

*WHAT THE HECK
ARE AIR BARRIERS,
VAPOR BARRIERS
AND WATER-
RESTIVE BARRIERS?*

AIA # WHA2025

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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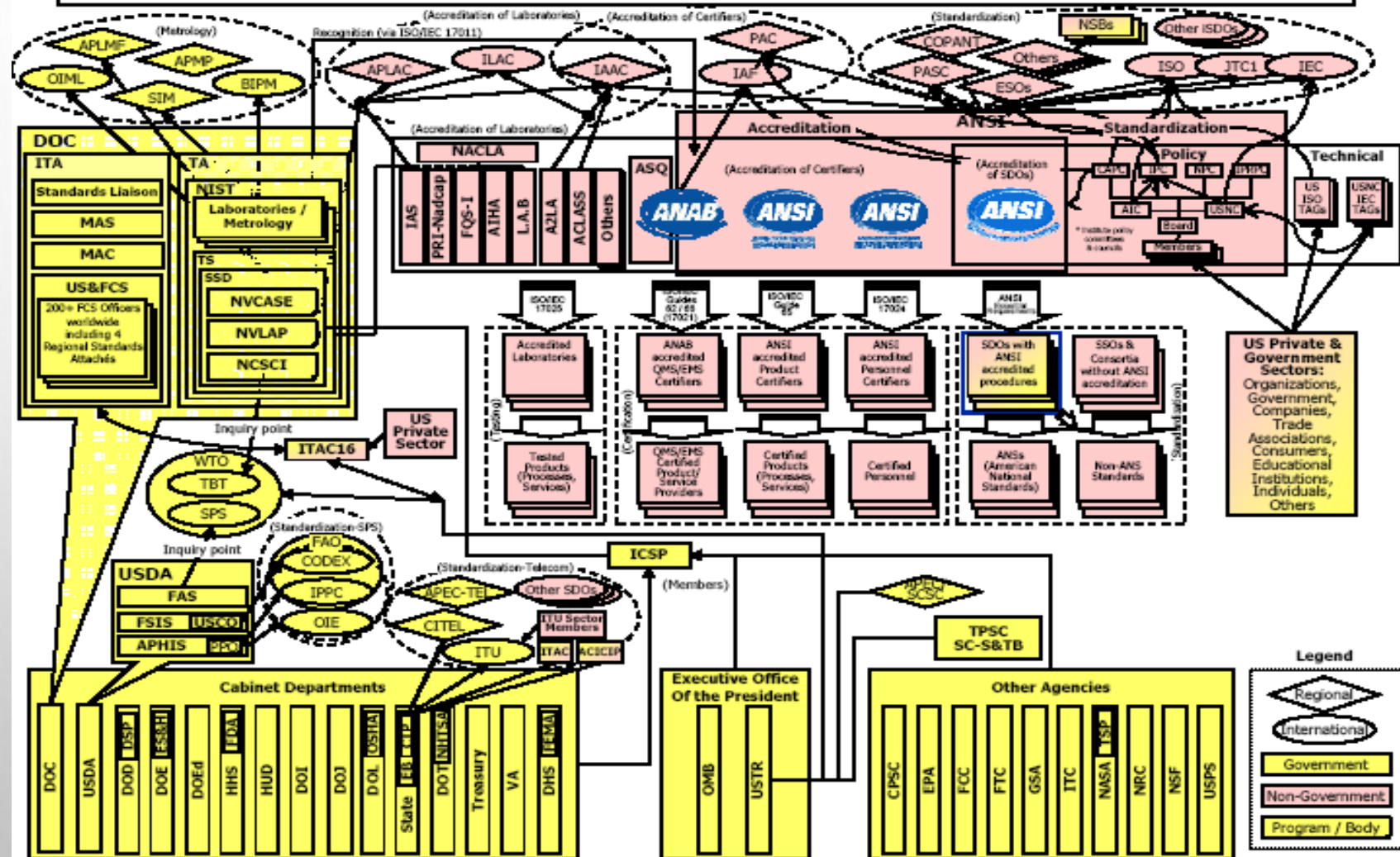
Laverne Dalglish
Executive Director, Air Barrier Association of America



Laverne has promoted high performance durable building both in North America and Internationally, He started the Air Barrier Association of America in 2001 which has grown into a whole industry and air barriers have become a Building Code requirement. He continues to work on developing standards and in implementing site quality assurance programs in the construction industry.

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Standards and Conformity Assessment Bodies of the U.S.



What are Air Barriers, Vapor Barriers and Water-Resistive Barriers?

- Air barriers, Vapor barriers. Water-resistive barriers are all the same right?
- No – So why is there some much confusion?
- The answer is also confusing

What are Air Barriers, Vapor Barriers and Water-Resistive Barriers?

- **Abstract:** these terms are really simple, so why confusion? This presentation will cover what they are, when they are not and when they may be more than one. That is when the confusion comes in. Some barriers are critical, and some are not, how do you know? When can a single material be different just because where it is installed in the building envelope?

What are Air Barriers, Vapor Barriers and Water-Resistive Barriers?

Learning objectives:

- Define each of the barriers
- Determine the various means water enters the building
- Explain why what you do not see can hurt you the most
- Show what can be a critical barrier

WHAT IS AN AIR BARRIER, VAPOR BARRIER OR WATER-RESISTIVE BARRIER?

AIR BARRIER MATERIAL – REDUCES AIR GOING **THROUGH** A MATERIAL

- **VAPOR BARRIER MATERIAL** – REDUCES WATER VAPOR GOING **THROUGH** A MATERIAL
- **WATER-RESISTIVE BARRIER MATERIAL** – STOPS LIQUID WATER GOING **THROUGH** A MATERIAL
- **HEAT BARRIER (THERMAL INSULATION)** – SLOWS THE HEAT FLOW **THROUGH** A MATERIAL
- VERY SIMPLE RIGHT? **BUT.....**

THE FUTURE

WE BUILD A LOT OF BUILDINGS RIGHT, SOME NOT SO GOOD



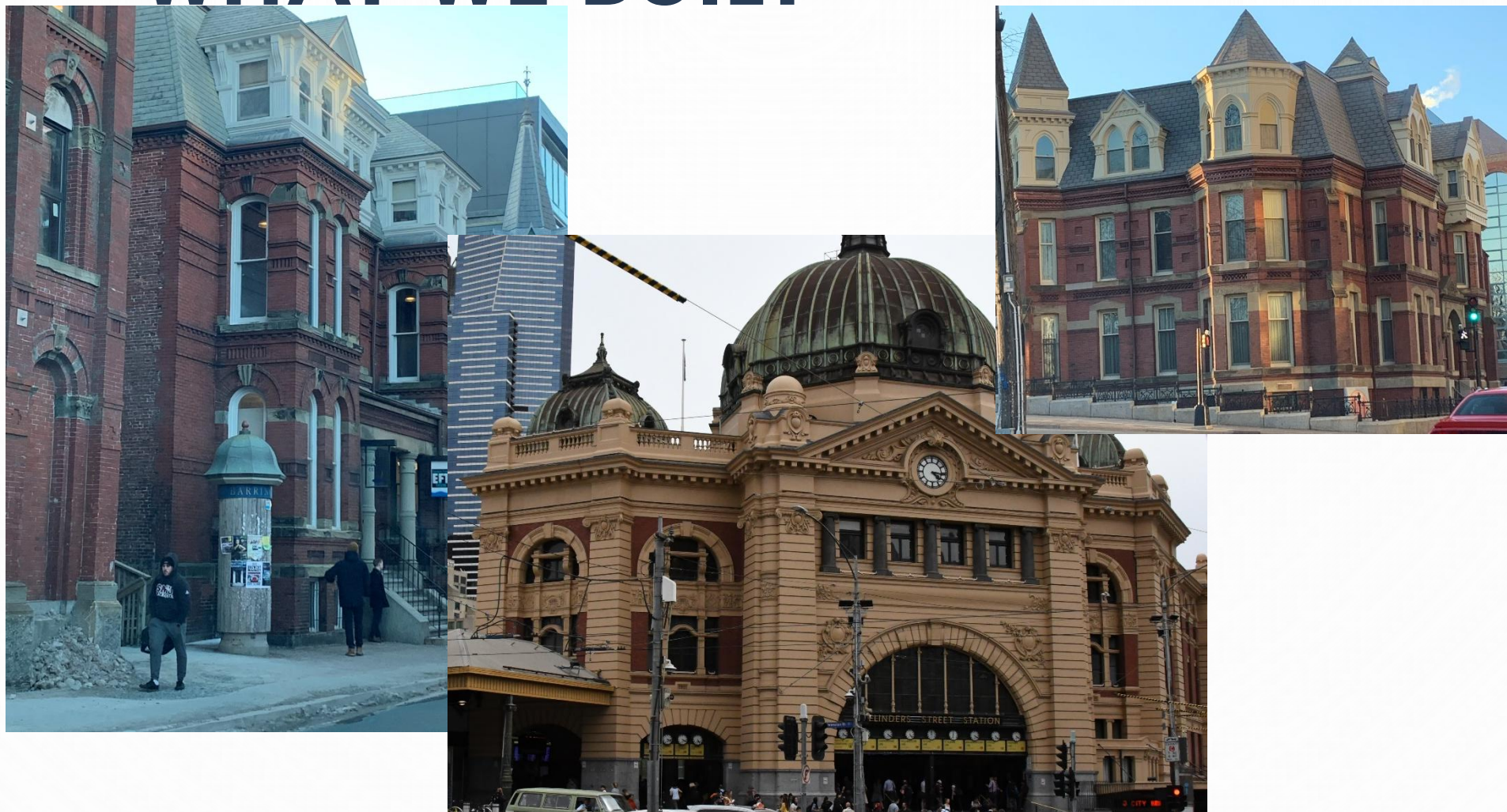
THE FUTURE

WHAT WE USE TO BUILT

WHAT WE ARE BUILDING



WHAT WE BUILT



WHAT WE ARE BUILDING



THE FUTURE

WE ARE BUILDING THE SAME, BUT BUILDINGS HAVE CHANGED



THE FUTURE

WE ARE BUILDING THE SAME, BUT OUR WORKFORCE HAS CHANGED



WHAT IS AN AIR BARRIER, VAPOR BARRIER OR WATER-RESISTIVE BARRIER?

Very simple right? **But.....**

1. Many materials can do more than one function
2. Many material properties change when temperature and humidity changes
3. Many material properties change when they are part of a building assembly
4. Installation requirements can dictate when a material provides a material property

WHAT IS AN AIR BARRIER, VAPOR BARRIER OR WATER-RESISTIVE BARRIER?

For any of these barriers, the material must be

- a. designed
- b. selected
- c. installed

To function as intended

THE HISTORY OF AIR BARRIERS

1940's University of Minnesota researched why water was coming into walls – resulted in #15 felt being installed as a water-resistive barrier

1960's More insulation was being put into buildings resulting in water in the walls – resulted in a vapor barrier being installed in walls

THE HISTORY OF AIR BARRIERS

1970's/80's Water was still showing up in walls – research was done on water vapor by air transport resulted in air leakage being shown as the cause

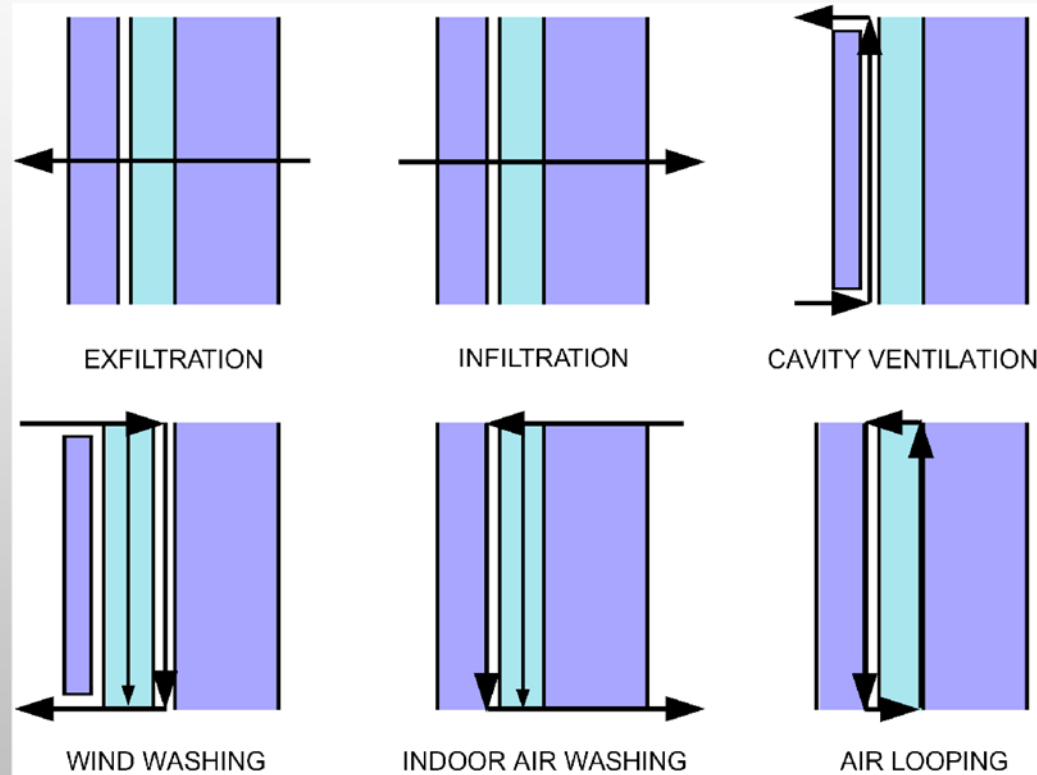
1990 National Building Code of Canada required an air barrier to be installed in buildings

2001 Commonwealth of Massachusetts requires an air barrier in buildings

THE HISTORY OF AIR BARRIERS

All this work was done to deal with **water** in buildings

WHAT IS AN AIR BARRIER?

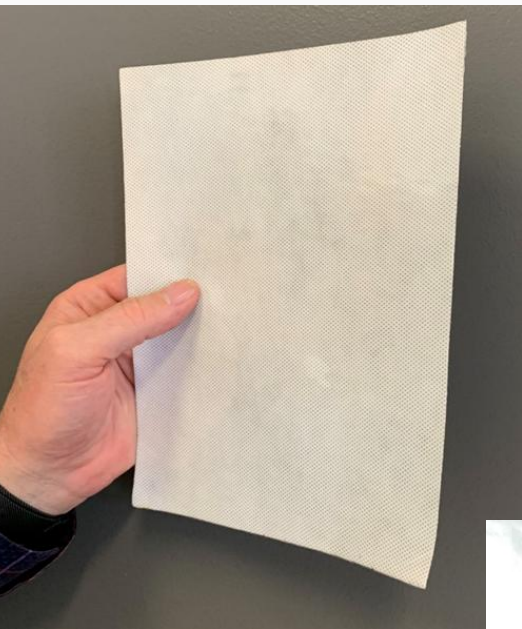


WHAT IS AN AIR BARRIER? (VERB)

What is the performance requirement for an air barrier?

- Depends on
 - **Material** – the main part of an air barrier assembly
 - **Accessory** – material or products that are used with the material
 - **Sub-Assembly** – portion of an assembly used to confirm performance
 - **Assembly** – made up of material(s) and accessories – roof assemblies, wall assemblies and foundation assemblies
 - **Component** – items which are manufactured and simply installed on site – doors, windows, etc.
 - **System** – all six sides of a building, made up of the assemblies

WHAT IS AN AIR BARRIER?



What is an Air Barrier?

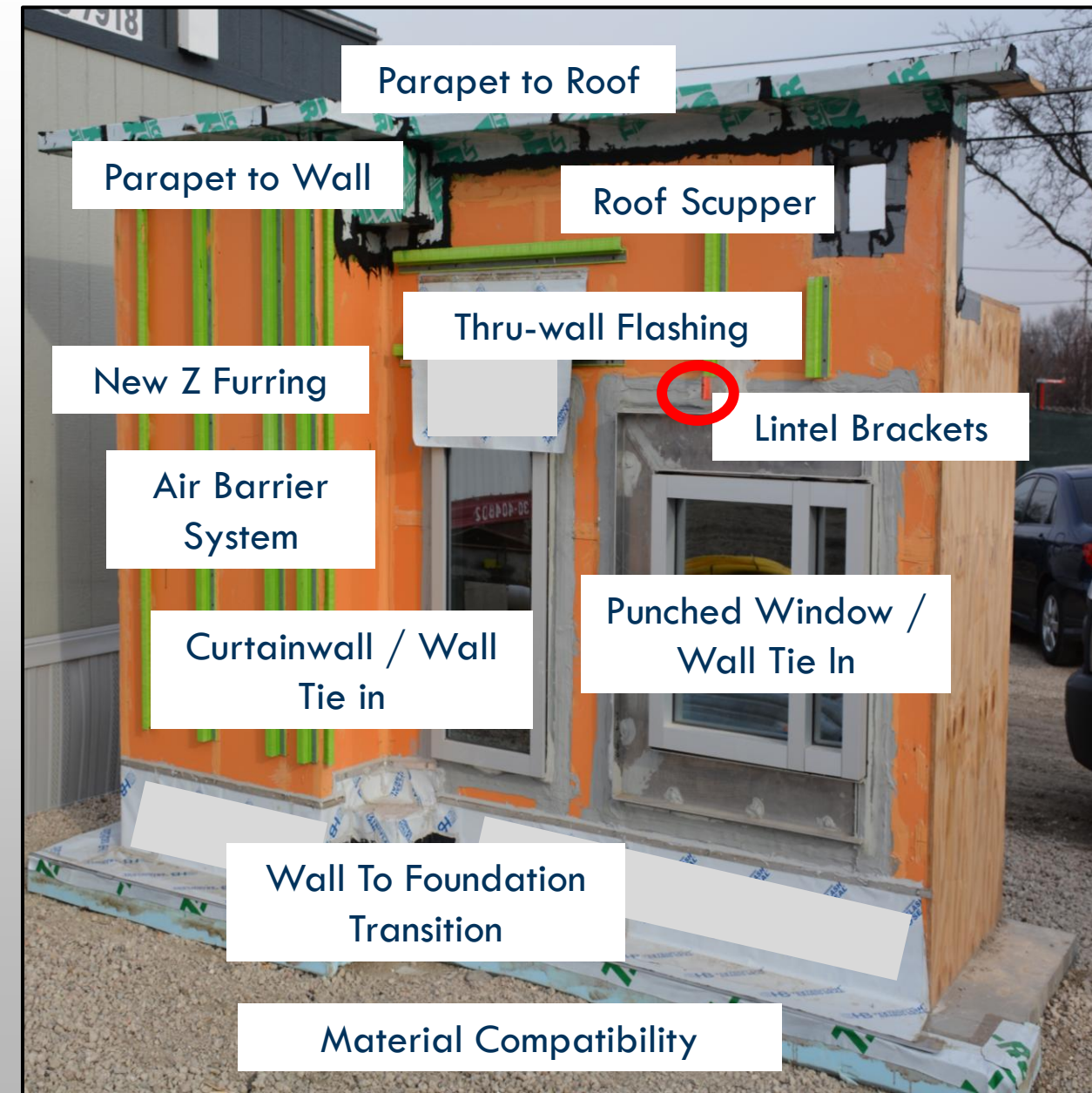
Air barrier requirements

Air Barrier Material - the big pieces	0.004 CFM/ft ² @ 1.56 lbs/ft ² pressure difference (ISO 14857 ASTM E2178)
Air Barrier Accessory – tapes, strips, caulking, etc.	0.004 CFM/ft ² @ 1.56 lbs/ft ² pressure difference (ASTM E283)
Air Barrier Component – windows, doors, skylights, etc.	0.04 CFM/ft ² @ 1.56 lbs/ft ² pressure difference (ASTM E283)
Air Barrier Assembly - wall assembly, roof assembly, foundation assembly	0.04 CFM/ft ² @ 1.56 lbs/ft ² pressure difference (ASTM E2357)
Air Barrier System - Whole Building	0.10* CFM/ft ² @ 1.56 lbs./ft ² pressure difference (ISO 9972, ASTM E 779 ABAA AB-001)

*proposed maximum air leakage rate

Why are air barriers hard to do?

Hundreds of opportunities for air leaks



\$14 M Project

On Site Simple Wall Mock Up =
\$12,500.

Mock Up = 0.09% of Construction Costs



What is a Vapor Retarder (Barrier)?

Air Barrier Performance Requirements

- **Material** designated to reduce the water vapor transmission rate through the material
- Notice we have specifically identified a material – **NO accessories, sub-assemblies, assemblies or systems**
- **Every** construction material has a water vapor transmission rate, so all materials are vapor retarders of some sort

What is a Vapor Retarder (Barrier)?

Vapor Retarder (Barrier) Code Performance Requirements

Vapor Retarder (Barrier) Material - the big pieces, there are only pieces – big or small

International Building Code Table 1404.3(2)

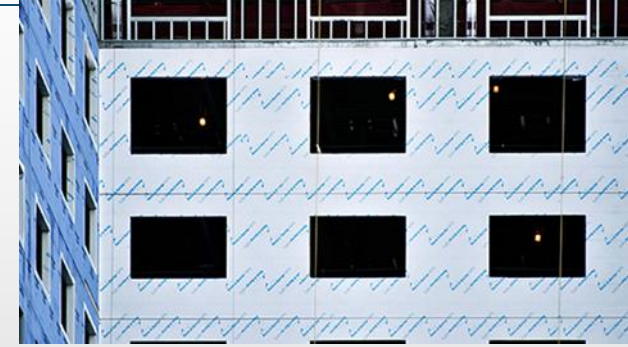
Climate Zone
1,2
3,4 (except
Marine 4)
Marine 4,
5,6,7,8

Vapor Retarder
Class
III
II,III
I, II, III (Table
1404.3(3))

A vapor retarder should be the simplest control layer in a building assembly, but it is the most complex

Class I	less than or equal to 0.1 Perm
Class II	greater than 0.1 Perm and less than or equal to 1.0 Perm
Class III	greater than 1.0 perm and less than or equal to 10.0 Perms

What is a Vapor Retarder Material (Barrier)?



What is a Water-Resistive Barrier?

- “**Assembly** of materials and accessories behind an exterior wall covering that is intended to resist the further intrusion of liquid water that has penetrated the exterior covering into the exterior wall assembly”
- Code has got this right – it’s an **ASSEMBLY**
- **Material and Accessories** have to be combined into a control layer

What is a Water-Resistive Barrier?

Water-Resistive Barrier Performance Requirements

***Water-Resistive
Barrier Material***
- the big pieces

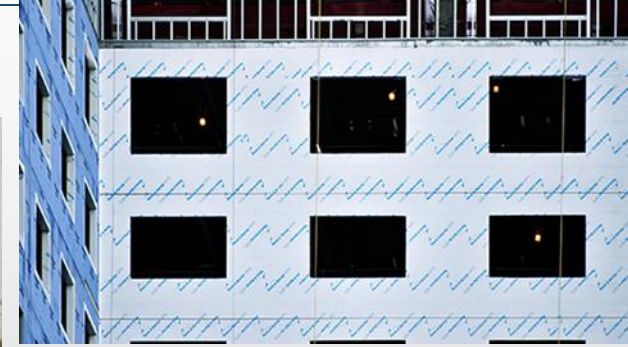
No liquid water through the material

***Water-Resistive
Barrier
Accessories*** -
Flashings, etc.

No liquid water through the material

Water-resistive barriers seems to be straight forward – keep
water out

What is a Water-Resistive Barrier Material?



Now the Confusing Part

Materials use change depending on whether the material has been designed and installed to provide a specific performance

Why do we care?



MOLD



CORROSION



WOOD ROT



WHY DO WE HAVE PROBLEMS?

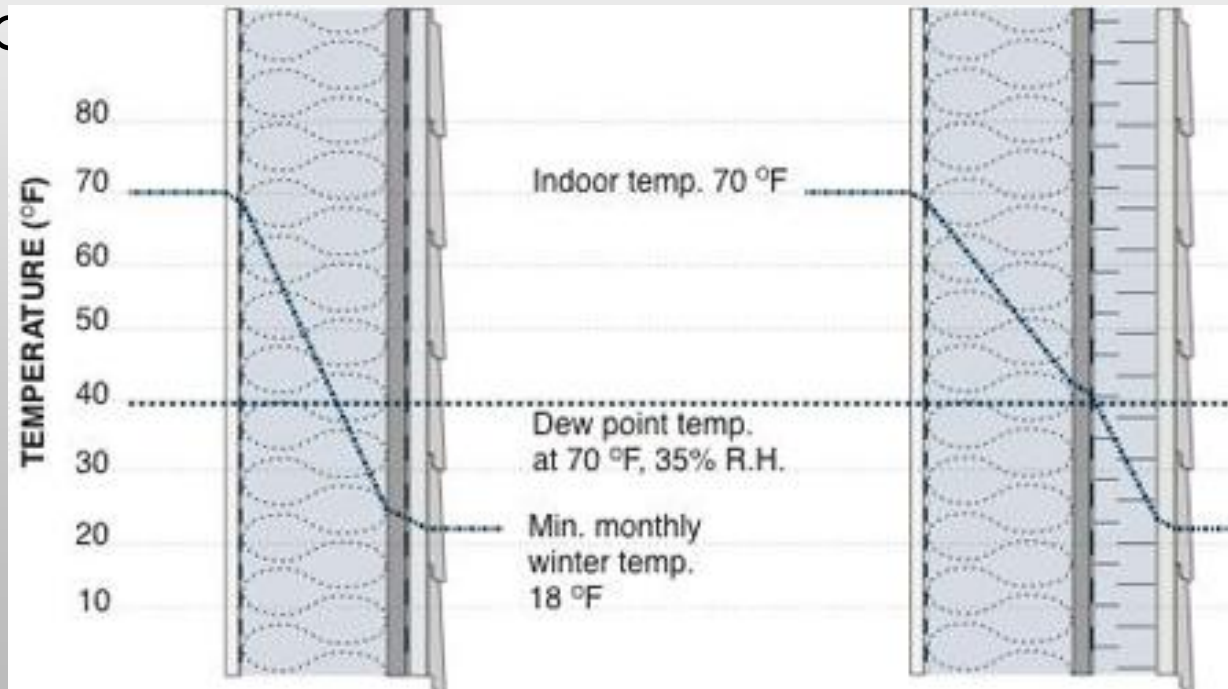
- **A SINGLE MATERIAL CAN PROVIDE MORE THAN ONE FUNCTION**
- SOME MATERIALS CAN PROVIDE ONE FUNCTION - AIR BARRIER
- SOME MATERIALS CAN PROVIDE TWO FUNCTIONS – AIR BARRIER AND VAPOR BARRIER
- SOME MATERIAL CAN PROVIDE THREE FUNCTIONS – AIR BARRIER, VAPOR BARRIER AND WATER-RESISTIVE BARRIER
- SOME MATERIAL CAN PROVIDE FOUR FUNCTIONS – AIR BARRIER, VAPOR BARRIER, WATER-RESISTIVE BARRIER AND HEAT BARRIER

WHY DO WE HAVE PROBLEMS?

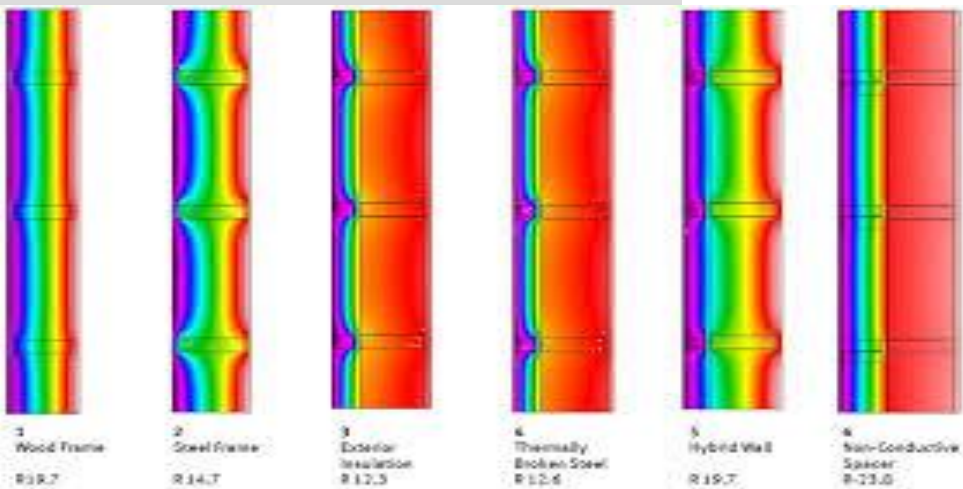
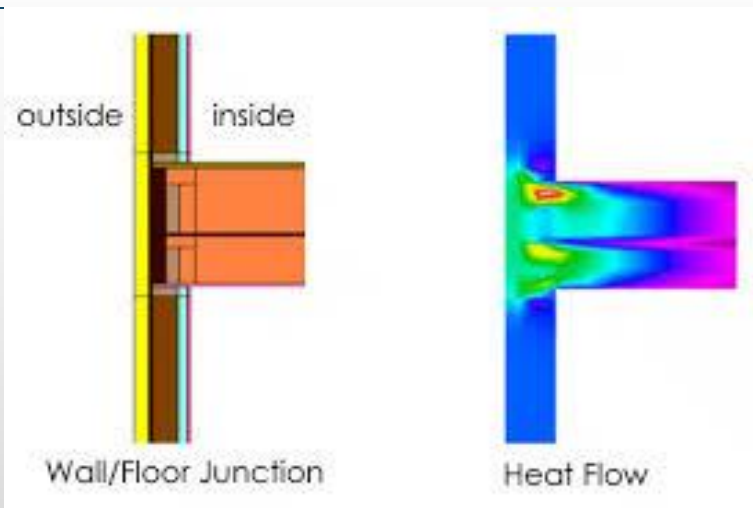
- IF A MATERIAL CAN PROVIDE MORE THAN ONE FUNCTION, DO THEY AUTOMATICALLY PROVIDE THOSE FUNCTIONS?
- NO – NOT UNLESS THEY ARE **DESIGNED AND INSTALLED** TO PROVIDE THAT FUNCTION

WHY DO WE HAVE PROBLEMS?

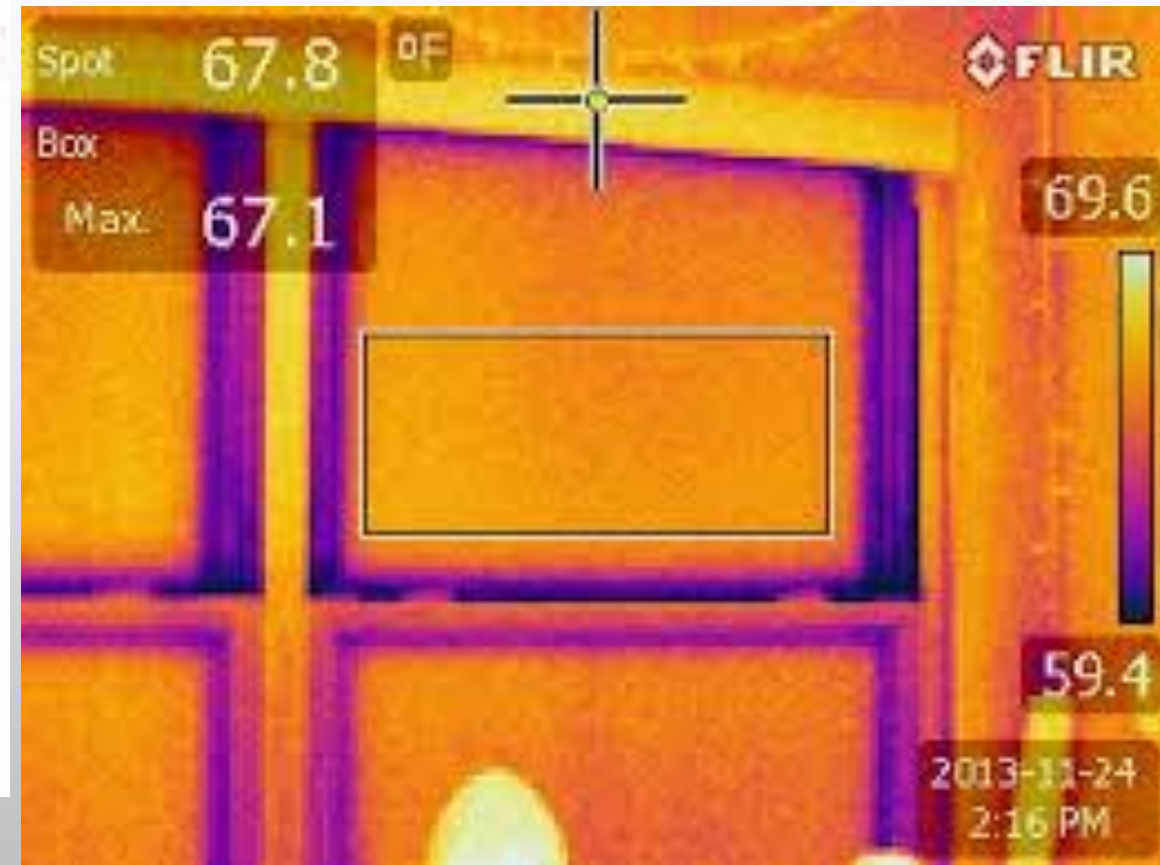
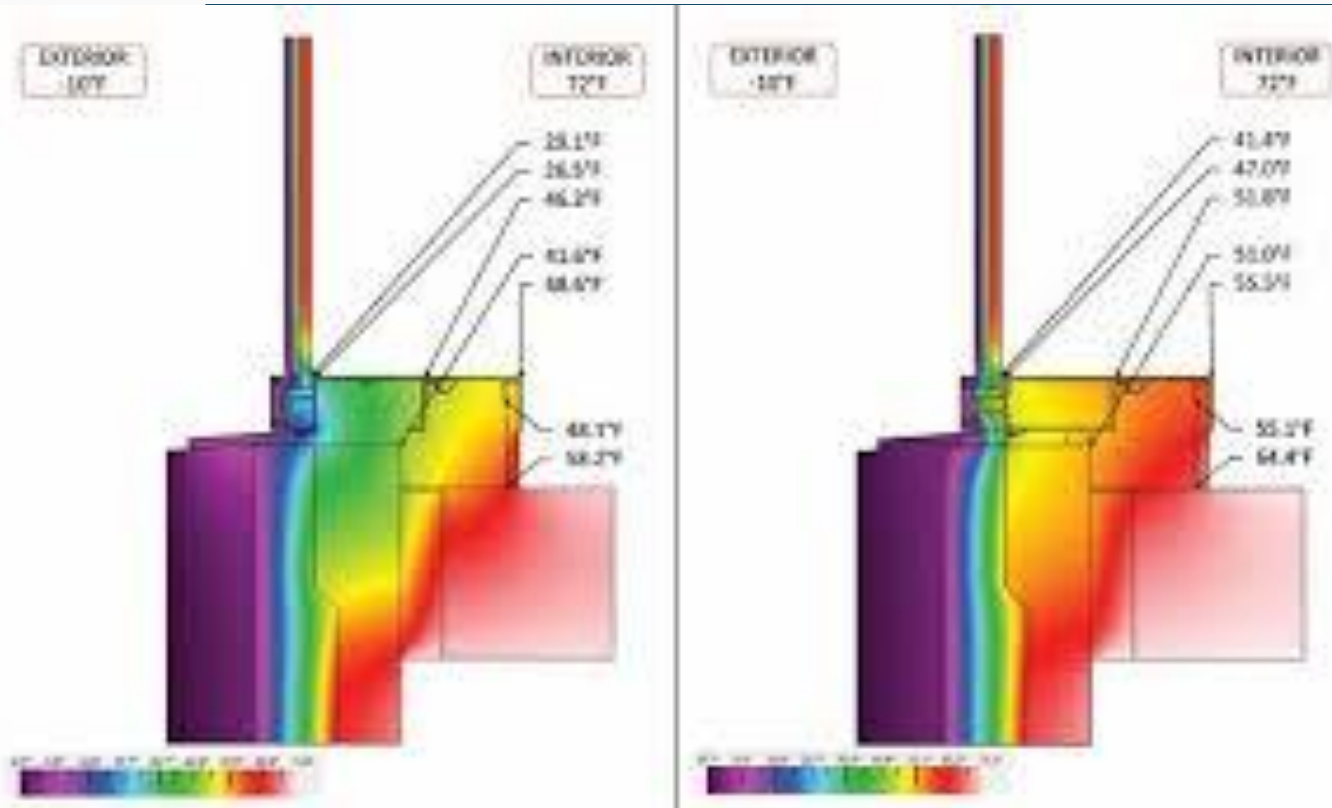
- EACH MATERIAL THAT IS PART OF A WALL ASSEMBLY MUST BE CONSIDERED IN THE ENVIRONMENT THEY ARE PLACED
- MOVING A MATERIAL TO A DIFFERENT PLACE IN AN ASSEMBLY WILL CHANGE THE PERFORMANCE



WHY DO WE HAVE PROBLEMS?

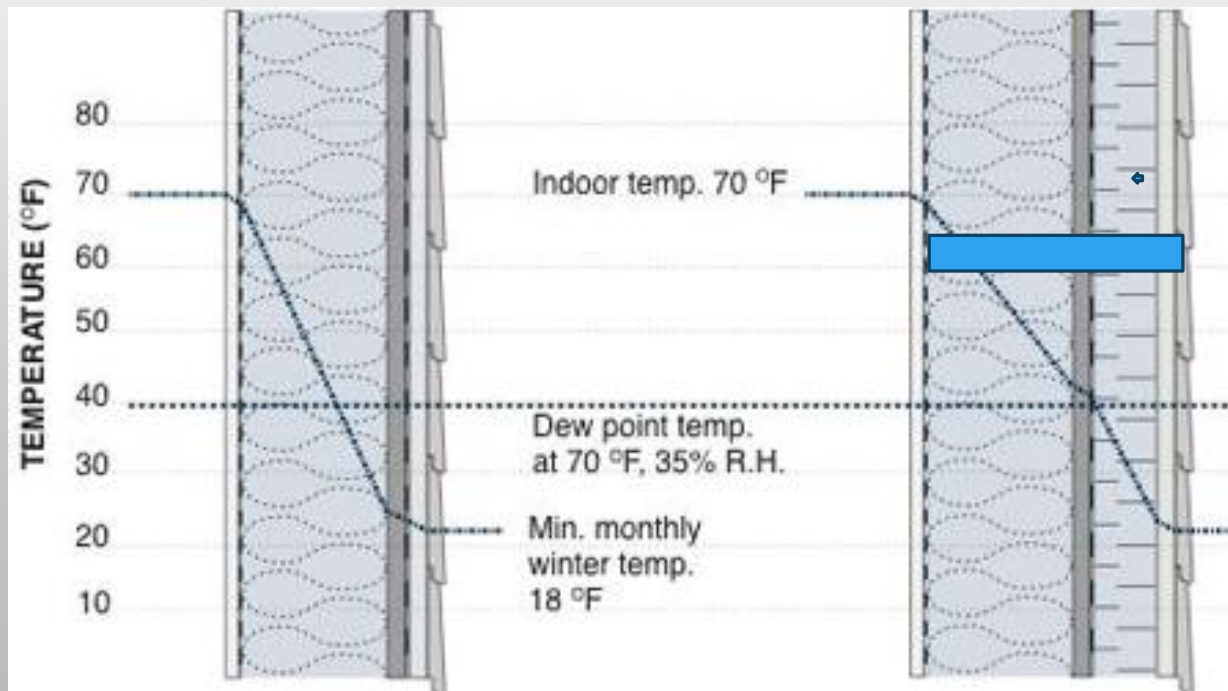


WHY DO WE HAVE PROBLEMS?



WHY DO WE HAVE PROBLEMS?

A THERMAL BRIDGE SHORT CIRCUITS THE INSULATION AND INCREASES HEAT FLOW WHICH REDUCES THE TEMPERATURE IN A BUILDING ASSEMBLY



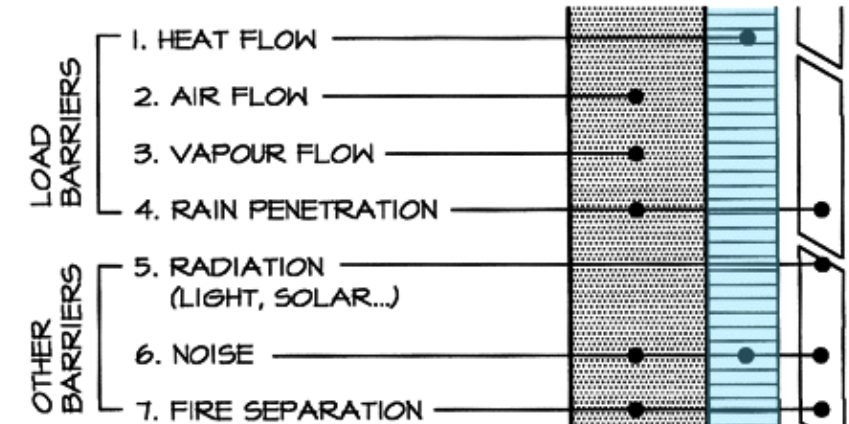
WHY DO WE HAVE PROBLEMS?

The four control layers must be considered together in the following order

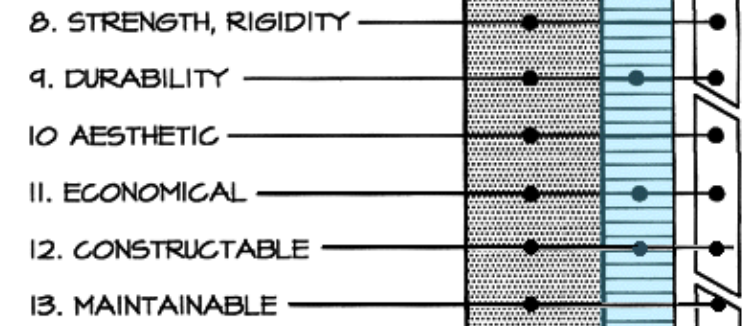
1. Liquid Water flow
2. Air Flow
3. Heat Flow
4. Vapor Flow

Yet we focus on the water vapor transmission of a single material

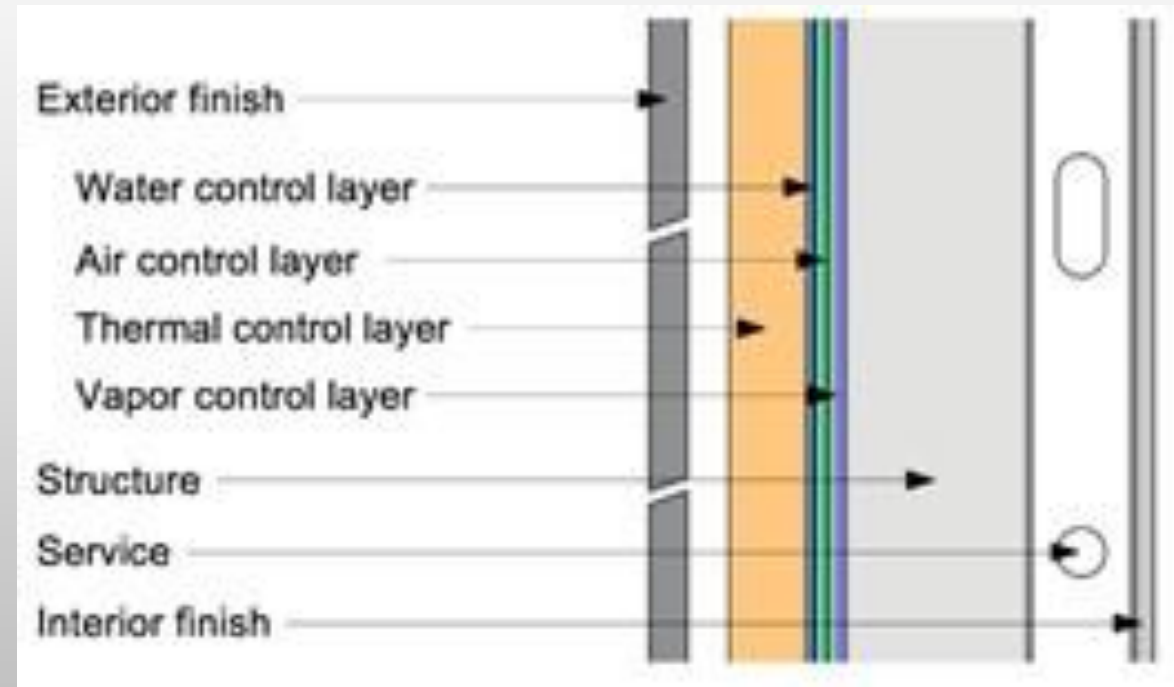
A. ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT



B. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

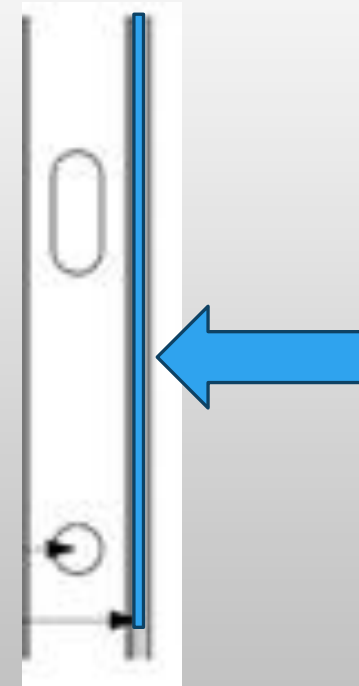


A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION



A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- INTERIOR FINISH
 - ½ INCH GYPSUM BOARDS ARE AN AIR BARRIER MATERIAL AND **BUT** MUST BE COMPLETELY SEALED AN AIR BARRIER ASSEMBLY
 - PAINTED DRYWALL CAN PROVIDE A CLASS II VAPOR RETARDER
 - NO WATER-RESISTANCE
- EACH WILL AFFECT HOW THE BALANCE OF THE WALL
WILL PERFORM



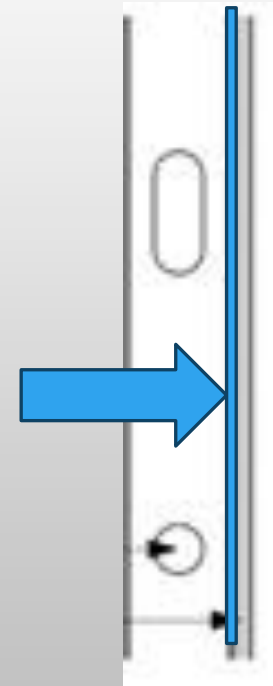
A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- INTERIOR VAPOR RETARDER

POLYETHENE FILM OR OTHER SUCH MATERIAL IS A CLASS I VAPOR RETARDER

IT IS AN AIR BARRIER MATERIAL **BUT** MUST BE COMPLETELY SEALED AND SUPPORTED TO BE AN AIR BARRIER ASSEMBLY
CANNOT BE A WATER-RESISTIVE BARRIER AS IT IS INSTALLED ON THE INTERIOR

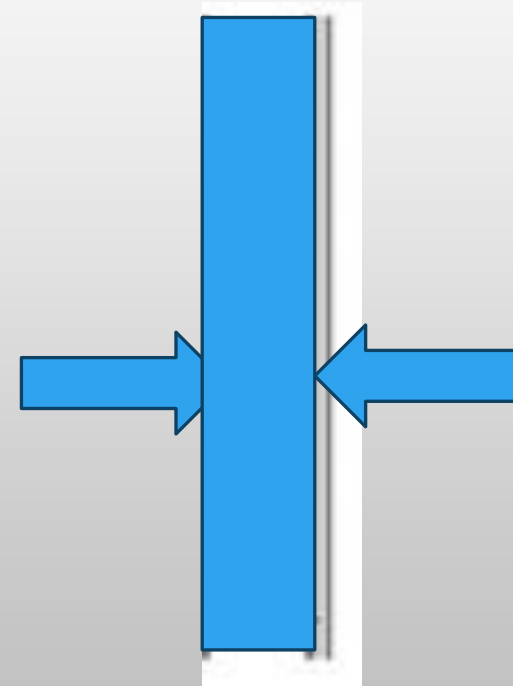
THE MATERIAL WILL AFFECT HOW THE BALANCE OF THE WALL WILL PERFORM



A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

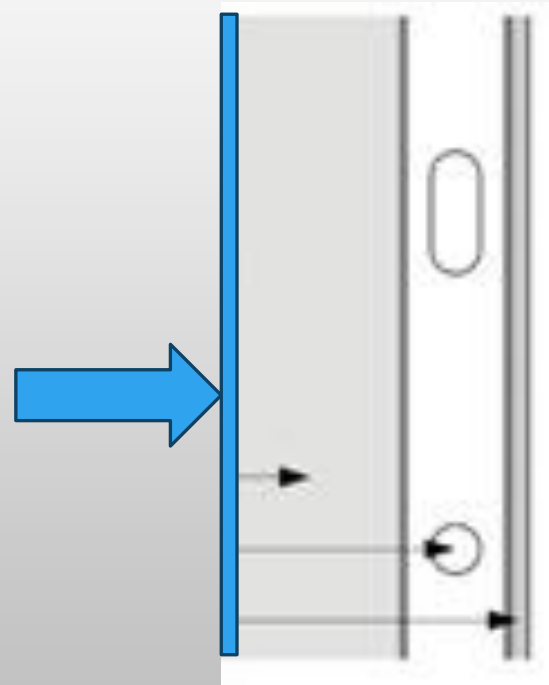
- INSULATION BETWEEN FRAMING MATERIALS
 - FIBROUS INSULATION IS NOT A AIR BARRIER, VAPOR BARRIER
 - OR WATER-RESTIVE BARRIER
 - IF CLOSED CELL MEDIUM DENSITY INSULATION IS USED, IT CAN BE AN AIR BARRIER MATERIAL, CLASS II VAPOR BARRIER IN ADDITION TO INSULATION **BUT** MUST BE COMPLETELY SEALED TO BE AN AIR BARRIER ASSEMBLY

THE MATERIAL WILL AFFECT HOW THE BALANCE OF THE WALL
WILL PERFORM



A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

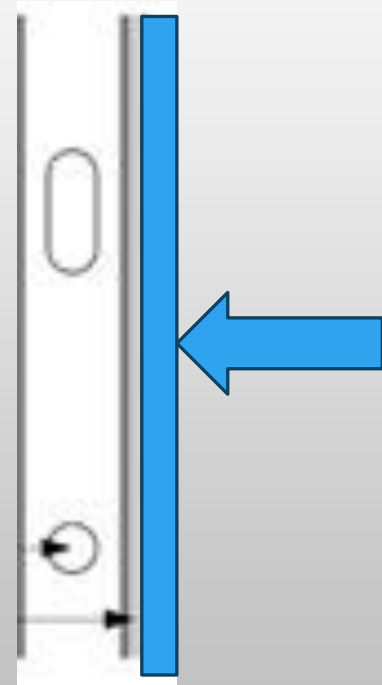
- STRUCTURE/BACKUP WALL/EXTERIOR SHEATHING
- GYPSUM, OSB SHEATHING AT A MINIMUM THICKNESS OR CAST IN PLACE CONCRETE, THE EXTERIOR SHEATHING CAN BE AN AIR BARRIER **BUT** MUST BE COMPLETELY SEALED TO BE AN AIR BARRIER ASSEMBLY
- IF CMU, THE MATERIAL IS NOT AN AIR BARRIER



A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

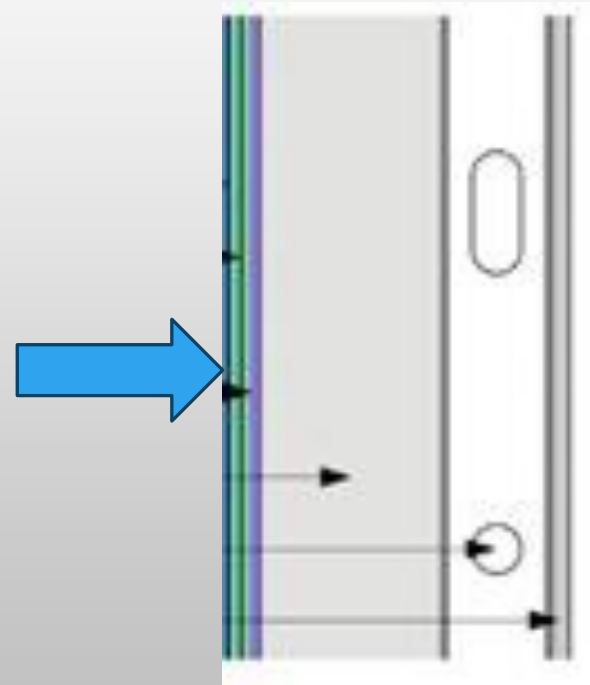
- INSULATION ON EXTERIOR
 - FIBROUS INSULATION IS **NOT** AN AIR BARRIER, VAPOR BARRIER
 - OR WATER-RESTIVE BARRIER
 - CELLULAR PLASTIC CAN BE AN AIR BARRIER, VAPOR BARRIER
- AND WATER RESTIVE BARRIER **BUT** MUST BE
COMPLETELY SEALED TO BE AN AIR BARRIER ASSEMBLY

THE MATERIAL WILL AFFECT HOW THE BALANCE OF THE WALL
WILL PERFORM



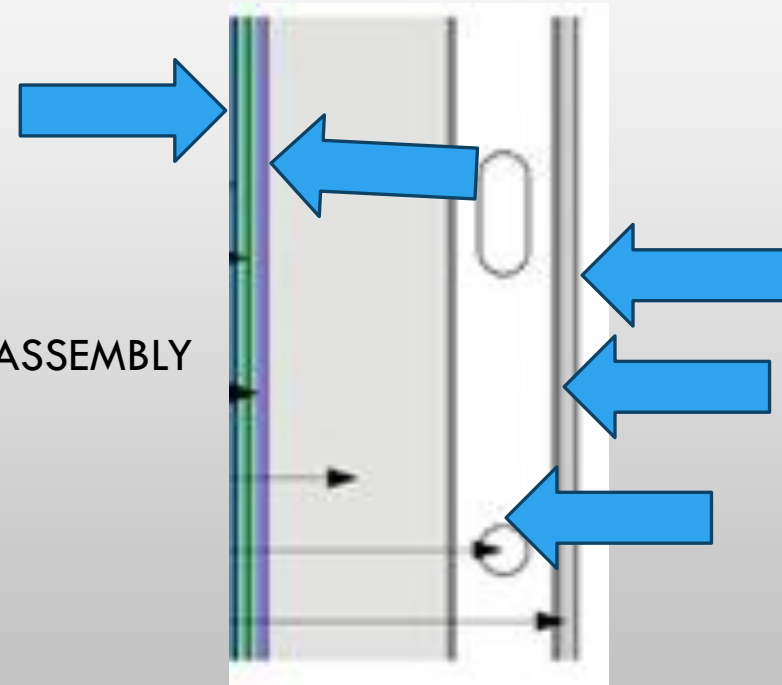
A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- WATER CONTROL LAYER
 - MUST BE ON THE EXTERIOR NORMALLY BEHIND THE CLADDING
 - STOPS WATER INGRESS, MUST BE CONTINUOUS AND COMBINED WITH FLASHINGS
 - DEPENDING ON THE MATERIAL, IT COULD ALSO BE AN AIR BARRIER, A VAPOR RETARDER OR THERMAL INSULATION



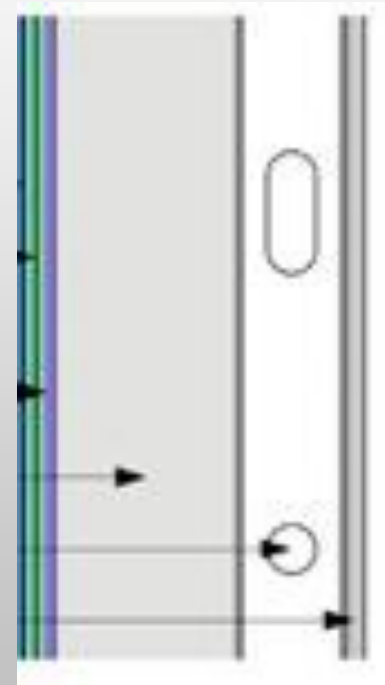
A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- AIR CONTROL LAYER
 - STOPS AIR LEAKAGE, MUST BE CONTINUOUS
 - DEPENDING ON THE MATERIAL, IT COULD ALSO BE A WATER-RESISTIVE BARRIER, A VAPOR RETARDER OR THERMAL INSULATION
- IF ONLY THE AIR BARRIER CAN BE ANYWHERE IN THE ASSEMBLY



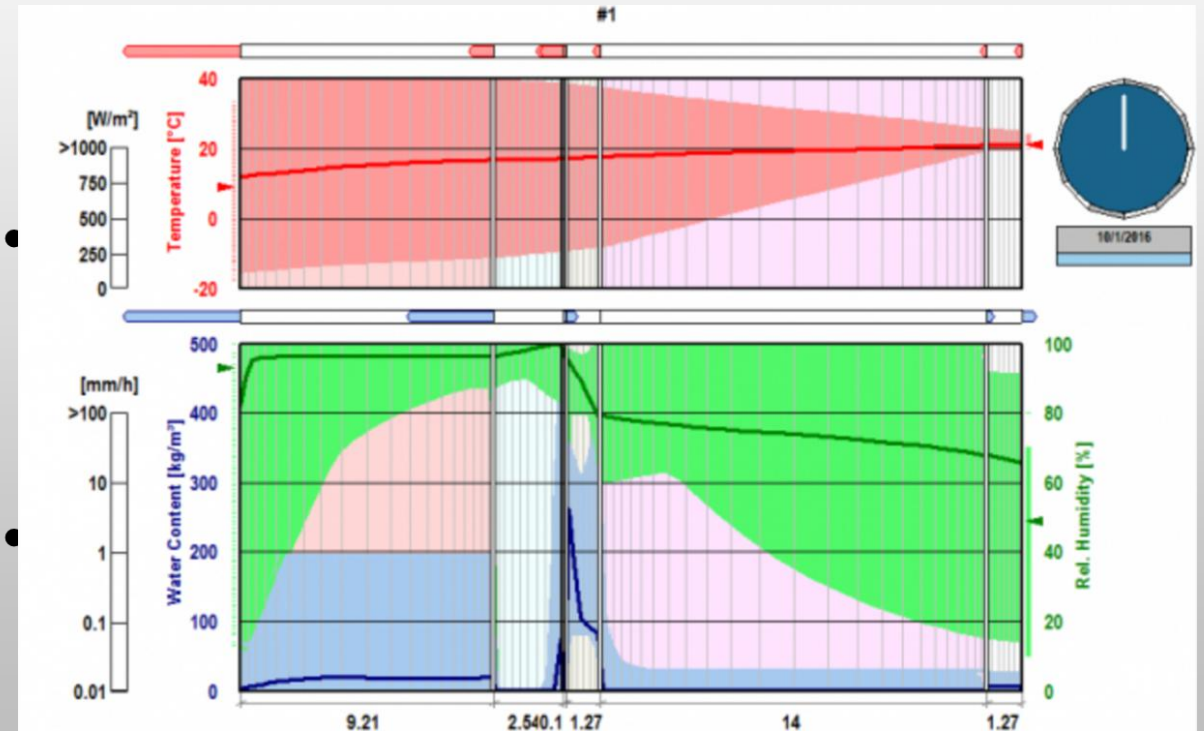
A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- VAPOR CONTROL LAYER
 - STOPS WATER VAPOR FROM MOVING **THROUGH** THE MATERIAL DOES NOT NEED TO BE CONTINUOUS
 - DEPENDING ON THE MATERIAL, IT COULD ALSO BE AN AIR BARRIER, A WATER-RESTIVE BARRIER OR THERMAL INSULATION
 - NEEDS TO BE ON THE SIDE WITH HIGH VAPOR PRESSURE WHICH CHANGES CONTINUALLY



WATER VAPOR TRANSMISSION RATE OF ASSEMBLIES MODELING

- MORE REALISTIC APPROACH IS TO USE WUFI MODELING FROM ORNL WHICH USES REAL WEATHER DATA TO PRODUCE REALISTIC CONDITIONS
- USES WVTR OF INDIVIDUAL MATERIALS
- REQUIRED MULTIPLE DATA POINTS TO DETERMINE THE CURVE



THIS IS WHY THERE IS CONFUSION

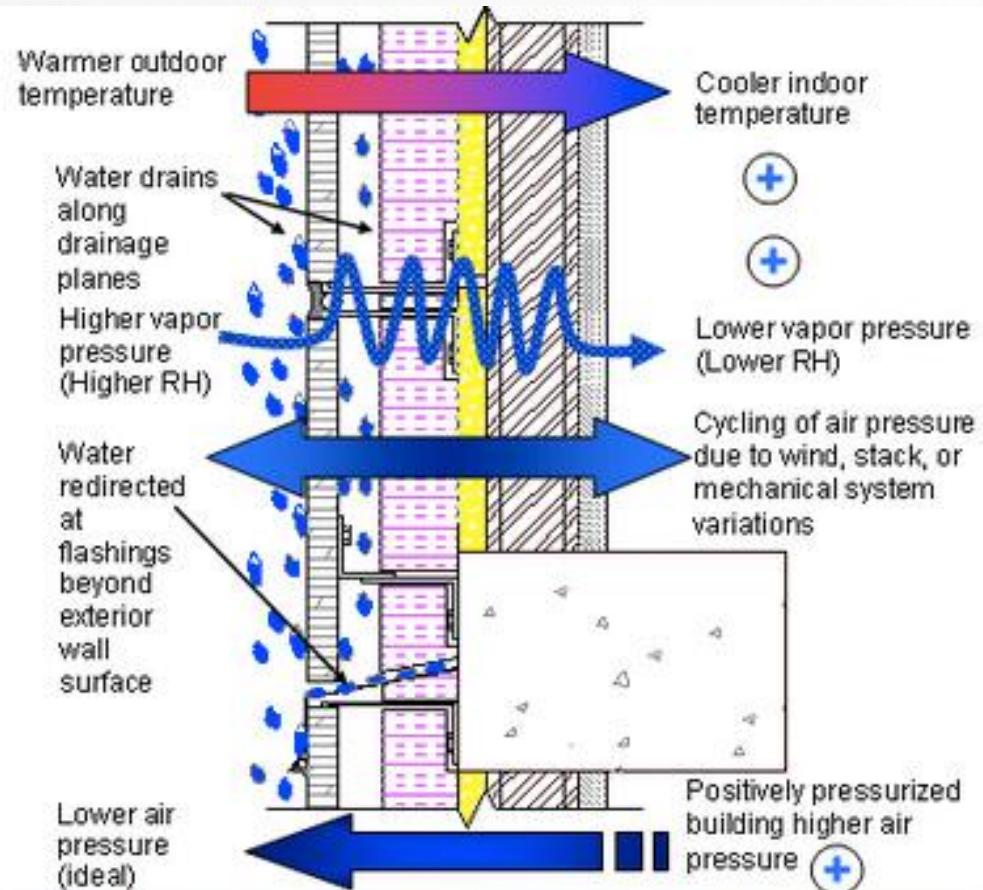
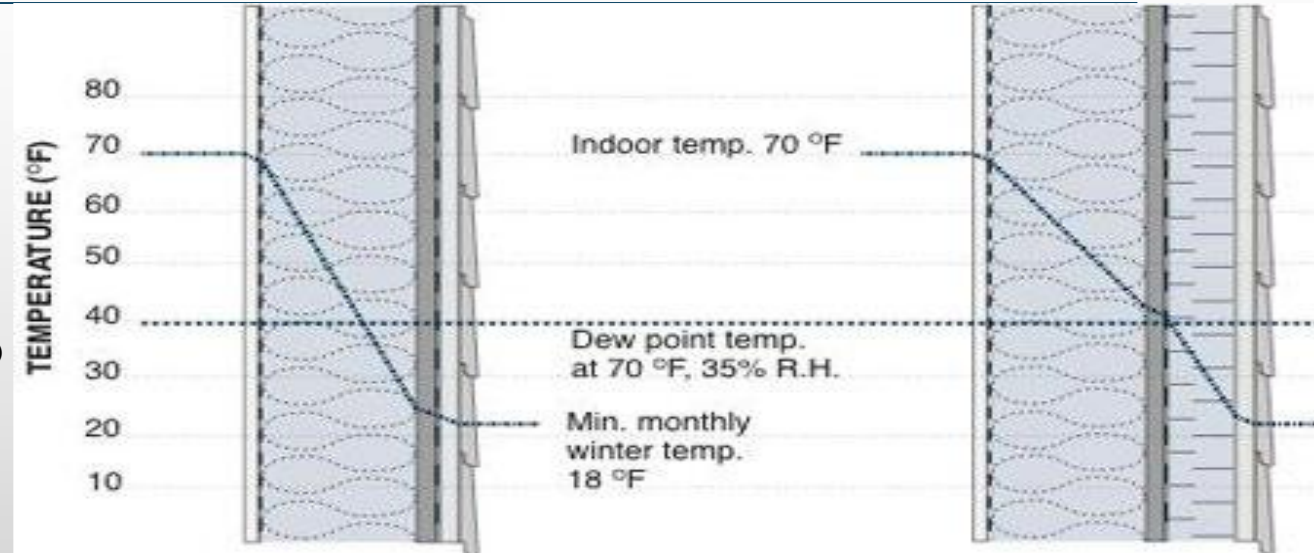


Figure 6. Moisture Transfer Diagram ("Hot-humid" climate shown)



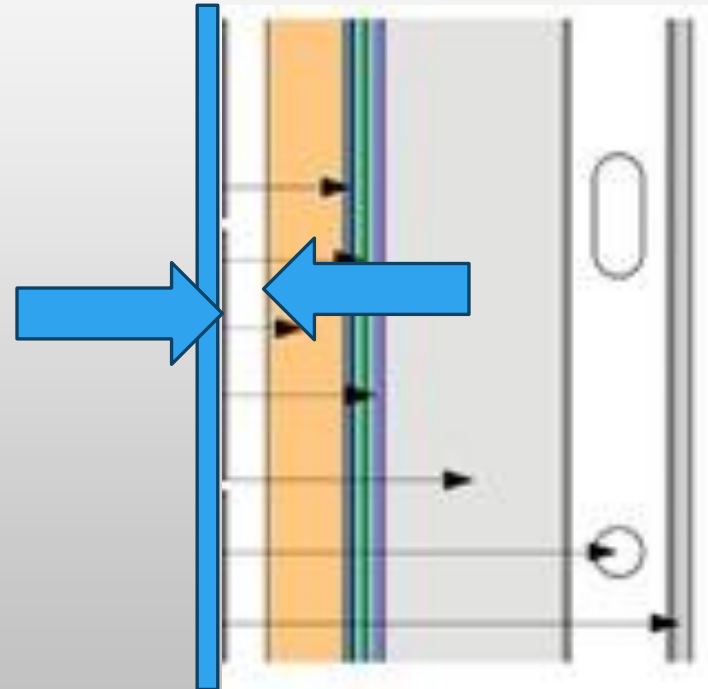
A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- EXTERIOR CONTINUOUS INSULATION
 - IMPACTS THE COMPLETE WALL BY CHANGING THE TEMPERATURE GRADIENT
 - DEPENDING ON THE MATERIAL, IT COULD ALSO BE AN AIR BARRIER, A WATER-RESTIVE BARRIER OR VAPOR RETARDER
 - CHANGES THE DEW POINT IN THE ASSEMBLY



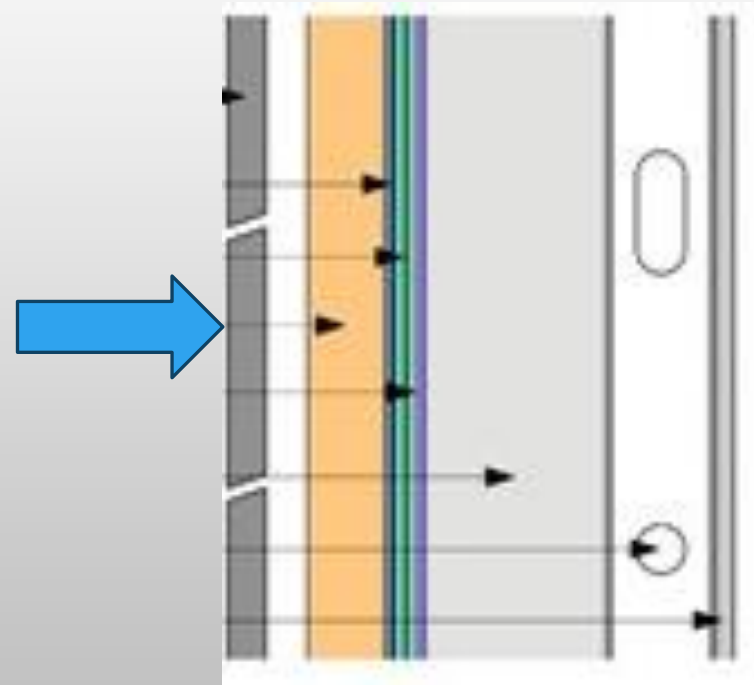
A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- AIRSPACE (RAINSCREEN)
 - BECOMING AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT COMPONENT IN SOME WALL ASSEMBLIES
 - ALLOWS WATER TO DRAIN FROM THE WALL AND VENTILATION PROMOTES DRYING
 - MORE INSULATION IN A WALL, THE MORE IMPORTANT THE CAVITY



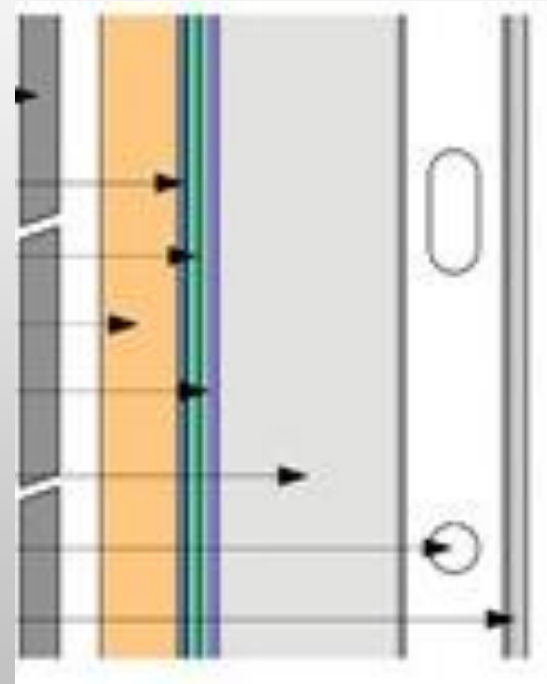
A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- EXTERIOR FINISH
 - THE LOOK OF THE BUILDING
 - SHEDS MUCH OF THE BULK WATER
 - NEEDS TO BE STRUCTURALLY ATTACHED WHICH CAN PUT HOLES IN THE WATER-RESTIVE BARRIER, AIR BARRIER AND CAUSES **THERMAL BRIDGING** IN THE INSULATION



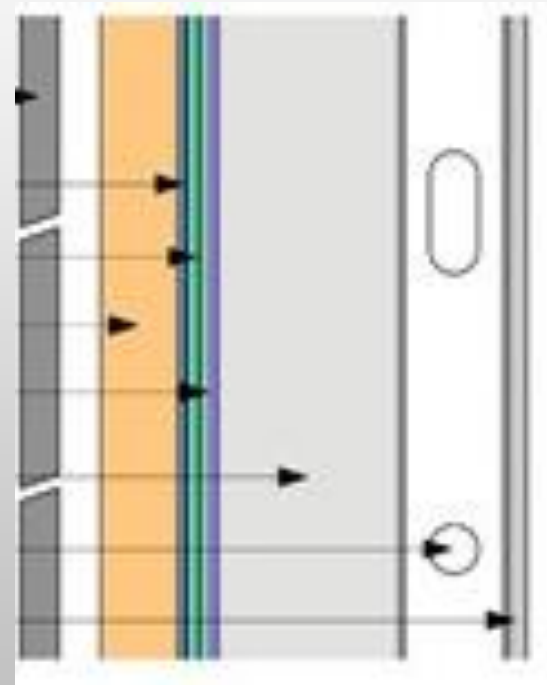
A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION
 - NO BUILDING ASSEMBLY IS SIMPLE
 - EVERY LAYER IN THE ASSEMBLY AFFECTS THE OTHER LAYERS
 - ONE VALUE ENGINEERED CHANGE NOTICE CAN RESULT IN CAUSING MAJOR DAMAGE TO THE BUILDING ENVELOPE



A SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION

- SIMPLE WALL CONSTRUCTION
 - THE DESIGN PROFESSIONAL CAN DO A GREAT DESIGN OF A BUILDING ASSEMBLY, BUT IT WILL ONLY WORK AS INTENDED, IF INSTALLED PROPERLY



INSTALLATION

Zurich Construction Defect claims study results

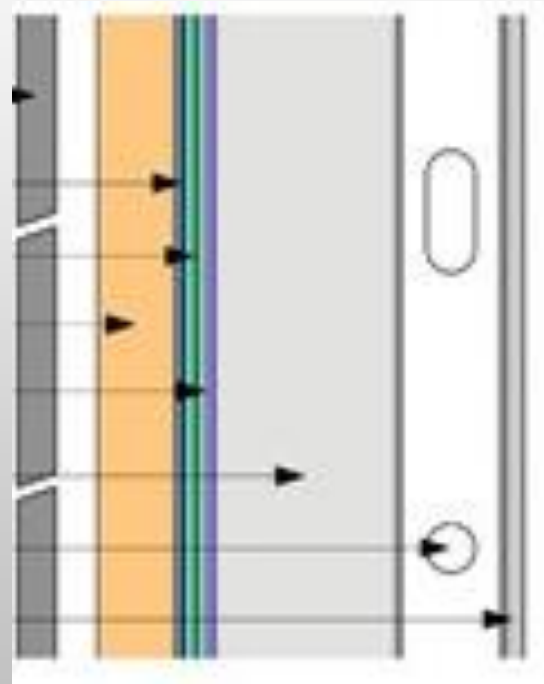


CD Claims by Cause of Loss



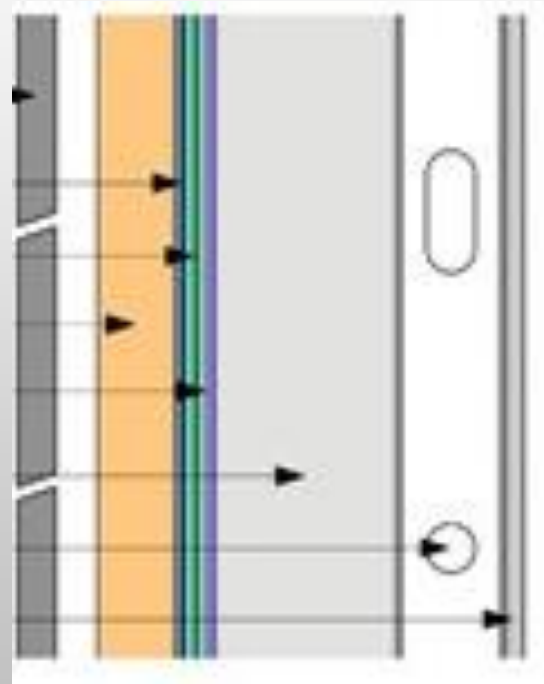
INSTALLATION

- MANY MATERIALS PROVIDE THE INTENDED FUNCTION ONLY IF INSTALLED AS REQUIRED FOR THAT FUNCTION



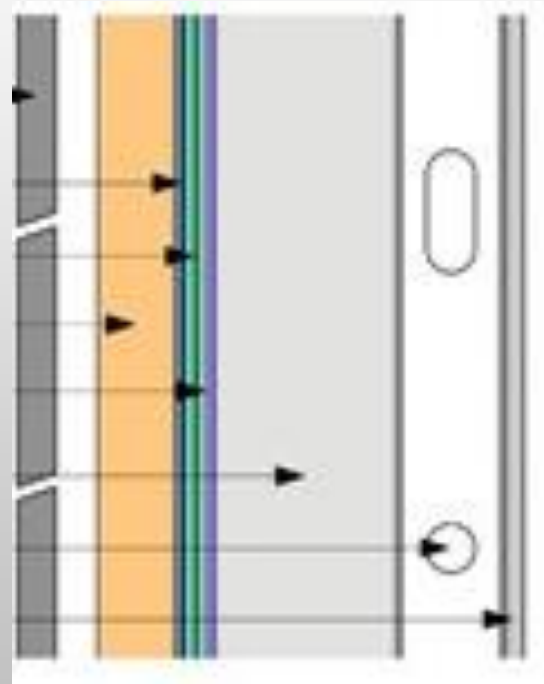
INSTALLATION

- WATER-RESTIVE BARRIER
 - ONLY KEEPS WATER OUT IF
INSTALLED CONTINUOUSLY WITH
NO HOLES, EVEN SMALL ONES



INSTALLATION

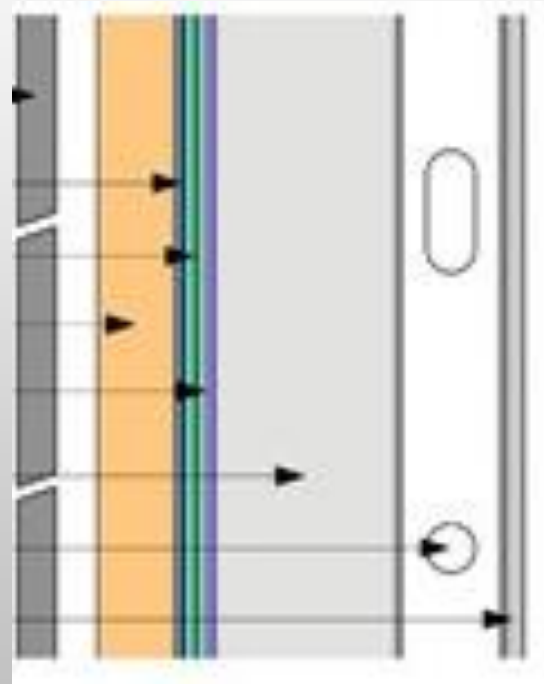
- AIR BARRIER
 - ONLY AN AIR BARRIER IF INSTALLED CONTINUOUSLY WITH NO HOLES, EVEN SMALL ONES





INSTALLATION

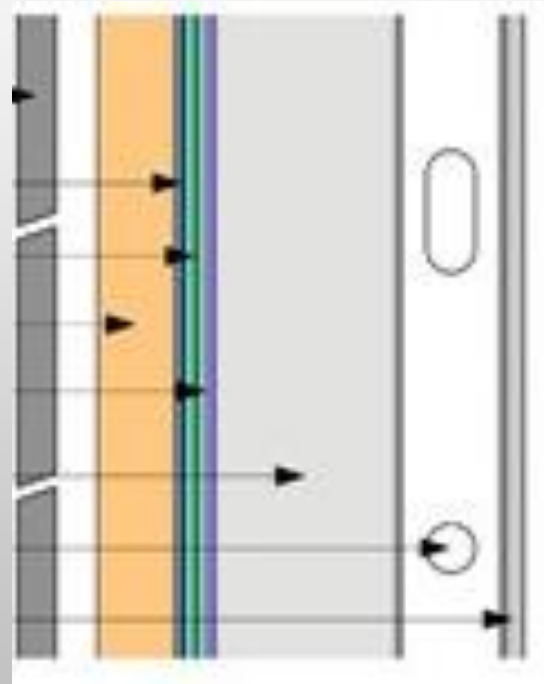
- THERMAL INSULATION
 - EFFECTIVENESS REDUCED IF AIR PASSES THROUGH, THERE ARE GAPS BETWEEN BOARDS OR THERMAL BRIDGES THROUGH THE MATERIAL
 - LEADS TO COLD SURFACES AND POTENTIAL FOR **CONDENSATION**





INSTALLATION

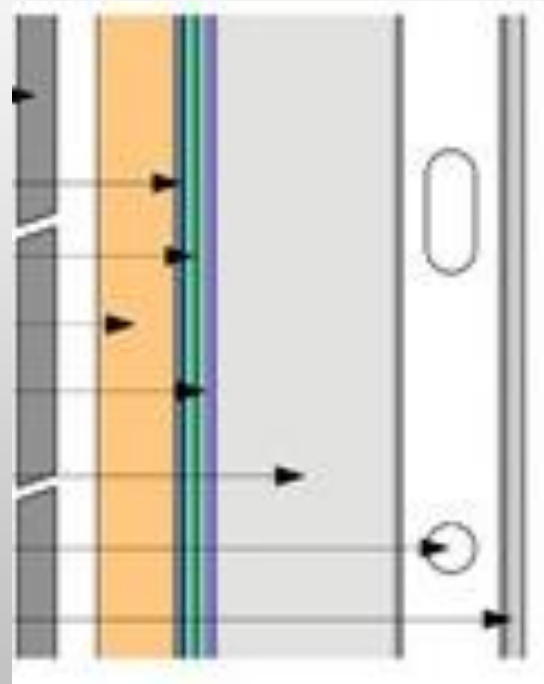
- VAPOR RETARDER
 - NOT AFFECTED AS MUCH BY BAD INSTALLATION
 - A LARGE HOLE IN THE VAPOR RETARDER MEANS MORE WATER VAPOR PASSING THROUGH, BUT NOT THAT MUCH





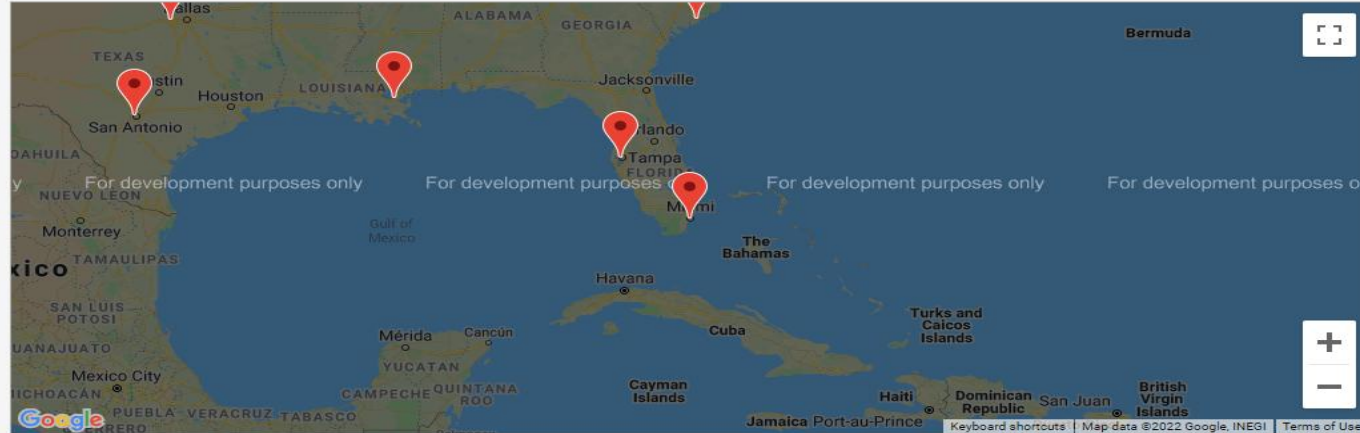
INSTALLATION

- VAPOR RETARDER VS AIR BARRIER
- WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT TO
KEEP YOUR BUILDING DRY?



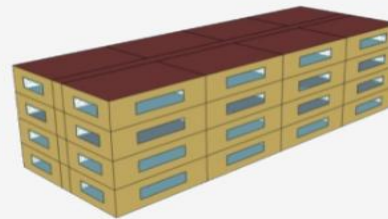
WATER VAPOR TRANSMISSION OF MATERIALS

Infiltration Calculator



Location: United States Florida Miami

Building Type: Mid-Rise Apartment Floor Area: ft² 33700



Leakage Rates: CFM/ft²

Base case: 4.32

Retrofitted building: 0.10

Energy Costs:

Electricity: (\$/kWh) 0.09

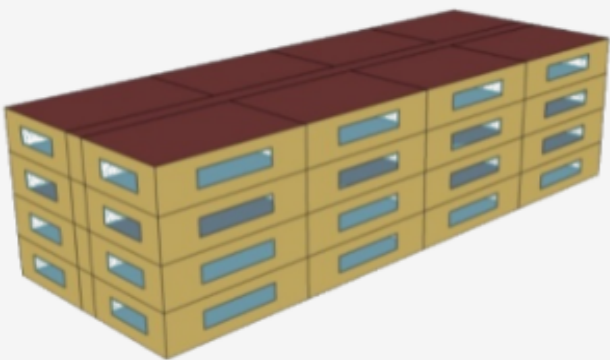
Natural Gas: \$/1000 ft³ 10.74

Calculate >>



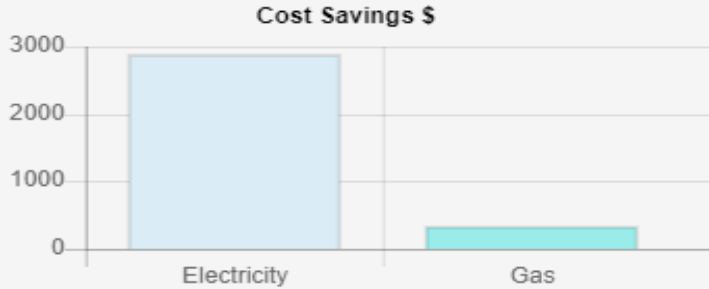
Infiltration Calculator Results

Building Type	Mid-Rise Apartment
Location	Miami FL USA
Floor Area	33700 ft²
Energy Price	Electricity 0.09\$ /kWh, Natural Gas 10.74\$ /1000 ft³

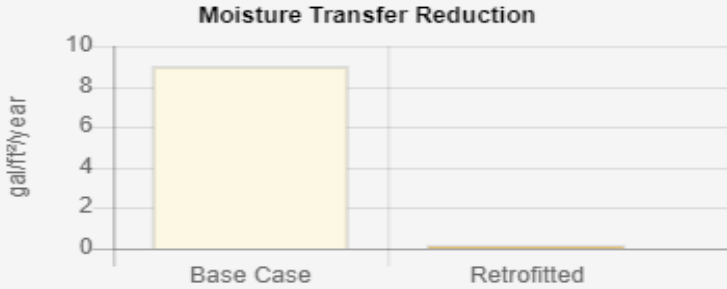


Leakage Rate		Equivalent Leakage Area	
Base Case	Retrofitted Building	Base Case	Retrofitted Building
4.32 CFM/ft² at 75 Pa	0.10 CFM/ft² at 75 Pa	42.40 ft²	0.99 ft²

Predicted Savings	Electricity	Natural Gas
Energy	32,029 kWh	32,317 ft³
Cost	\$ 2,882.61	\$ 347.08
Total Cost Savings	\$ 3,229.69	

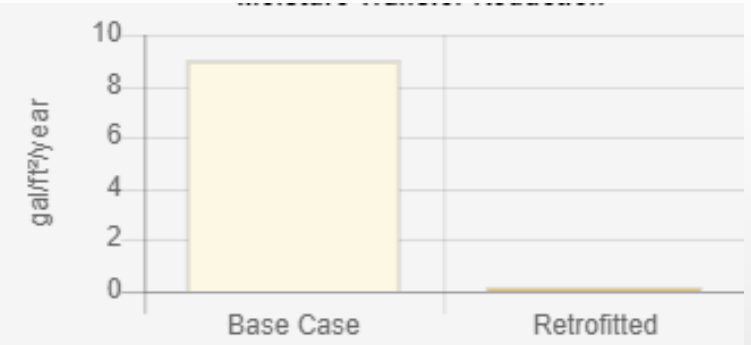


Moisture Transfer through the Wall Assembly due to Air Leakage	
Base Case	Retrofitted Building
9.00 gal/ft²/year	0.21 gal/ft²/year
303,221.39 gal/year	7,033.64 gal/year



WATER VAPOR TRANSMISSION OF MATERIALS

Moisture Transfer through the Wall Assembly due to Air Leakage	
Base Case	Retrofitted Building
9.00 gal/ft ² /year	0.21 gal/ft ² /year
303,221.39 gal/year	7,033.64 gal/year



BASE 42.40 FT² = 6,105 IN² 303,221 GALLONS ÷ 6,105
= 44.7 GALLONS/ IN² PER YEAR

20 OUNCES / IN² /DAY

WATER VAPOR TRANSMISSION 10 PERM (570 NG/S · M² · PA) – **16 OZ/YEAR**

WATER VAPOR TRANSMISSION OF MATERIALS

A PERM IS EQUAL TO **57.2 NANOGRAMS METER⁻² SECOND⁻¹ PASCAL⁻¹** .

SINCE THERE ARE 31,536,000 SECONDS IN A YEAR,

2985PA OF VAPOR PRESSURE AT SATURATION,

1,000,000,000 NG PER GRAM

THE VAPOR PRESSURE FOR BOTH THE WET CUP (100%-50%RH) AND DRY CUP (50%-0%RH) IS 50% OF THE SATURATION VAPOR PRESSURE OR 1492PA,

THE WEIGHT OF WATER VAPOR GOING THROUGH ONE SQUARE METER OF A **0.1 PERM (INCH-POUND)** IN A YEAR WOULD BE

$0.1 * 1492 * 31,536,000 / 1,000,000,000$ OR 4.71 GRAMS (**0.166 OUNCES**).

THE WEIGHT OF WATER VAPOR GOING THROUGH ONE SQUARE METER OF A **1.0 PERM (INCH-POUND)** IN A YEAR WOULD BE

$1.0 * 1492 * 31,536,000 / 1,000,000,000$ OR 47.1 GRAMS (**1.66 OUNCES**).

THE WEIGHT OF WATER VAPOR GOING THROUGH ONE SQUARE METER OF A **10 PERM (INCH-POUND)** IN A YEAR WOULD BE

$10 * 1492 * 31,536,000 / 1,000,000,000$ OR 471 GRAMS (**16.60 OUNCES**).



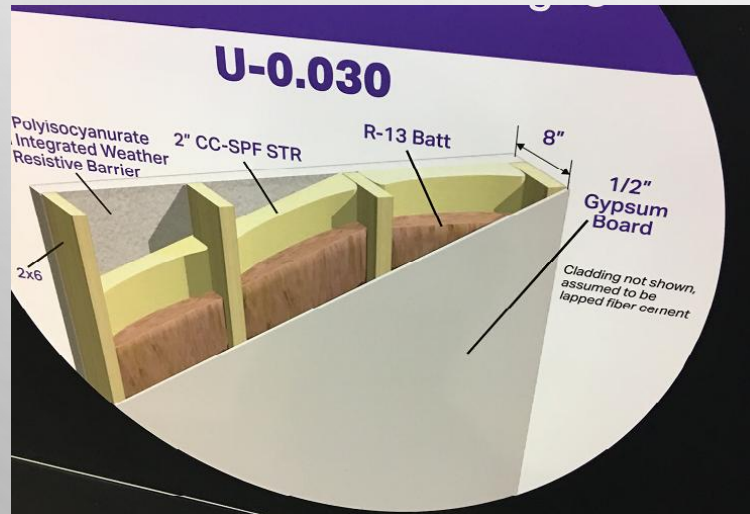


**AIR BARRIERS, VAPOR BARRIERS, WATER-RESISTIVE
BARRIERS, AND HEAT BARRIERS MUST WORK
TOGETHER**

**THEY MUST BE DESIGNED, SELECTED AND INSTALLED
PROPERLY TO PROVIDE THE INTENDED FUNCTION**



**A MATERIAL IS PART OF AN ASSEMBLY AND WILL
PERFORM DIFFERENTLY DEPENDING ON WHAT IS IN
THE ASSEMBLY AND WHERE IT IS IN THE ASSEMBLY**



THE FUTURE

- HIGH PERFORMING BUILDING ENVELOPE ARE REQUIRED
- DESIGNS NEED TO WORK WITH ASSEMBLIES WITH THE WHOLE BUILDING IN MIND
- MANUFACTURERS NEED TO PROVIDE BUILDING ASSEMBLY PERFORMANCE NOT JUST MATERIALS
- CONTRACTORS NEED TO UPGRADE THE SKILL LEVELS OF NEW ENTRANCE TO THE WORKFORCE
- TRUST IN CONSTRUCTION PRACTICES BUT VERIFY

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

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