

# Designing for Durability

Strategies for achieving maximum durability with wood-frame construction

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**A**rchitects specify wood for many reasons, including cost, ease and efficiency of construction, design versatility, and sustainability—as well as its beauty and the innate appeal of nature and natural materials. Innovative new technologies and building systems are also leading to the increased use of wood as a structural material, not only in houses, schools, and other traditional applications, but in larger, taller, and more visionary wood buildings. But even as the use of wood is expanding, one significant characteristic of wood buildings is often underestimated: their durability. Misperceptions still exist that buildings made of materials such as concrete or steel last longer than buildings made of wood. Although this connection between materials and building longevity is often assumed, it is not borne out in fact, as will be discussed in this course.

Examples of wood buildings that have stood for centuries exist all over the world, including the Horyu-ji temple in Ikaruga, Japan, built in the eighth century, stave churches in Norway, including one in Urnes built in 1150, and many more. Today, wood is being used in a wider range of buildings than would have been possible even 20 years ago. Next-generation lumber and mass timber products, such as glue-laminated timber

(glulam), cross laminated timber (CLT), and nail-laminated timber, along with a variety of structural composite lumber products, are enabling increased dimensional stability and strength, and greater long-span capabilities.

These innovations are leading to taller, highly innovative wood buildings. Examples include (among others) a 10-story CLT apartment building in Australia, a 14-story timber-frame apartment in Norway,

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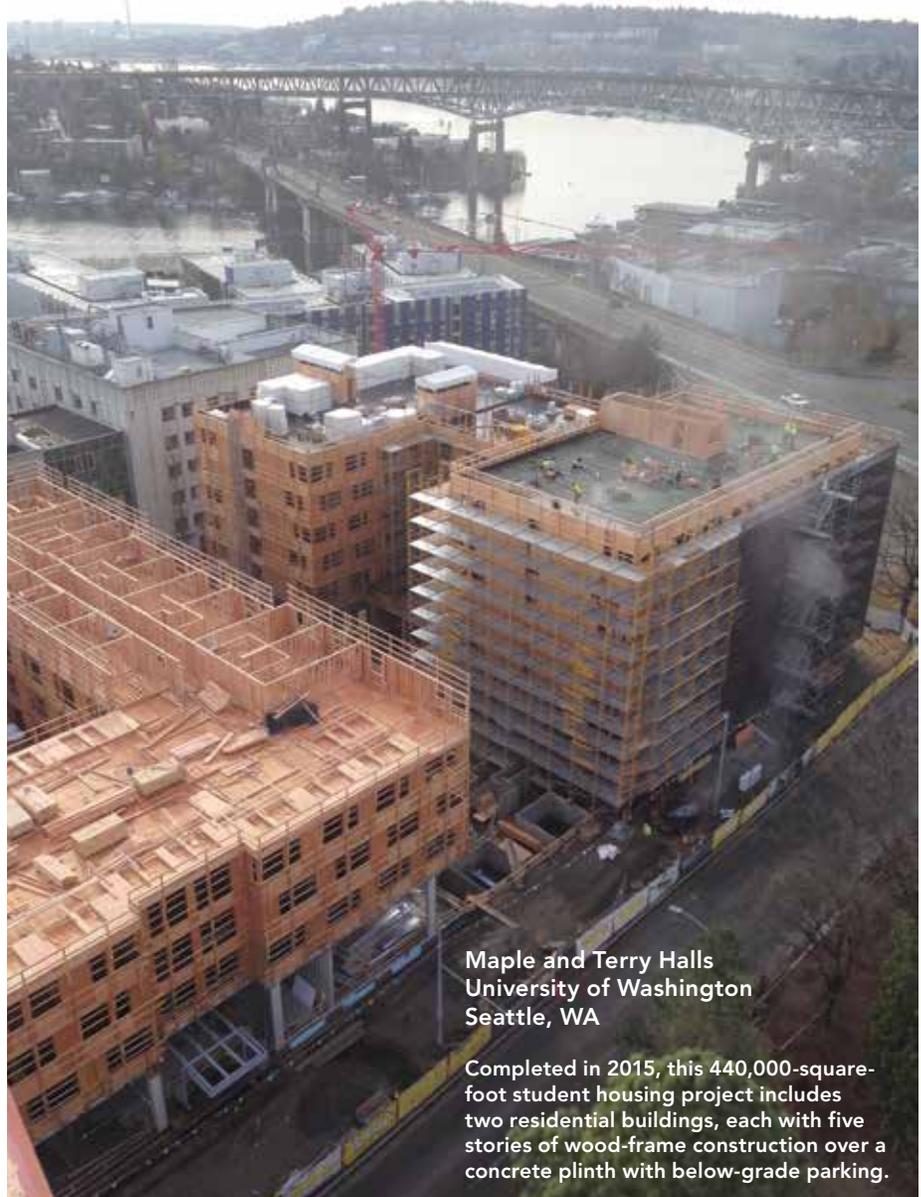
### Learning Objectives

After reading this article, you should be able to:

1. Analyze factors contributing to the long-term durability of wood buildings.
2. Implement effective design strategies for controlling moisture in wood buildings.
3. Discuss comprehensive approaches for protecting wood buildings from insect damage.
4. Determine effective quality control measures that will have significant positive long-term impact on building durability.

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Maple and Terry Halls  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA

Completed in 2015, this 440,000-square-foot student housing project includes two residential buildings, each with five stories of wood-frame construction over a concrete plinth with below-grade parking.

Photo: Mithun Architects Inc., WG Clark Construction

*Photo courtesy of Lend Lease (developer)*

Completed in 2012, the Forté in Australia includes ten stories of cross laminated timber.



and an eight-story CLT apartment in the United Kingdom. Closer to home, a six-story wood building (plus mezzanine and penthouse) was recently completed in British Columbia—becoming, for a moment, the tallest contemporary wood building in North America.<sup>1</sup> Although durability is important in every structure, a long future takes on an additional dimension in iconic structures such as these.

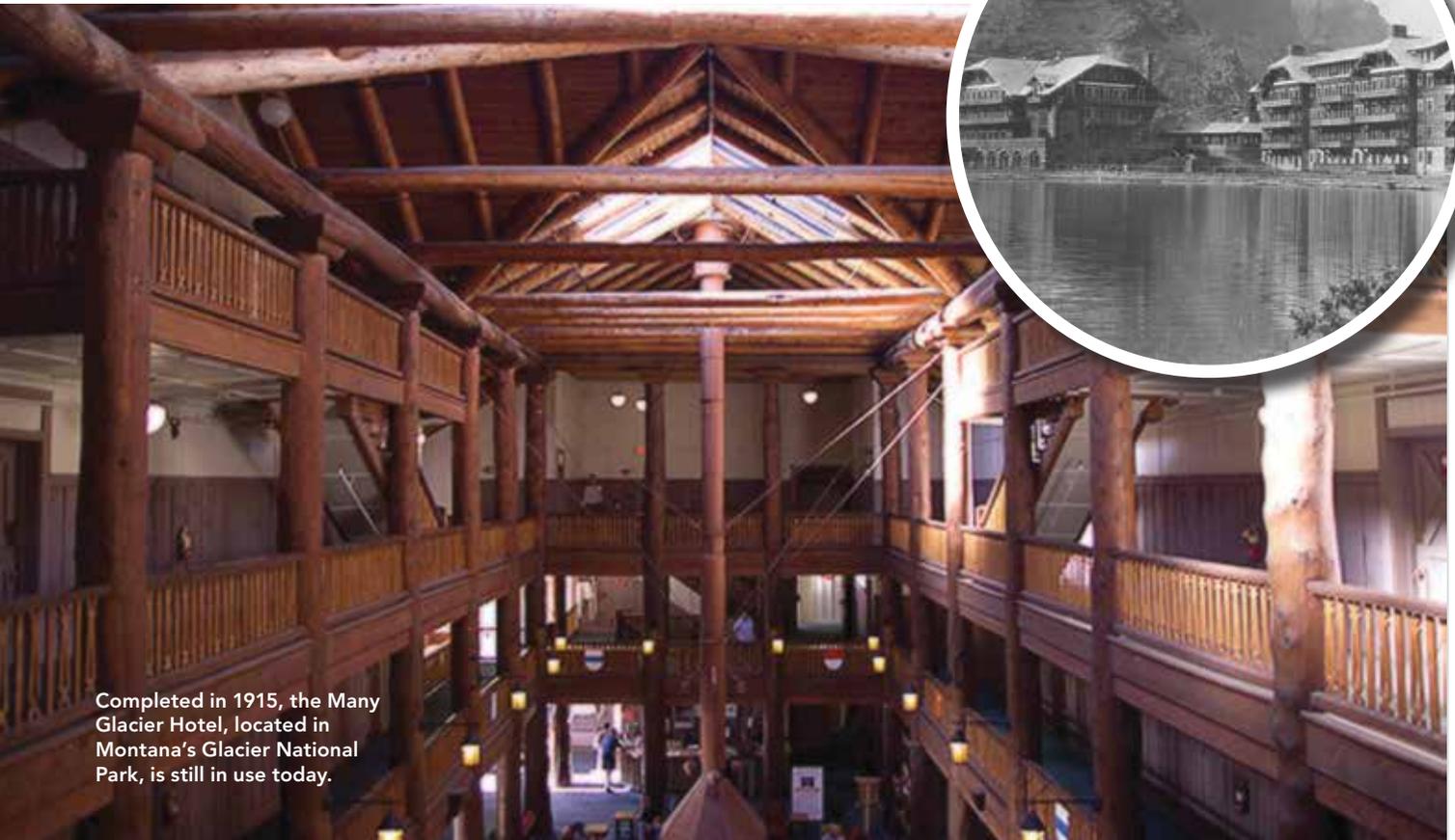
As with any structural material, perhaps the most important single factor to a long and useful service life is effective design. Extensive research and documented experience have led to a number of proven strategies for ensuring that wood material reaches its full potential for longevity. This course outlines the informed design, specification, detailing, and quality control during construction, installation, and maintenance that are collectively key to achieving maximum durability in today's wood construction.

#### **DURABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Durability is a key component of sustainability. Before making a large investment in a building, it is important to consider its environmental impacts versus realistic lifespan. For example, it has been suggested that concrete should be used for buildings because it can last 100 years.

However, research indicates that there is actually no significant relationship between the material used for a building's structural system and its service life. Rather, a study of buildings demolished in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area found that most were demolished because of changing land values, changing tastes and needs, and lack of maintenance of non-structural components.<sup>2</sup> Only eight buildings (3.5 percent) were demolished because of structural failure. In fact, wood buildings in the study were typically the oldest; the majority were older than 75 years. In contrast, more than half the concrete buildings fell into the 26- to 50-year category, with only a third lasting more than half a century. Some 80 percent of the steel buildings demolished were less than 50 years old, and half were less than 25 years old.

Overall, the fact that wood buildings had the longest lifespans shows that wood structural systems are fully capable of meeting a building's longevity expectations; however, considering the embodied



Completed in 1915, the Many Glacier Hotel, located in Montana's Glacier National Park, is still in use today.

*Photo courtesy of David Restivo, National Park Service; inset photo by T.J. Hileman, courtesy of Montana State University Library*

energy in demolished buildings and the implications of material disposal, the fact that wood is adaptable either through renovation or deconstruction and reuse is a significant advantage.

Many architects believe wood can add to a building's longevity, and thus sustainability, not only because of its physical properties, but because wood buildings tend to be valuable to their occupants for reasons related to aesthetics, comfort, acoustics, and innate positive human response to wood. Marc L'Italien, whose architecture firm EHDD often uses wood materials on its projects, puts it this way: "Whenever we can, we select materials with integral finish, both from a sustainability angle and because there is inherent beauty in well-detailed natural materials. This is one of the most overlooked aspects of sustainability. It's not about the [green rating system] points. It's about designing places where people want to be. The more they like their environments, the less likely these structures are to be demolished. A strong following and internal flexibility allow them to be repurposed when the users and owners change over time."

#### DESIGN: TOWARD A DURABLE WOOD BUILDING ENVELOPE

Although wood structural systems are capable of meeting service life objectives, there are potential threats to longevity that must be considered, as there are with any material. Moisture is one of the most challenging, and no material is immune. In steel-frame buildings, for example, warm, moist air can condense on the cold steel members, creating problems such as rust, corrosion, and mold on adjacent drywall. In concrete buildings, condensation can occur on cold surfaces, creating similar problems. In exterior applications, concrete can spall due to water seepage, rusting its steel reinforcing. Likewise, if masonry isn't detailed for proper drainage and drying, spalling can result. In wood buildings, moisture may lead to decay, mold, and other issues. However, with proper detailing to prevent bulk water intrusion and moisture entrapment—i.e., to avoid excessive wetting and promote drying—these issues can be avoided.

For wood, an additional consideration is protection against insects. In some parts of the country where termites pose a significant problem, building codes require the use of preservative-treated wood or wood species that are naturally insect resistant.

Regardless of material, long-term durability starts with good design—including proper detailing, product selection, and quality control.



Building exterior: Butler Square

#### BUTLER BROTHERS BUILDING

In 1900, T. B. Walker (who eventually founded the Walker Art Center) bought the 1.4-acre "baseball block" in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and with partner Levi Butler, decided to use the site for a nine-story warehouse building.

In 1906, construction began on the Butler Brothers Building, a 500,000-square-foot warehouse for

the Butler Brothers Company, a mail order retailing firm. It was designed by architect Harry W. Jones at a time when American architecture was shifting toward more structural simplicity. Its thick masonry bearing walls, cut by vertical recessed windows and topped by corbelled parapets, gave it a fortress-like appearance. Heavy timber post and beam construction provided for the warehouse's 300-pound-per-square-foot loading requirement. The Douglas fir timbers were sawn at Walker's own lumber mill in Aitken, Minnesota, precut and put together on a module measuring approximately 14 feet by 16 feet. The columns receive the beams with cast iron brackets, and gradually diminish in size from 24 inches square on the ground floor to 9 inches on the ninth floor.

In 1974, the successful rebirth of Butler Square as a mixed-use retail/office building served as a catalyst for the surrounding area and was responsible for much of the restoration that has taken place in the city's Warehouse District. The heavy timber framing served as a focal point of the building's new atrium—created to bring natural light into the interior (where there weren't any windows) and considered key to the building's marketability.



Building interior: Preservation Alliance of Minnesota

Photo: Ankrom Moisan Architects, WG Clark Construction



For this project in the Pacific Northwest, plywood sheathing is used as an exterior substrate, onto which the weather-resistant barrier and cladding would be attached.

### Natural Moisture Levels in Wood

Wood and water in natural balance are compatible. Wood tolerates high humidity and is capable of absorbing and releasing water vapor without compromising its structural integrity. This moisture buffering effect of wood is called hygroscopicity.

Although problems may arise when wood gets too wet for too long, wood buildings that are properly designed and constructed perform well in all types of climates. “All materials have challenges when it comes to moisture; however, when moisture is managed properly, wood buildings perform well even in the wettest parts of the country,” says Ethan Martin, P.E., regional director for WoodWorks in the Pacific Northwest.

Moisture content (MC) is a measure of how much water is in a piece of wood relative to the wood itself. It is expressed as a percentage calculated by dividing the weight of water in the wood by the weight of that wood if it were oven dry. For example, 100 percent MC signifies that a piece of lumber has the same amount of water, in weight, as it does wood.

Two important MC numbers to remember are 19 percent and 28 percent. A piece of solid sawn lumber or timber is considered dry for structural applications if it has an MC of 19 percent or less. Fiber saturation averages around 28 percent.

Fiber saturation is important because it is the point at which cell walls are holding as much water as they can. If more water is

introduced, it will go to the cell cavity. Research by FPInnovations, a non-profit forest research center, has shown that, at a temperature of approximately 68 degrees Fahrenheit, decay fungi can colonize kiln-dried wood products when the MC rises to a threshold of 26 percent.<sup>3</sup> It's not the water per se that harms wood, but a consistently elevated moisture content that allows fungi to proliferate.

The fiber saturation point is also the limit for wood shrinkage. As the MC changes, wood shrinks or swells, but only according to the variation of water in the cell walls, not the cell cavity, meaning that wood only shrinks and swells when it changes moisture content below the point of fiber saturation, or 28 percent. Below 28 percent, wood expands as it absorbs moisture and contracts as it dries. Shrinkage and expansion is largest in the direction around the growth rings (tangential) and is also significant across growth rings (radial). Consequently, the width and depth of sawn lumber (e.g., across the depth of plates and band or rim joists) shrink the most. Shrinkage in the longitudinal direction, such as along the length of a wall stud, is much less significant.

These naturally occurring movements of wood are not problematic with proper design and construction, yet they are an important consideration for taller wood buildings of five stories or more. The rule of thumb is that, for every 4 percent change in MC below 28 percent, there is approximately 1 percent change in dimension across the growth

rings (radial and tangential directions). This means that horizontal solid wood members of buildings, such as plates and joists, have the most effect on building movement. Engineered wood products are dryer from manufacturing and also usually have lower shrinkage coefficients when compared with lumber and solid wood timbers, but they may be more susceptible to water absorption.

Simple construction details, such as ensuring that materials are compatible and leaving gaps between sheathing panels and in cladding between floors, will accommodate shrinkage and swelling. Given an environment with consistent temperature and relative humidity, the moisture content of wood will stabilize—interior wood at 8-14 percent moisture content and exterior wood at 12-18 percent, depending on indoor and outdoor climates.<sup>4</sup>

The shortest path to trouble-free use of wood in buildings is to begin with dry wood and then prevent excess moisture intrusion during construction and in building service. By starting with dry lumber, some of the shrinkage will have occurred prior to purchase as the MC drops from 28 percent to 19 percent or even lower. Meanwhile, preventing excessive wetting and allowing the wood to dry during construction will greatly reduce the potential for differential movement that may cause serviceability and durability issues in a wood building. Dry lumber will be stamped with the letters S-DRY (surface-dry, meaning that the MC is 19 percent or lower when it is planed or surfaced to the standard lumber dimension) or KD (kiln-dried). Rough-cut lumber is generally dried and then planed. For kiln-dried softwood framing lumber, the MC is typically around 15 percent.

Photo courtesy of Mark Parlee, The Building Consultant



A molded kick-out flashing device efficiently diverts water into the gutter and prevents water intrusion at the roof/wall intersection.

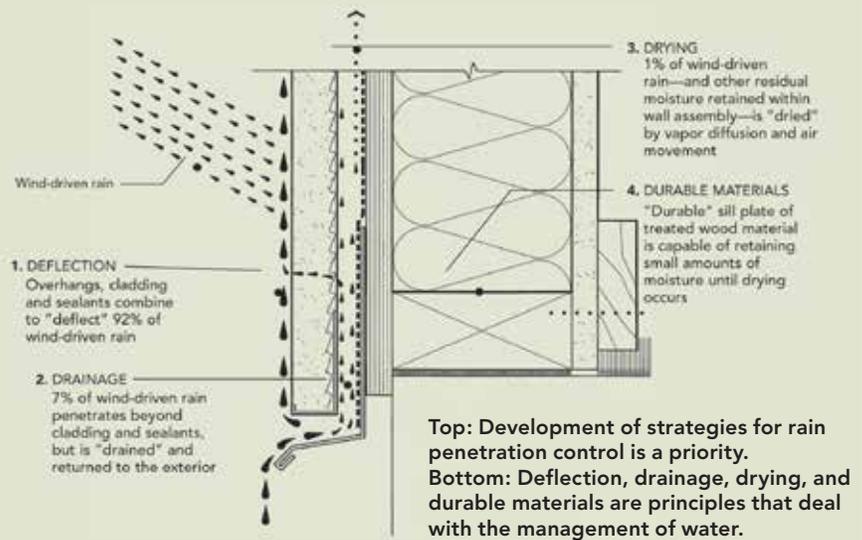
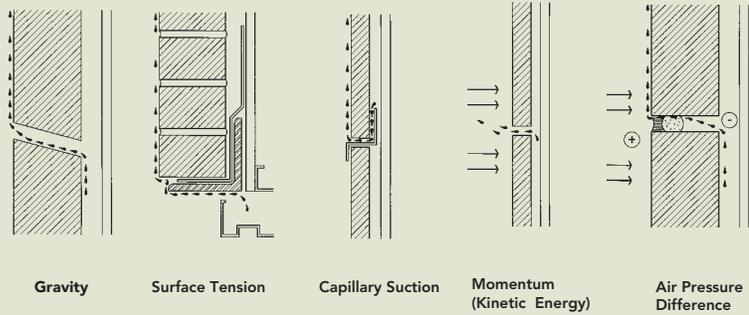
Source: *Design of Wood Frame Structures for Permanence*, American Wood Council

Images courtesy of Canadian Wood Council and Canada Wood

## CONTROLLING MOISTURE: DEFLECTION CHECKLIST

Deflection is the first principle and main priority of water management. Some of the primary strategies that have proven effective at reducing the amount of rainwater on exterior walls include the following:

- Place the building so it is sheltered from prevailing winds by other buildings, trees, etc.
- Use a pitched roof where appropriate.
- Provide sizable roof overhangs and water collection systems at the roof perimeters.
- Provide architectural detailing, including flashing and caulking to direct rainwater away from the building.
- Provide an approved drainage system around the foundation perimeter to accept roof water run-off.
- Install a weather barrier within the wall in an appropriate location and with vapor permeability appropriate for the climate and moisture management approach.
- Install permeable bulk vapor diffusion retarders on the exterior of walls and floors, including below a concrete slab or on top of the bare soil within a crawl space.
- Separate wood elements from moisture sources including soil and concrete, using impermeable membranes.



### Sources of Water and How to Control Them

Moisture loads placed on a building must be accounted for and balanced in the building envelope design. The character of these loads is a function of the climate, surroundings, and type of building. Managing moisture in structural wood products is essential in order to control swelling and shrinkage, and to prevent problems associated with pests and decay.

Potential exterior sources of moisture include rain (wind-driven rain in particular) and snow, as well as groundwater, adjacent irrigation systems, and outdoor air bringing in water vapor. Any design and construction features that may trap moisture and slow the wood's drying should be avoided. Interior moisture sources include poor detailing of the building envelope resulting in air leaks and plumbing failures, poor ventilation and thermal design, and building occupants and their activities. A four-member family can generate up to 10 gallons of water vapor a day.<sup>5</sup>

The primary objectives when addressing moisture loads are to keep water from entering the building envelope in the first place, and to balance the relative humidity of the indoor air within the building itself. Moisture management can be achieved by best-practice design details that protect wood-frame buildings and envelope assemblies against decay, using four lines of defense. None of these measures are perfect in themselves, but, in combination, they can create conditions where the risk of moisture problems is negligible. They are summarized as the four Ds:<sup>6</sup>

**Deflection:** Rain deflection is critical in preventing bulk water from entering the building envelope, whether through wall or roof coverings, or openings such as doors and windows. Pitched roofs, overhangs, and flashing should be used to deflect water away from the structure. To minimize the effects of wind-driven rain, exterior wall coverings should be installed over a drainage plane. If water penetrates the exterior siding, the drainage plane is designed to direct water down the vertical

surface to the outside via weep-holes, rather than allowing it to enter the wall cavity.

**Drainage:** For any water that penetrates the cladding, roof shingles, or other building envelope surfaces, a well-designed drainage path, such as the drainage cavity integrated in rainscreen walls and other drainable building envelope assemblies, will allow water in the cavity to flow down a water-resistant plane and then exit the building envelope.

**Drying:** Drying is the mechanism by which building envelope assemblies remove accumulated moisture by venting (air movement) and vapor diffusion. If, due to construction or maintenance errors, water penetrates the water-resistant membrane, the wood sheathing, studs, roof truss, and other wood elements in the building envelope can get wet. These elements must be allowed to dry. In properly designed building envelope assemblies, water will evaporate and the resulting vapor will go through the assembly's outer layers, providing vapor permeability has been designed into the building envelope assemblies.

Photo courtesy of Brian Gassel, tvsdesign



Designed by tvsdesign, the Branson Convention Center in Branson, Missouri, features a large overhanging roof. By sheltering the wood underneath, the roof deflects precipitation and helps to ensure long-term durability.

Exterior wall assemblies must be designed to allow sufficient drying both to the exterior and interior depending on the climate. The permeability of cladding, moisture barrier, vapor barrier, insulation (exterior insulation in particular), and interior finish materials will greatly affect the wall's overall drying potential. Rainscreen cavities may also dry the wall and cladding if vented.

Experts caution that the drying ability of wall systems should not be relied on to compensate for serious flaws in other moisture management mechanisms, since only minimal amounts of water can be dissipated through drying. The bulk of the moisture protection in wall stems from deflection and drainage.

**Durable materials:** Designers should not discount the value of preservative-treated wood or naturally decay-resistant wood for applications such as cladding, shingles, sill plates, and exposed timbers or glulam beams, where moisture tolerance is necessary or where termite infestation is likely. Approved durable or preservative-treated wood is usually recommended when location of the member in question cannot be maintained at a safe moisture content, and when climatic or site conditions may not permit control of decay or termites by construction practices alone. The role, characteristics, and availability of naturally durable and preservative-treated wood species are discussed later in this course.

### Fungi Control

Decay of wood doesn't happen mysteriously or without cause. Wood that is recognizably rotten is the product of a sequence of events involving a succession of microorganisms operating under certain conditions. Understanding the conditions under which wood in a building can break down is a first step in interrupting the process of decay and preventing wood deterioration.

Fungi can be a cause of wood deterioration. Not all fungi weaken wood: for example, mold will merely stain it. Staining fungi give wood a "blue stain" that goes deep into the interior of the tree and typically occurs before logs are sawn into lumber. According to the Forest Products Laboratory, unlike decay fungi, staining fungi and mold fungi feed off the wood's free water and its sugars but don't impair the strength of the wood. However, if the wood remains wet for too long, it can be eaten by decay fungi.

Molds are notorious for their contribution to poor air quality and potential impact on human health. Mold spores can grow and thrive where there's moisture, including humid air—which means they can proliferate almost anywhere. They grow on many surfaces, wood included, and usually signal a deficiency in a building's moisture management program.

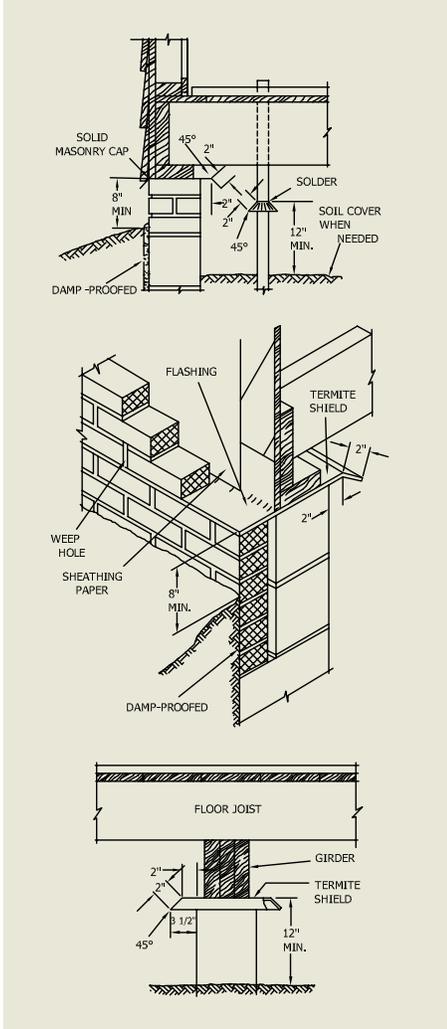
The MC of wood is the deciding factor in the growth of fungi. Wood with an MC of 19 percent or less is dry enough to virtually eliminate the ability of mold to grow. The risk of mold increases with higher moisture content and relative humidity, particularly when these conditions are sustained for extended periods of time. Relative humidity greater than 80 percent is a cause for concern—even though mold growth can be slow initially, higher humidity levels will accelerate growth. Most fungi grow fastest in the 60-80 degree Fahrenheit range; at freezing temperatures, they either do not grow or grow slowly.<sup>7</sup>

### Termite Control

Insects, mainly termites, carpenter ants, and powder post beetles, can cause significant property damage, including (though not limited to) wood-frame structures or wood- or cellulose-based components.

They will also attack fixtures and fittings, furniture, cardboard boxes and books; therefore, even steel and concrete buildings are not immune to invasion. Of the offending insects, subterranean termites cause the most damage, particularly the non-native species known as the Formosan subterranean termite. Though found only in the southern

Image courtesy of the American Wood Council

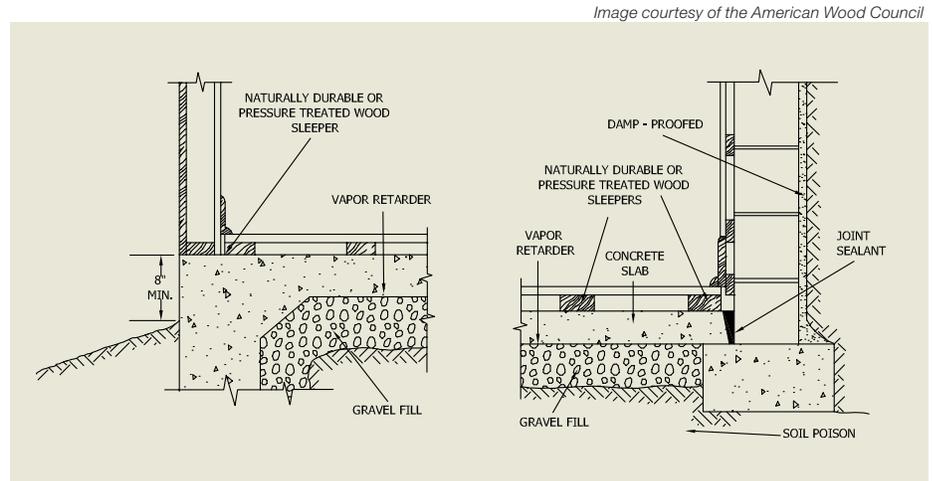


Installing termite shields has proven to be an effective means of control.

United States, it is responsible for most of the value loss due to insect damage to U.S. buildings in the south.

The current thinking is that total eradication of termites from certain areas is unfeasible, and a more realistic approach involves containing existing insect populations and limiting risk to buildings. As with the moisture control strategies described above, the strategy for combating termites is based on the assumption that none of the following measures are 100 percent effective on their own, but, in combination, create conditions where the risk is negligible. The six-S strategy includes the following lines of defense:<sup>8</sup>

**Suppression:** This involves reducing termite populations in a particular area and preventing their spread to new areas. An “area” can range from an entire state (though usually only if the termite is a recent introduction and still has limited distribution) to a single home. Methods of



An example of termite control for slab-on-ground construction.

suppression include locating and destroying termite colonies, burning infested wood, and heat-treating reclaimed lumber.

**Site management:** Careful site preparation and clean-up helps to reduce the potential for termite infestation. If individual trees, forests, or orchards have been cleared, it is essential to completely remove tree stumps and other buried wood from the site, as well as construction debris that may contain cellulose. Water should be drained away from the site of the building. Wooden formwork for concrete should never be left in place.

**Soil barriers:** Treating the soil is a popular and cost-effective option for protecting against conditions that lead to termite damage, especially in states like Louisiana and Florida where termites are a major issue. According to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, the optimum time to protect against termites is during planning and construction, with the key objective of establishing a chemical barrier between the soil, where termites live, and the wood in the building.

Another option, which is sometimes used in California and Hawaii, is a physical barrier, such as precisely sized silica sand, crushed basalt, or granite beneath slab foundations and other locations. Optimum particle size ranges from 1/16 inch to 1/10 inch in diameter, as these particles are too heavy for the termites to move, and the spacing between them too small to move through. A more recent development is termite mesh to wrap the foundation, which protects at-grade or below-grade penetrations of foundations and slabs. Sufficiently fine mesh—1/32 inch—is recommended. Stainless steel mesh installed by licensed contractors will resist corrosion, though it can be costly.

Termiticide-impregnated membranes have also been used as a barrier, mostly in

Japan, but don’t have a long track record. They can be expected to have similar characteristics to termite shields in that they require very careful installation, and termites may be able to get around them. Termite bait systems can also be used as a substitute for the soil barrier, but require a long-term commitment to a contract with a professional company.

**Slab and foundation details:** Slabs and foundation walls should be designed to inhibit the entry of termites into the building and to facilitate inspection for termite shelter tubes. If hollow concrete masonry units (CMUs) or double walls are used in foundations, they must be capped with concrete or masonry to eliminate holes. All exterior slab edges or foundation walls must be kept free of cladding for a height of 6 inches from the finished soil level to allow inspection for shelter tubes. This separation of cladding from the ground must allow for any landscaping to be done immediately after construction or likely in the future.

It’s important to note that there should be no contact between the building woodwork and the soil or fill material. For best results, exterior woodwork should be at least 6 inches above ground and any wood in contact with or adjacent to the soil should be preservative treated.<sup>9</sup> (For more details, see the section on code requirements below.)

**Structural protection:** For many decades, preservative-treated framing has been successfully used to deter termites. These days, wood products can be treated with borate (disodium octaborate, sometimes expressed by its oxide B<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>), a water-soluble chemical that is benign to humans, but kills insects that feed on it. Borates are used in many common household products, from eye drops to washing powder. Borate-treated products—from dimension lumber to plywood, OSB, and cellulose insulation—are

Photo: 2014 WoodWorks Wood Design Award, Hennebery Eddy Architects, Inc.; Josh Partee Photography



Western red cedar's unique properties make it ideal for weather-resistant applications, including roof shingles, decking, exterior siding, and exterior cladding. At the Cascades Academy of Central Oregon, western red cedar cladding is arranged in vertical sections separated by glazing to reflect the rhythm of scattered junipers and pines.

enabling termite-resistant structures. While suitable for framing and sheathing, borate-treated wood should not be used for outdoor applications, such as decks and porches, since the chemicals are water-soluble. A good quality coating, such as a three-coat film-forming finish, prevents the borate from moving out of the wood. Architects should consult the American Wood Protection Association (AWPA) standards for borate and other preservative treatments under specific conditions and types of termites.<sup>10</sup>

Preservative treatments can either be pressurized or non-pressurized. With pressure treatments, combinations of pressure and vacuum achieve a deep, thorough chemical penetration by infusing the wood cells with preservatives. Pressure-treatment preservatives consist of chemicals in either a water or an oil solvent: odorless water-borne options are more popular, as they achieve a paintable or stainable clean wood surface. Depending on local codes, several types of wood preservatives may be used. With non-pressure treatments, the preservative can be applied via brushing, spraying, or dipping of the wood member. Spray application of borates at the framing stage is recognized as an effective termite protection measure by some codes. For information on preservative-treated and naturally durable species, see the section on code requirements.

**Surveillance and remediation:** To ensure effectiveness of the management strategies discussed above, regular inspections are necessary. Baiting may be used to detect the presence of termites. Tubes or traps holding pieces of untreated lumber, or "bait", are placed around the building. Termites feed on the bait, which can then be replaced with

treated lumber that contains a slow-acting chemical that the insects bring back to the colony. Over a period of time, the colony is destroyed. The original untreated bait can then be restored to the traps to determine whether there are any remaining termites. Alternatively, the infested building can undergo either chemical fumigation or heat treatment, the former having the obvious disadvantage of toxicity and the necessity of evacuation for several days.

Both types of remediation must be done by licensed contractors and, while they will eradicate the termites, they do not protect against re-infestation. Vigilant monitoring is key to identifying sources of food and moisture, including leaks in downspouts or



The IBC requires specific wood framing members of a building to be protected against decay and termites. Protection can be provided by using either naturally durable or preservative-treated wood.

Courtesy of the American Wood Council

Non-Treated Wood Elements	Minimum Height Above Ground Permitted (inches)
Floor joists	18
Studs	8
Wood veneer	6
Girders	12
Posts in crawl spaces	8
Columns	6
Columns above concrete	1

Height above ground of non-treated wood elements. Based on the U.S. model building codes and American Wood Council recommendations.

gutters, air conditioners, pipes, window or door seals, and poorly ventilated bathrooms. The type of action taken against termite colonies will vary widely depending on the type of termite, location, and condition of the building.

#### Code Requirements

To avoid decay caused by fungi and termite infestation, it is critical to separate untreated wood from the ground and other moisture sources, including concrete less than 6 inches above finished soil level. Such separations are required by current codes, including Section 2304.11 of the International Building Code (IBC). This section addresses protection against decay and termites, and sets out requirements for non-residential construction applications, and for wood used above ground for framing, decks, stairs, and similar features.

Photo courtesy of BS&S Treated Lumber

Photo courtesy of KK Law



Once delivered to the construction site, wood should be stored and wrapped properly.

To protect framing at the connections to foundation, 2012 IBC Section 2304.11 requires that specific wood framing members of a building be protected against decay and termites. Protection can be provided by using either naturally durable or preservative-treated wood.

Wood that is naturally durable for decay and termites, as defined in IBC Chapter 2, includes the heartwood of redwood, Alaska yellow cedar, eastern red cedar, and western red cedar. Preservative-treated wood typically needs to comply with IBC 2303.1.8. Preservative-treated southern pine is distributed throughout much of the United States, while preservative-treated Douglas fir and hem-fir are also commonly distributed in the western states. Preservative treated Douglas fir and hem-fir are often incised to improve their treatment absorption. Because the incising process cuts a small percentage of wood fibers in the lumber, for structural applications, the reduction in strength must be accounted for using the incising factor prescribed by the referenced design standard, the *National Design Specification® (NDS) for Wood Construction*, available from the American Wood Council.

The required use of treated wood or a naturally durable species is dictated by the proximity of the wood to earth or to concrete in contact with earth.

Sill plates and wood sleepers on concrete in direct contact with the earth, such as a foundation wall or slab-on-grade, require protection. Sills can be protected from moisture migration from the concrete by installation of a sill sealer between the concrete and sill. Such sill sealers are often self-adhesive closed cell foam ribbons installed on the concrete before placing the sill. Not only do sill sealers act as a capillary break for moisture migration, they also serve as an air seal, eliminating potential gaps beneath the sill, and as a small thermal break between the concrete and framing.

In raised floors, wood joists and underlayment are best constructed at least 18 inches from exposed ground and wood girders at least 12 inches from exposed ground. With less clearance, the IBC requires the members to be naturally durable or preservative-treated wood.

At the exterior of the buildings, it is good practice to provide vertical clearance between the ground and any wood members. A stem wall in a raised floor or

a curb made of concrete or masonry on a slab-on-grade foundation can provide the required clearance. Alternatively, the top of a foundation slab is located at an elevation to provide the desired vertical clearance at the exterior edges. Wood framing members, such as studs and wood structural sheathing, are best located at least 8 inches above earth. Below that, IBC 2304.11.2.2 requires wood framing on foundation walls to be naturally durable or preservative-treated wood.

#### CONSTRUCTION: KEEPING WOOD DURABLE

Informed design is essential to durability, but encouraging proper material handling during construction will greatly improve the long-term performance of wood material in the building envelope. “While an architect’s role typically does not extend beyond specification of wood to materials handling and construction practices, specifications can state S-DRY or KD lumber as well as 19 percent maximum moisture content at time of enclosure,” says Paul Morris, research leader, durability and building enclosure at FPInnovations. “It would also be ideal if architects provided recommendations on how wood should be treated during

construction. Even something as elementary as requiring field treatment of saw cuts in treated wood to seal newly exposed untreated wood would help protect the structure's long-term durability."

### Weather Protection

Advanced planning to protect wood during construction can contribute to long-term durability. Material delivery should be timed as close to the installation date as possible. Too often, wood construction products, even for interior use, arrive at the construction site and are left outside and exposed to the elements, absorbing moisture from rain, snow, puddles, or soil. If wood does need to be stored for any length of time, a clean, well-drained material storage area is critical. Upon arrival, wood should be inspected to see that wrappers are intact—faulty ones should be replaced with heavy tarp—and then stored 6-8 inches off the ground away from ponding water. If the soil is wet or poorly drained, a polyethylene tarp or a temporary gravel pad should be placed on the ground below as supports for the materials. The storage area should also be free of vegetation which can harbor insects, hamper ventilation, and maintain moisture in the air.

After installation, the structure should be protected from rain and other sources of bulk water by installing roof coverings and

*Photo courtesy of Togawa Smith Martin, Inc.*



**This photo shows how a multi-story wood building can be protected from the elements.**

moisture barriers on the exterior of the building envelope as soon as practicable. If elevated moisture levels exist, materials inside the building envelope should be adequately dried before installing insulation and other materials. It is best to avoid the premature application of interior membranes like gypsum wallboard. Allowing the wood framing to acclimate and lower its moisture content to the extent reasonable is highly desirable.

If lumber has been significantly wetted during construction, schedules should allow for drying of framing and sheathing materials to an MC of 19 percent or below. Moisture barriers, installed soon after assemblies are framed, will reduce exposure to weather. If needed, artificial heat and/or dehumidification can accelerate drying.

### BUILDINGS THAT WORK

Over the years, research and experience have identified several key characteristics of wood buildings that last.

#### Dry Buildings

As has been discussed, controlling moisture is a key factor in ensuring durability. Wood meant for a dry structure must start out dry and stay dry. Buy dry wood, store it properly, design the building to keep the wood dry, and observe proper maintenance practices. This is fundamental to an approach called "durability by design."

For example, if wood is in direct contact with concrete outdoors, moisture can accumulate unless the concrete is detailed to drain away from the wood. Moisture can be a problem in basements because they are surrounded by soil and basement walls are subject to penetration by tiny amounts of water through concrete foundation walls. This can be prevented by use of an effective moisture barrier.

*Photo courtesy of Stephanie Tracey*



### Buildings with Quality Assurance

For long-term durability, conformance to requirements of the building code is essential at every stage of the building process.

Inspection is required for all construction materials covered by the building code and is typically performed by the local code agency. Special inspection by third-party agencies for construction practices critical to the building's structural capability, such as tight diaphragm nailing in high seismic areas, are enumerated in Chapter 17 of the IBC, Structural Tests and Special Inspections. Treated wood products should confirm to AWPAs standards, and should carry the quality mark of an accredited inspection agency of the American Lumber Standard Committee (ALSC) or ICC Evaluation Service.

### Buildings that are Properly Maintained

Also essential to building longevity is regular maintenance, repair, and renewal. Five years after installation (or sooner), wood exposed on the exterior should be inspected, and then every two years thereafter. Sunken paint and surface collapse both indicate subsurface wood decay, which requires repair. To minimize moisture problems, cladding should be inspected annually for signs of wear and for green algae stains; through-wall flashing should be examined for brown stains. Exposed wood should be properly painted, stained or otherwise protected. Re-treat with termiticides at appropriate intervals. Heavy shrubbery should be kept from exterior walls, and sprinklers pointed away from wood walls. Roof gutters should be kept unclogged. Any plumbing leaks should be promptly repaired.

### WOOD: A MATERIAL OF CHOICE

Because of its cost effectiveness, ease and efficiency of construction, versatility, and sustainability, wood will continue to be a material of choice for many structural applications. Protecting the longevity of wood buildings starts with good design and construction practices—both areas in which architects can influence the optimum use of wood. When appropriate steps are taken, architects can tap the virtually unlimited design possibilities of wood material, while delivering buildings that will perform well for owners, occupants, and the environment—and for centuries.

### INFORMATION SOURCES

*Design of Wood-Frame Structures for Permanence*, American Wood Council, <http://awc.org/codes-standards/publications/wcd6>

*Managing Moisture and Wood*, Canadian Wood Council, [http://www.cwc.ca/documents/durability/BP6\\_ManagingMoistureAndWood.pdf](http://www.cwc.ca/documents/durability/BP6_ManagingMoistureAndWood.pdf)

*Moisture and Wood-Frame Buildings*, Canadian Wood Council, [www.cwc.ca/documents/durability/BP1\\_MoistureAndWoodFrameBuildings.pdf](http://www.cwc.ca/documents/durability/BP1_MoistureAndWoodFrameBuildings.pdf)

*Guide for Designing Energy-Efficient Building Enclosures for Wood-Frame Multi-Unit Residential Buildings in Marine to Cold Climate Zones in North America*, Finch, G., J. Wang, and D. Ricketts, 2013, [www.fpinnovations.ca](http://www.fpinnovations.ca)

USDA Forest Products Laboratory, [www.fpl.fs.fed.us](http://www.fpl.fs.fed.us)

[www.durable-wood.com](http://www.durable-wood.com), Canadian Wood Council and FPInnovations

Building Science Corporation, [www.buildingscience.com](http://www.buildingscience.com) and [www.buildingsciencepress.com](http://www.buildingsciencepress.com)

### ENDNOTES

1 <http://www.rethinkwood.com/sites/default/files/Tall-Wood-CEU-Nov-2014.pdf>

2 O'Connor, J., Horst J.S., Argeles, C., 2005. *Survey on Actual Service Lives for North American Buildings*, FPInnovations, Proceedings, 10th International Conference on Durability of Building Materials and Components

3 Wang, J., Morris, P.I. 2011. *Decay initiation in plywood, OSB and solid wood under marginal moisture conditions*. The International Research Group on Wood Protection Document No. IRG/WP 11-20469

4 Canadian Wood Council, <http://cwc.ca/design-with-wood/durability/durability-hazards/about-moisture-and-wood/>

5 *Moisture and Wood-Frame Buildings*, [www.canadawood.ca/english/downloads/pdf/moisture/moisture\\_english.pdf](http://www.canadawood.ca/english/downloads/pdf/moisture/moisture_english.pdf)

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7 USDA Forest Products Laboratory, [http://www.fpl.fs.fed.us/documnts/informationalkits/infokit\\_0011\\_Mold\\_A525.pdf](http://www.fpl.fs.fed.us/documnts/informationalkits/infokit_0011_Mold_A525.pdf)

8 Morris, P.I. 2000. *Integrated control of subterranean termites: the 6S approach*. Proceedings American Wood Preservers' Association Annual Meeting. (96): 93-106.

9 North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, [www.ncagr.gov/SPCAP/structural/pubs/preconstruction.htm](http://www.ncagr.gov/SPCAP/structural/pubs/preconstruction.htm)

10 American Wood Protection Association, <http://www.awpa.com/standards/organization.asp>



reThink Wood represents North America's softwood lumber industry. We share a passion for wood and the forests it comes from. Our goal is to generate awareness and understanding of wood's advantages in the built environment. Join the reThink Wood community to make a difference for the future. Be part of the message to "rethink" wood use, address misperceptions and enhance awareness of wood's benefits and choices. Visit [reThinkWood.com/CEU](http://reThinkWood.com/CEU) to learn more and join.

To receive AIA/CES credit, you are required to read the entire article and pass the test. Go to [ce.architecturalrecord.com](http://ce.architecturalrecord.com) for complete text and to take the test. The quiz questions below include information from this online reading.

1. Which of the following statements best describes the relationship of a building's structural material—for example, concrete, steel, wood—to how long the building will last?
  - A. The heavier the material, the longer the building tends to last.
  - B. Materials with a higher original cost tend to last longer.
  - C. Structural material has little or no relationship to building longevity; other factors such as land values and occupant needs usually determine how long a building will last.
  - D. Materials from renewable sources are not as durable as other building materials.
2. Many common building materials like concrete, steel, and masonry are immune to moisture problems.
  - A. True
  - B. False
3. Hygroscopicity is:
  - A. the natural moisture buffering effect of wood, i.e. its ability to absorb and release water vapor without compromising its structural integrity.
  - B. the science of analyzing tree rings.
  - C. methods for studying wood's moisture content at microscopic levels.
  - D. a measure of forest rainfall in a given area.
4. Moisture content (MC) is a measure of how much water is in a piece of wood relative to the wood itself. Two important MC numbers for lumber as a building material are:
  - A. 50 percent, the MC that can be determined by the naked eye.
  - B. 19 percent or less: a piece of solid sawn lumber is considered dry for structural applications if it has this MC.
  - C. 28 percent: average point of fiber saturation.
  - D. a. and b., but not c.
  - E. b. and c., but not a.
5. Steps to ensure durable wood construction and minimize moisture problems would include which of the following?
  - A. Starting with dry wood
  - B. Designing details to accommodate any shrinkage or swelling
  - C. Preventing excess moisture intrusion during construction or building service
  - D. All of the above
6. Dry lumber will be stamped with the letters:
  - A. S-DRY (Surfaced Dry) or KD (Kiln Dry).
  - B. XD (Extra Dry) or MD (Medium Dry).
  - C. A-1 (Dry) or AA-1 (Super Dry).
  - D. Initials of lumber inspectors.
7. All of the following are strategies for creating durable buildings with minimal risk of damage from moisture, except which one?
  - A. Deflection
  - B. Deconstruction
  - C. Drainage
  - D. Drying
  - E. Durable materials
8. Not all fungi weaken wood.
  - A. True
  - B. False
9. How low does the MC percent of wood need to be to virtually eliminate the ability of mold to grow?
  - A. 5
  - B. 10
  - C. 19
  - D. 75
10. Current thinking among construction experts about termite infestation is that:
  - A. complete eradication is the only remedy.
  - B. strategies such as suppression, soil barriers, structural protection, and effective slab and foundation details can effectively limit damage to buildings.
  - C. toxic chemicals must be used to wipe out existing termite populations.
  - D. termite damage is unavoidable, and focus should be on rapid replacement of materials.