickness of adobe bricks is illustrated by photos, taken at Southwest Adobe in Escondido, where bricks are made for most of Southern California consumption. Process now includes adding a chemical to soil to prevent weathering that destroyed uncovered adobe in historic times. Part of appeal of material is in its appearance on walls, which would be destroyed if insulation were added.

COVER PHOTO —

Contemporary sculpture in garden adjacent to Fine Arts Gallery in Balboa Park can also be seen through fence by visitors to the Old Globe Theatre. Sculpture spills into garden from enclosed sculpture court.

Dan Rio's photo



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