

Guidelines For Judging Portland Cement Plaster/Stucco

Applying plaster is and always has been a skill-intensive trade. The quality will depend largely on the knowledge and skill of the plasterers applying the plaster mix. Unlike a machine or factory-fabricated product, expecting machine-like perfection is impracticable and unreasonable. Applying plaster requires skilled tradesmen to apply the plaster mix in various weather conditions and often under unfavorable circumstances. The skill of the plasterer, weather conditions, time allowed to work, substrate quality and available materials all play a part in the quality of the finished appearance. Above all, clear communication, mockups and hiring qualified contractors is the key to a successful project.

STANDARDS:

There are a few recognized standards for the installation of plaster and plaster systems with regard to flatness. However, regardless of established and recognized tolerances, one should not see “**eye catching**” discrepancies or variations in the finished workmanship. A mock-up or sample wall should be approved by the owner before the project is started.

VIEWING:

Normal viewing distance is considered 10 to 15 feet from the surface to be judged. You should be able to observe some uniformity in the overall texture and color of the finished surface. For instance, there may be noticeable swirl marks in a float finish, and when they are consistent, they become uniform and acceptable. However, the finish may be deemed unacceptable when there are random areas where the float was dragged straight and the plaster has a “grain”. Judging should be done under normal lighting conditions and cannot be limited to brief periods of time when the sun’s angle to the plastered surface creates a critical light condition. No plaster wall is perfectly flat. Strong light casting across the surface at just the right angle will make a good wall look bad. Sconce or up-lighting can have the same effect to the wall. Owners, architects and contractors should be forewarned and wary of “up” or “down” lighting fixtures on walls.

TOLERANCES:

For flatness, the International Building Code tolerance for the brown coat is set at ¼ inch in five feet. Most plaster industry experts agree that ¼ inch in ten feet is obtainable for the finished assembly and an acceptable quality of workmanship. Flatness is checked in the field of the panel with a straight edge. Caution should be used not to place the straight edge within 12 inches of an accessory. Plaster must be taken in as an entire assembly, and not looked at under a microscope. Plaster is a hand wrought material that will show the characteristics of the craftsman applying it. No two plaster finishes will look the same.

COLOR and TEXTURE:

Texture is an important part of the aesthetics of plaster. The texture should be uniform and consistent. Some textures have random characteristics, such as the “Santa Barbara” or “Mission” finishes but they should maintain a similarity throughout the wall when viewed in totality. Color for cement finish plaster may have some variations that are inherent in pigmented, cementitious applications. For more uniformity, the cement color finish may be fog coated or painted. Acrylic finish should be uniform in color unless specifically designed for a mottled appearance. “Smooth” finishes of all types are susceptible to “color mottling”.