



# MASONRY MATTERS:

Five reasons Canada  
needs more brick,  
block and stone

By Steve Maxwell

**W**henever I go to Europe, I feel jealous. It's all those solid houses. They use so much more masonry across the Atlantic than we do here, even in regions that get colder and hotter than Canada. Masonry makes for substantial, sound-resistant and long-lasting results. Even partition walls in Europe are often made of solid masonry.

While there certainly are situations in which non-masonry building materials make the most sense, here are five reasons I keep thinking we should be using more masonry.



## TIMES CHANGE

Why is there a difference in "masonry consciousness" between Canada and other parts of the world? One reason is our building heritage. A hundred years ago the place where my house sits was virgin wilderness. A pioneer family named Taylor spent their entire lives dealing with a vast over-abundance of wood on their land. This is the same story across much of Canada, and our once-upon-a-time abundance of wood is why we have a heavily wood-based building culture today. But times change and the building business is following.



### Reason No. 1: Strength Over Time

Twenty nine years ago I built my first masonry exterior walls, and they still look brand new today. That's because three decades is nothing compared with the working life of properly built masonry. Not many other exterior wall materials can compete with good brick, decorative block or stone. A poured concrete foundation is still the industry standard for strength and durability. Natural stone is the king of building materials and always will be.



### BOOSTING SLAB CRACK RESISTANCE

Rebar and fiber used together is the best way to reduce cracking of concrete structural slabs, but this only works if the rebar is actually completely surrounded by concrete. That's where rebar chairs come in. One of the most common lies contractors tell themselves is that we'll pull that rebar up during the pour. Right, while you're standing on it? Better get some chairs. And if that rebar is supporting hydronic heating lines, chairs mean more consistent pipe levels and more even heating.



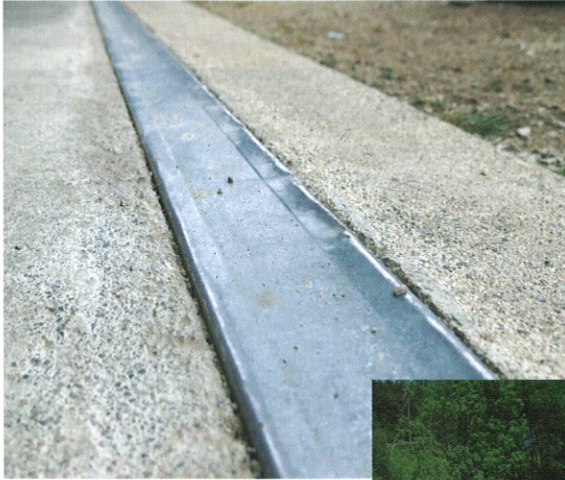
### Reason No. 2: Classy Results

The great places of the world are all made with great materials. But we live in a time when the prominence of quick-and-dirty consumer goods is on the rise. Ultimately this trend is fueled by the fact that people like low prices way too much. But isn't it also true that no diligent contractor gets in the business to satisfy an urge to work with cheap materials in a race to the bottom? You probably feel an attraction to craftsmanship and the chance to build something that people will admire a century from now. I know I do and classy permanence is one reason I like masonry.

### Reason No. 3: Disaster Resistance

Whether or not you believe that destructive weather events really are on the rise, some people want a home that can stand up to anything. That's why disaster-resistant housing is a trending feature for more and more clients. Part of this is demographic. As the population ages, physical security and solidity become more valued. Insulated concrete forms are one example. Built properly, a disaster-resistant ICF home can withstand the kind of severe weather events that regularly destroy non-masonry structures. In fact, this happens all the time. The ICF home to the right fared a lot better than other kinds of houses (and even cars) in a hurricane.





## CAPPING ICFs

Sometimes the top of ICFs remain visible in the finished project, so you need to protect the foam in some way. This happens when an ICF foundation wall ends at a garage door, for instance. One of the best options is some 2 1/2-inch wide track for steel studs. Many ICF systems use foam that's also 2 1/2 inches thick, so the track slips down over the exposed edge perfectly, protecting it while making it look great. The steel cap here is actually two caps, one on top of the other for extra protection. After eight years of traffic, it still looks great.



## Reason No. 4: Reduced Liability

Every time you build or renovate, you're on the hook for the continued performance of your work. There's a time limit on this, of course, but at any given moment you're vulnerable to call backs on dozens – maybe even hundreds – of projects. All else being equal, the proven reliability of properly installed masonry translates to less financial vulnerability to worry about.



## Reason No. 5: Reputation Enhancement

Every time you build something you either add to your reputation or subtract from it. Masonry's reputation for quality not only benefits your clients, but it looks good on you, too. Communities are starting to appreciate this fact as well. The simple truth is that once a home or commercial building is done, it exerts a permanent influence on the flavour of a place. Some building authorities are even mandating against cheap-and-dirty building materials in favour of masonry. That's a good thing in my book. Visit places like Niagara-on-the-Lake, Victoria or Quebec City. Beautiful masonry is one reason people travel to these cities from around the world.

## COST VERSUS BENEFITS

Not every client can afford masonry. But then again not everyone understands that \$4/sq.ft. siding isn't necessarily the bargain it seems compared with \$16 to \$18 per sq.ft. exterior brick. But the fact is, even for people who look at homes as investments only, masonry still makes sense. It costs more up front, but this translates into more when it comes time to sell. In fact, a brick wall will continue to look new for longer than other materials, so the long-term payoff is actually higher. Some jurisdictions in Canada are catching on to this idea too, exploring local building codes that require masonry exteriors.

