Plastic housing favored by Dietz

By Cary Bolleck

For many years Albert G. Dietz, professor of building engineering in the department of architecture and the department of civil engineering, has advocated that plastics be used for housing. In London, plastic has been used extensively in house building for over twenty years. In Mexico City, plastic has been used extensively in house building, but it has not been used very much in a technologically superior America, however.

Main obstacle is psychology.

The principal problem is overcome in expanding use of plastics in construction is grounded in psychology, Professor Dietz indicated. The first exposure to plastics for many Americans came during World War II. "We regarded plastic as a cheap substitute, for something better," he said. "This is the impression that has and will continue to remain if parents of children with broken toys have anything to say. The fear of using plastics in this country is reflected in the fact that building codes still require that buildings be made of conventional materials, even though there are many successful experiments. The house of the future at Disney World, all reinforced plastic, is in excellent condition after 10 years of handling two million people a year. A Moscow exhibit of U.S. technology a few years ago contained rooms made completely of plastic. An example of this is a Chicago apartment building with completely plastic constructed rooms, according to Dr. Dietz. The ability to limit the size of the foundation produces a savings of about 50%. In addition, savings are made because the assembly time of buildings is drastically cut. The challenge for plastics producers has moved from the realm of engineering to that of selling.

Factors in this change-of-heart have been the consideration of a few successful experiments. The engineering in the department of architecture will bring new kinds of architectural expression, it will also offer many economic advantages. For example, the use of lightweight plastic panels in apartments substantially reduces the load on the foundation, according to Dr. Dietz. The ability to limit the size of the foundation produces a savings of about 50%. In addition, savings are made because the assembly time of buildings is drastically cut. The challenge for plastics producers has moved from the realm of engineering to that of selling. And it looks like quite a job to change public image of plastics from toys to apartments and office buildings.

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