

PREJUDICE AGAINST WOOD

Most Mexicans regard wood as an inferior building material, vulnerable to fire, earthquakes, termites and rot. This perception is beginning to change, especially among more sophisticated buyers.

Mexican building traditions are derived from the nation's Spanish and indigenous ancestry. Temples were made of stone, and churches were made from the stones of the destroyed temples. In a society exposed to ongoing strife, stone or cement houses offered protection against fire and violence. Moreover, they were considered a permanent asset, to be left as a legacy for future generations.

Mexicans continue to perceive masonry houses as safe and prestigious, and they are prejudiced against the use of wood for structural purposes. They regard wood as vulnerable to a wide range of hazards, including fire, termites, tornadoes, rot and earthquakes. For the most part, they are unaware of advances in materials and construction methods that can eliminate these potential problems.

Some of these attitudes are purely cultural. As one observer put it: "A house must look like a house. It must be and look solid". Another consideration is that Mexicans prefer homes that require little maintenance. The predominance of owner-built homes is also a major factor. Such homes are typically built a little at a time, and concrete and brick can be left exposed as the builder finishes the project, perhaps over a period of years.

These obstacles to wood construction are reinforced by the policies of banks and insurance companies. Banks require that the expected life of a home exceed the period of the loan by at least 50 percent. Many of them do not consider wood homes to be durable enough for the 45 years that this might imply. This is especially true for lower-income buyers, who are perceived as being incapable of adequately maintaining a wood home. Traditional building codes perpetuate the belief that wooden houses are vulnerable to fire and earthquake. As a result, it is very difficult for wood construction to qualify for government-sponsored low-income building projects.

Mexican construction companies understand the true characteristics of wood-frame homes and they have worked to educate consumers. The *Consejo Nacional de la Madera en la Construcción*, National Council for Wood Construction, has worked with the Mexican government to promote wood-frame construction. They have published a manual and have set up training programs to overcome Mexico's lack of skilled carpenters. Several Mexican universities offer courses in wood-frame construction in their engineering departments.