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Standard Guide for Limiting Water-Induced Damage to Buildings¹

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1. Scope

1.1 This guide concerns building design, construction, commissioning, operation, and maintenance.

1.2 This guide addresses the need for systematic evaluation of factors that can result in moisture-induced damage to a building or its components. Although of great potential importance, serviceability issues which are often, but not necessarily, related to physical damage of the building or its components (for example, indoor air quality or electrical safety) are not directly addressed in this guide.

1.3 The emphasis of this guide is on low-rise buildings. Portions of this guide; in particular Sections 5, 6, and 7; may also be applicable to high-rise buildings.

1.4 This guide is not intended for direct use in codes and specifications. It does not attempt to prescribe acceptable limits of damage. Buildings intended for different uses may have different service life expectancies, and expected service lives of different components within a given building often differ. Furthermore, some building owners may be satisfied with substantially shorter service life expectancies of building components or of the entire building than other building owners. Lastly, the level of damage that renders a component unserviceable may vary with the type of component, the degree to which failure of the component is critical (for example, whether failure constitutes a life-safety hazard), and the judgement (that is, tolerance for damage) of the building owner. For the reasons stated in this paragraph, prescribing limits of damage would require listing many pages of exceptions and qualifiers and is beyond the scope of this guide.

1.5 *This standard does not purport to address the safety concerns associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.*

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards:*²

C168 Terminology Relating to Thermal Insulation

C717 Terminology of Building Seals and Sealants

C755 Practice for Selection of Water Vapor Retarders for Thermal Insulation

C1193 Guide for Use of Joint Sealants

D1079 Terminology Relating to Roofing and Waterproofing

E331 Test Method for Water Penetration of Exterior Windows, Skylights, Doors, and Curtain Walls by Uniform Static Air Pressure Difference

E547 Test Method for Water Penetration of Exterior Windows, Skylights, Doors, and Curtain Walls by Cyclic Static Air Pressure Difference

E631 Terminology of Building Constructions

E632 Practice for Developing Accelerated Tests to Aid Prediction of the Service Life of Building Components and Materials

E1105 Test Method for Field Determination of Water Penetration of Installed Exterior Windows, Skylights, Doors, and Curtain Walls, by Uniform or Cyclic Static Air Pressure Difference

E1643 Practice for Selection, Design, Installation, and Inspection of Water Vapor Retarders Used in Contact with Earth or Granular Fill Under Concrete Slabs

E1677 Specification for an Air Barrier (AB) Material or System for Low-Rise Framed Building Walls

E1745 Specification for Plastic Water Vapor Retarders Used in Contact with Soil or Granular Fill under Concrete Slabs

E2112 Practice for Installation of Exterior Windows, Doors and Skylights

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² For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact ASTM Customer Service at service@astm.org. For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

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2.2 Other Documents:

- ASCE/SEI 24–05 *Flood Resistant Design and Construction*, American Society of Civil Engineers, Structural Engineering Institute, Reston, VA.
- ASHRAE Handbook of Fundamentals *Chapter 23: Thermal and Moisture Control in Insulated Assemblies—Fundamentals; Chapter 24: Thermal and Moisture Control in Insulated Assemblies—Applications; Chapter 27: Ventilation and Infiltration; Chapter 29: Residential Cooling and Heating Load Calculations; Chapter 30: Nonresidential Cooling and Heating Load Calculations*; American Society of Heating Refrigerating, and Air Conditioning Engineers; Atlanta, GA, 2005.
- ASHRAE Standard 62 Ventilation for Acceptable Indoor Air Quality³
- ASHRAE Technical Data Bulletin, Vol 10, No. 3 *Recommended Practices for Controlling Moisture in Crawl Spaces*, American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air Conditioning Engineers, Atlanta, GA, 1994.
- ASTM MNL 18 Trechsel, H., (ed.), *Moisture Control in Buildings*, American Society for Testing and Materials, West Conshohocken, PA, 1994.
- ASTM MNL 40 Trechsel, H., (ed.), *Moisture Analysis and Condensation Control in Building Envelopes*, American Society for Testing and Materials, West Conshohocken, PA, 2001.
- Bateman, R., “Nail-On Windows” *Installation & Flashing Procedures for Windows & Sliding Glass Doors*, DTA, Inc., Mill Valley, CA, 1995.
- Connolly, J., “Humidity and Building Materials” in *Proceedings: Bugs, Mold & Rot II* (W. Rose and A. TenWolde, eds.), National Institute of Building Sciences, Washington, DC, 1993.
- ISO 6707-1 Building and civil engineering—Vocabulary—General Terms⁴
- Lstiburek, J., and Carmody, J., *The Moisture Control Handbook: New, Low-Rise, Residential Construction* prepared for U.S. Department of Energy, Washington, DC, 1991.
- Timusk, J., Seskus, A., and Linger, K., “A Systems Approach to Extend the Limit of Envelope Performance” in *Proceedings: Thermal Performance of the Exterior Envelopes of Buildings V*, American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers, Atlanta, GA, 1992.

3. Terminology

3.1 *Standard Definitions*—Refer to Terminologies C168, C717, D1079, and E631 for definitions of general terms.

3.1.1 *perm, n*—a measurement unit for time rate of water vapor migration by diffusion through a material or component. See Terminology C168 for the explicit definition.

3.1.2 *vapor retarder (barrier), n*—As defined in Terminology C168, a material or system that adequately impedes the transmission of water vapor under specified conditions.

3.1.2.1 *Discussion*—For low-rise residential construction, materials or components with a water vapor permeance not exceeding 60 ng/(s m² Pa) (approximately one perm) are generally considered vapor retarders (see Practice C755). What constitutes adequate restriction of water vapor transmission however depends on vapor pressure difference across the construction (which in turn depends on interior and exterior conditions), ability of the construction to dissipate moisture, and capacity of the construction to seasonally accumulate moisture without damage. Therefore, a material or system with a water vapor permeance exceeding 60 ng/(s m² Pa) (approximately one perm) may in some circumstances provide adequate impedance to vapor transmission.

3.1.3 *water vapor permeance, n*—see Terminology C168.

3.1.3.1 *Discussion*—Permeance is a performance evaluation and not a property of a material. Permeance is expressed in perms (I-P units), or in ng/(s m² Pa) (SI modified units)-Pa (SI modified units) or in perms (IP units).

3.1.4 *water vapor permeability, n*—see Terminology C168.

3.1.4.1 *Discussion*—Permeability is a property of a material. Permeability is the arithmetic product of permeance and thickness.

3.2 *Other Definitions Found in ASTM Standards:*

3.2.1 *air barrier, n*—a material or system in building construction that is designed and installed to reduce air leakage either into or through an opaque wall or across a ceiling.

3.2.1.1 *Discussion*—Source of this definition is Specification E1677.

3.2.2 *opaque wall, n*—exposed areas of a wall that enclose conditioned space, except openings for windows, doors and building service systems.

3.2.2.1 *Discussion*—Source of this definition is Specification E1677.

3.3 *Definitions from ASHRAE*—The following definitions are consistent with those in Chapter 27 of the ASHRAE Handbook of Fundamentals.

3.3.1 *exfiltration, n*—the uncontrolled flow of indoor air out of a building through cracks and other unintentional openings and through the normal use of exterior doors for entrance and egress.

³ Available from American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers, Inc. (ASHRAE), 1791 Tullie Circle, NE, Atlanta, GA 30329, <http://www.ashrae.org>.

⁴ Available from International Organization for Standardization (ISO), 1, ch. de la Voie-Creuse, Case postale 56, CH-1211, Geneva 20, Switzerland, <http://www.iso.ch>.

3.3.2 *infiltration, n*—the uncontrolled flow of outdoor air into a building through cracks and other unintentional openings and through the normal use of exterior doors for entrance and egress.

3.3.3 *ventilation, n*—the intentional introduction of air, from the outside, into a building.

3.4 *Definitions from the U.S. Department of Energy:*

3.4.1 *cold climate, n*—a climate with between 5400 and 9000°F heating degree days (HDD (65°F basis) [or between 3000 and 5000°K heating degree days (18.3°C basis)].

3.4.1.1 *Discussion*—This definition is consistent with the climate classification system adopted by the U.S. Department of Energy’s Building America program. According to this classification system, a climate with in excess of 9000°F HDD (5000°K HDD) is considered a very cold climate.

3.4.2 *hot-humid climate, n*—a climate where annual precipitation exceeds 20 in. (500 mm) and one or both of the following occur: (1) wet-bulb temperature exceeds 67°F (19.5°C) for 3000 or more h during the warmest six consecutive months of the year, or (2) wet-bulb temperature exceeds 73°F (23°C) for 1500 or more h during the warmest six consecutive months of the year.

3.4.2.1 *Discussion*—This definition is consistent with the climate classification system adopted by the U.S. Department of Energy’s Building America program.

3.5 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.5.1 *air leakage, n*—infiltration or exfiltration, in other words uncontrolled air flow into or out of a building through cracks and other unintentional openings and through normal use of exterior doors for entrance and egress.

3.5.1.1 *Discussion*—This definition is essentially the same as that in Terminology C168, although expressed with different verbiage.

3.5.2 *building component, n*—an inclusive term to collectively refer to building materials, products, or assemblies.

3.5.3 *capillary break, n*—a term applied to a material used to limit liquid water transfer by diffusion or capillary suction from wet ground or from a wet or damp building component to another building component that can absorb liquid water.—a term applied to a material or system intended to inhibit liquid water transfer by capillary suction. The mechanism for inhibiting liquid water transfer is by insertion of, or provision for, a discontinuity of capillary suction force.

3.5.3.1 *Discussion*—A capillary break may be a membrane capable of blocking liquid water movement regardless of direction, or may be a coarse granular material capable of preventing capillary rise, while allowing drainage. An airspace may serve as a capillary break, where it is of such dimension and configuration that bridging of water drops across the airspace is prevented. Membrane capillary breaks are commonly composed of synthetic polymers but may also be composed of corrosion-resistant sheet metal, asphalt impregnated and coated felt, or, where lesser degrees of resistance to capillary transfer are required, asphalt-impregnated felt.

3.5.4 *critical moisture content, n*—a moisture condition parameter. This parameter is expressed as a moisture content level above which immediate or virtually immediate damage will occur to a building component at a given temperature, such that the level of damage is deemed unacceptable.

3.5.5 *critical cumulative exposure time, n*—a moisture condition parameter, this parameter is expressed as a time sum when moisture conditions are above a level that results in cumulative damage to a building component, such that the level of cumulative damage is deemed unacceptable.

3.5.5.1 *Discussion*—cumulative damage to a component may occur over a range of moisture and temperature combinations, and damage is frequently more rapid at some combinations than at others. The differing rate of damage accumulation at different sets of conditions is accounted for with intensity factors, which are discussed in Chapter 26 of ASTM MNL 18.

3.5.6 *durability, n*—in constructions, the capacity of a building component or a construction to remain serviceable as intended with usual and customary operation and maintenance during the designed service-life under anticipated internal and external environments.

3.5.6.1 *Discussion*—This definition is similar to that found in Terminology C168 as a subheading under the term “building performance.”

3.5.7 *flashing, n*—a term applied to elements, most commonly fabricated of sheet metal, but which may also be fabricated of synthetic materials, used at interruptions and terminations of water shedding systems of roofs and walls, and intended to prevent intrusion of liquid water at these points.

3.5.7.1 *Discussion*—This definition is consistent with, although not identical to, that found in ISO 6707-1.

3.5.8 *limit, v*—to keep the value or level of some parameter, which is recognized as being problematic or potentially problematic, below a value or level which is deemed to be objectionable.

3.5.9 *limit state, n*—a value which expresses a moisture condition parameter, generally a critical moisture content or a critical cumulative exposure time, that is deemed to be at the border of what is acceptable, and beyond which an unacceptable level of damage to a building component may be expected.

3.5.10 *serviceability, n*—in a construction, the capacity of a building component or a construction to perform the function(s) for which it was designed and constructed.

3.5.10.1 *Discussion*—This definition is similar to that found in Terminology C168 as a subheading under the term “building performance.”

3.5.11 *water or moisture, n*—water as liquid, vapor, or solid (ice, frost, or snow) in any combination or in transition.

4. Significance and Use

4.1 Moisture degradation is frequently a significant factor that either limits the useful life of a building or necessitates costly repairs. Examples of moisture degradation include: (1) decay of wood-based materials, (2) spalling of masonry caused by freeze-thaw cycles, (3) damage to gypsum plasters by dissolution, (4) corrosion of metals, (5) damage due to expansion of materials or components (by swelling due to moisture pickup, or by expansion due to corrosion, hydration, or delayed ettringite formation), (6) spalling and degradation caused by salt migration, (7) failure of finishes, and (8) creep deformation and reduction in strength or stiffness.

4.1.1 Moisture accumulation within construction components or constructions may adversely affect serviceability of a building, without necessarily causing immediate and serious degradation of the construction components. Examples of such serviceability issues are: (1) indoor air quality, (2) electrical safety, (3) degradation of thermal performance of insulations, and (4) decline in physical appearance. Mold or mildew growth can influence indoor air quality and physical appearance. With some components, in particular interior surface finishes, mold or mildew growth may limit service life of the component. Moisture conditions that affect serviceability issues can frequently be expected, unless corrected, to eventually result in degradation of the building or its components. This guide does not attempt however to address serviceability issues that could be corrected by cleaning and change in building operation, and that would not require repair or replacement of components to return the building (or portions or components of the building) to serviceability.

4.2 Prevention of water-induced damage must be considered throughout the construction process including the various stages of the design process, construction, and building commissioning. It must also be considered in building operation and maintenance, and when the building is renovated, rehabilitated or undergoes a change in use.

4.3 This guide is intended to alert designers and builders, and also building owners and managers, to potential damages that may be induced by water, regardless of its source. This guide discusses moisture sources and moisture migration. Limit states (or specific moisture conditions that are likely to impact construction or component durability) and design methods are also cursorily discussed. Examples of practices that enhance durability are listed and discussed, as are examples of constructions or circumstances to avoid. The examples listed are not all-inclusive. Lastly, field check lists are given. The checklists are not intended for use as is, but as guides for development of checklists which may vary with specific building designs and climates.

5. Moisture Sources and Migration

5.1 Moisture sources for buildings can be broadly classified as follows: (1) surface runoff of precipitation from land areas, (2) ground water or wet soil, (3) precipitation or irrigation water that falls on the building, (4) indoor humidity, (5) outdoor humidity, (6) moisture from use of wet building materials or construction under wet conditions, and (7) errors, accidents, and maintenance problems associated with indoor plumbing. At a given instant of time the categories are distinct from each other. Water can change phase and can be transported over space by various mechanisms. Water may therefore be expected to move between categories over time, blurring the distinctions between categories. Chapter 8 of ASTM MNL 18 provides quantitative estimates of potential moisture load from various sources.

5.1.1 High indoor humidity during winter is often a major cause of moisture problems in cold or temperate climates. Moisture-induced damage may be expected unless the building is designed to tolerate the levels of indoor humidity that occur in use. Conversely, moisture induced damage may be expected unless indoor humidity is kept within limits that the building will tolerate. Buildings should be designed and built so as to tolerate indoor humidity levels commensurate with their intended use. For some buildings (for example, those intended for habitation by persons with certain medical conditions or those housing swimming pools or textile production equipment), the levels of indoor humidity which the building should be expected to tolerate are moderately high, even if the building is located in a cold climate. Conversely however, most buildings are not designed nor built to tolerate high indoor humidities during winter. It is therefore unreasonable to expect such buildings to perform adequately if operated at high indoor humidities during winter.

5.1.1.1 The potential for indoor humidity to cause damage depends on the local climate. Occupant density, that is number of occupants per given unit of space, and occupant activities frequently have a large influence on indoor humidity levels. Among occupant activities that influence indoor humidity, cooking, bathing and laundry activities, and use of unvented combustion appliances are those most likely to be significant. Air exchange between the living space and the exterior can significantly lower indoor humidity levels during winter in temperate climates. Control of indoor humidity is discussed in greater detail in 8.3 and its subsections.

5.1.1.2 Mathematical evaluation tools (see 7.1.2 and 7.1.3) can be used to identify if a given building design in a given climate will tolerate a given level of indoor humidity or, alternatively, to estimate tolerable indoor relative humidities for a given building design and climate.

5.1.2 Although use of dry building materials is preferable, wet building materials are commonly used. With some building materials (for example cast-in-place concrete) a wet initial condition is an inherent characteristic of the material, and thus unavoidable. The influence of moisture from wet building materials must not be overlooked. With proper design, construction and operation, moisture from wet building materials can, within limits, be dissipated without causing damage.

5.1.2.1 When wood frame walls are constructed with wet building materials or under wet conditions, the walls should be allowed to dry by evaporation before they are enclosed. Wall designs that permit more rapid dissipation of moisture can

accommodate being enclosed at higher moisture conditions than can wall designs with lower capacity to dissipate moisture. Computer models (7.1.2) can be helpful in predicting drying rate in walls enclosed at higher than ideal moisture contents.

5.2 Strategies to prevent or control moisture accumulation in buildings fall into three broad categories: (1) limit moisture sources, (2) minimize moisture entry into the building or building envelope, and (3) remove moisture from the building or building envelope. Moisture control strategies that combine these approaches are usually most effective.

5.3 Moisture can migrate by a variety of moisture transport mechanisms. A comprehensive treatment of moisture transport and storage may be found in Chapter 1 of ASTM MNL 18. The following mechanisms are most significant in building constructions and are listed in order of potential magnitude: (1) liquid flow by gravity, air pressure, surface tension, momentum, and capillary suction; (2) movement of water vapor by air movement; and (3) water vapor diffusion by vapor pressure differences. These transport mechanisms can deliver moisture into the building or the building envelope, in which cases it is desirable that they be controlled. These transport mechanisms can also act to remove moisture from the building or building envelope, in which cases they may be used to promote drying.

5.3.1 In control of moisture delivery to the building or building envelope, the transport mechanisms that have the potential for moving the greatest amounts of moisture should (where practical) be controlled first. In promotion of drying of the building or building envelope, the transport mechanisms that have the potential for moving the greatest amounts of moisture should (where practical) be utilized first.

5.4 Building assemblies can become wet in three ways: (1) moisture can enter from the exterior, (2) moisture can enter from the interior, or (3) the assembly can start out wet as a result of using wet building materials or building under wet conditions.

5.4.1 Moisture typically enters building assemblies from the exterior through three mechanisms: (1) liquid flow by gravity, air pressure, surface tension, momentum, or capillary suction; (2) movement of water vapor by air movement; or (3) water vapor diffusion by vapor pressure differences.

5.4.2 Moisture typically enters building assemblies from the interior through two mechanisms: (1) movement of water vapor by air movement, or (2) water vapor diffusion by vapor pressure differences.

5.4.3 Operation of mechanical equipment has not always been recognized for its potential influence on moisture transfer. This potential influence should not be overlooked. Most notably, air handling equipment can induce a moisture transport mechanism that is capable of moving large amounts of moisture, namely movement of water vapor by air movement. Unplanned pressurization or depressurization of buildings or portions of buildings by air handlers can result in substantial moisture accumulations in the building envelope.

5.5 Moisture can typically be removed (dried) to the exterior or the interior by three mechanisms: (1) liquid flow by gravity (drainage) or capillary suction, (2) movement of water vapor by air movement (ventilation), or (3) water vapor diffusion by vapor pressure differences.

5.5.1 Where condensation of water vapor or water leaks can occur, weep paths to drain liquid water to a place where it can be dissipated are often effective. Converting liquid water to vapor, and dissipating the vapor by air movement may also be practical.

6. Limit States

6.1 Identification of conditions that must be avoided in order to prevent degradation of building components is an important step in making design or operating decisions. However, precise guidelines for identification of such conditions are generally lacking. Rather rough estimates based on empirical experience are often used.

6.2 Time and temperature are factors that are interrelated with moisture level in the degradation of building components. The moisture/temperature/time combinations that result in material degradation furthermore vary with the type of material. For example, wood will not decay, even at elevated moisture content when its temperature is near or below freezing, and even at temperature conditions conducive to decay, wood can withstand intermittent wettings of short duration to elevated moisture contents without decay becoming established. Conversely, masonry units can generally be expected to withstand elevated moisture conditions at temperatures above freezing for extended time periods (conditions under which wood decay might be expected), but suffer damage if frozen in a saturated condition.

6.2.1 Many materials or constructions have threshold water contents below which deterioration may be slow enough to be negligible for designed life expectancy. As indicated in 6.1 these threshold values are often rather rough estimates. See “Humidity and Building Materials” (Connolly, 1993) for estimates.

6.2.2 The concepts of critical moisture content and critical cumulative exposure time (see 3.5.5) are discussed in Chapter 26 of ASTM MNL 18. Although these concepts are generally recognized by building scientists, organized use of these as limit states by designers has not yet become a well-recognized practice.

6.3 A limit state is frequently based on avoidance of damage to a component as the result of its getting wet. A limit state may also be based on avoidance of damage to a component as a result of moisture conditions in an adjacent component. For example, limiting moisture-induced dimensional change of plywood sheathing may be critical to prevent cracking of stucco cladding.

7. Design Evaluation Tools

7.1 Means for evaluating the design of building envelopes from the perspective of moisture management can be classified as follows: (1) conceptual, (2) mathematical using computer simulation models, and (3) mathematical using calculations that can be performed without computer software (sometimes referred to as manual design tools).