

IT'S COLD IN THE GREAT WHITE NORTH, BUT WE DON'T LIKE WEARING OUR JACKETS

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As we start to hit the winter months in November or beginning of December, our temperatures begin to fall, and we prepare for the cold winter months ahead. Last year was horrible, with our temperatures hitting crazy low temperatures for an extended period. To survive, I must wear my super big and warm winter jacket.

In the Northern States, we treat our buildings different than we treat ourselves sometimes. You would think if we knew how to keep ourselves warm, we could translate that into how we build and design our building's. We somewhat do for our commercial buildings, but for residential and multi-family, we don't like wearing our "winter jacket".

You might be wondering what I am talking about. Those crazy Northerners you might say. So, yes, you are right about us being a little "unique" up here in the great white north.

I have attended lots of seminars, read lots of articles and had many discussions on the benefits of external insulation. Everyone knows it is the thing to do, but why do we keep "not wearing our jackets" for certain types of buildings? If I was really cold and could choose between a jacket or drinking some warm tea, I'm picking the jacket.

The number one reason I hear is "it's too expensive" (which is a common theme when talking about building things the right way no matter what), followed by "it's just easier to stuff insulation on the inside". I teach builders every year on building science and new building design/construction and after 15 years, the comments have not really changed.

There is a lot of education and great seminars put on by various organizations, such as the Building Enclosure Councils across the U.S. about thermal bridging and exterior insulation. You can see that people get it. The problem is not those that attended (you can call them "converted"), but those that do not attend and take the time to educate themselves on the value.

Energy conservation and energy efficiency is a selling feature still for a small subset of individuals that own multi-family or single residential properties. Utility costs can sometimes be low and the motivation to spend money on something that is not seen is hard to do. Builders and developers see this as additional cost and it changes both the sequence and design of the building when we start making the wall stick out farther from the exterior sheathing. There are lots of examples, details and case studies about how to accomplish this for things such as the window details, how to attach the exterior cladding, the types of fasteners that can be used, etc. The problem is there is not motivation to invest in the education of both the builders and trades to do it right for the building.

Like most things such as LEED, Passive House, Green Globes, etc., the market is not transformed until we are hit with regulation (we have to do it). Everything is voluntary until it becomes a code requirement. I have always hoped we would adopt the right thing to do long before we are "forced" to do it. After over 20 years in the industry, I'm not holding my breath that large market transformation will not happen without a mandatory requirement and enforcement.

Up in the great white north, we have been doing a pretty good job with adopting the energy codes. For the most part, a lot of our commercial buildings are pretty well built because we do not really have a choice and the strategy of exterior insulation is commonplace in commercial and institutional buildings. We like keeping everything outside (air, water, vapor, thermal) – that "perfect wall".

Our work relies in having people adopt good building science before being forced to do it and bringing along the residential and multi-family builders to take the time to understand building science and how it really helps them, rather than hinders them.

That is my hope.

I also hope that I will make the NHL one day and play for the Winnipeg Jets. I'll take the latter but would settle for external insulation.