

Playboy Mansion Rehab Mission

By Stephanie Marie Chizik

Photos courtesy of Surmac, Inc.

Imagine driving 1,400+ miles (2,253 km) to a job without having any information about the who, what, or why. You've traveled from Texas to Los Angeles, Calif., to follow your boss through the secret client's gate, and come upon a huge house that looks suspiciously familiar. It's at that point when you realize why everything has been kept a secret: You're working on the Playboy Mansion!

For the five members of the Surmac, Inc. team, this was exactly how their dreams came true.



A Tale of Two Hues

The famous home, which became the Playboy Mansion West in 1971 when owner and magnate Hugh Hefner moved in, hosts many different types of guests, including celebrities, exotic plants, threatened animals, and a few bunnies, including the infamous twins (at the time of repair). There were a lot of moving parts; there were the dogs being walked, cars moving around, and people milling about. And there were the applicators themselves, who needed to eat, park, and work in the right place without invading the privacy of the house staff and habitants.

"I was very concerned about Hef walking out the front door during spraying," explained Foxfire's VP of Sales West Coast Regional John Snowden. "Communication is the utmost importance on any job — seeing things before they happen and making sure they don't." Each of these moving parts had to be coordinated and accounted for throughout the week-long project. "I had to keep a handle on things because there were sensitive areas," continued Snowden.



Made of split-face blocks in 1925, the house exhibits a grotto, parapet, four Jacuzzis, and a pool. But with 55 documented leaks, Playboy Enterprises knew there was a serious problem. Using thermal imaging, the sources of the leaks were identified and a solution was sought.

Although they reviewed many different samples, Foxfire's products came out on top. The 2-foot by 2-foot (0.6 m x 0.6 m) area that Snowden used to showcase his products stayed clean and dry even after a few months. The products also left a matte finish, repelled water, and didn't change the hue of the concrete. The next step was to choose the applicator.

Snowden hand-picked Texas-based Surmac because of the "tall order" of solving this problem. "You can imagine," Snowden said, "there's water going through Hugh Hefner's dressing room. It's going to get some attention." And Surmac Owner Rick Watson knew they had high expectations to meet. "The building had multiple problems. It had some damage from earthquakes, and it had been worked on by other contractors who did not solve the problems," Watson explained.

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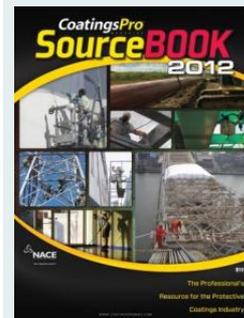
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For the 21,000-square-foot (1,951 m²) home, Summac used two of Foxfire's sealant products: P-1007 and 5000WB. These worked together to penetrate up to 4 inches (10 cm) of the concrete's surface to work into any cracks.

"The thing about water intrusion is it's so complicated," explained Snowden. "The reason these products work so well is that they follow the path of the water and then form a hydrophobic gel. Once it goes through all the capillaries and small cracks throughout, it solidifies." In addition, it allows the substrate to continue to breathe — an important aspect for concrete, which expands and contracts regularly with the weather.

Synchronized Spraying

Snowden started off each day by letting the mansion staff know where and for how long Summac's crew would be working. He used cones to mark off the area specified for the day and attached notes to caution pedestrians walking nearby. While Snowden worked the coordination aspect, the Summac crew started off by making sure to cover all windows, plants, and cars with plastic as needed.

Using round rotary wall washers, the five-man crew cleaned all exterior surfaces of the house and the walkways. This helped to remove the moss that had accumulated on the walkways and caused concern; high heels during regular parties and fundraising events didn't mix well with slippery moss.

With the concrete and area prepped, the Summac crew started in with the P-1007 densifier. They applied the first pass to the point of refusal, which meant that they spray-applied the product using their own configured low-pressure sprayers until no more product would absorb into the concrete. Any extra product that wasn't absorbed into the concrete was pushed to another area until the entire substrate had uniform absorption.



Wearing Sala harnesses and paper masks when needed, the crew let the first pass of the densifier set up anywhere between 15 minutes and a few hours depending on where they were on the property. On the old carriage house, for instance, they worked around the building with one pass and then started in with the next pass as soon as they got back to the starting point. The second pass, which was applied in the same manner as the first, took about 30 minutes to gel, which signified they wouldn't need any more P-1007. This also signified that P-1007 had already started to react within the concrete.

The crew let the second pass cure for 24 hours before returning to apply the 5000WB. This product was absorbed directly into the mortar and strengthened the substrate. For other areas of the house, including the waterfall, grotto, sidewalks, bar area, and some of the animal cages, the Summac crew used Foxfire's stain repellent and Izonil's waterproof and breathable plaster. They troweled on the Izonil to patch a few areas on the leaky waterfall before sealing, but everything else received just one pass of the repellent. It made the surface easy to clean and resistant to stains. The sealant starts to work immediately, which meant that Watson's crew only had one shot to get it down properly — just another layer of coordination and pressure on this high-visibility job.

Bunnies, Foxes, and Birds. Oh My!

Luckily, the overall application process didn't make too much noise, especially since the Summac crew worked around all kinds of household members, including the twins and an African crane called Spot.

"For some reason, Spot took up with me and would not leave my side on the entire job," said Watson. "I told my wife, you go there and you figure you'll get a Playboy bunny...but I got an African crane." Spot even followed Watson outside the fence when he left for the night.

Almost two years later, when Watson returned to the mansion to check on the status of the products, Spot came running over to Watson as if no time had passed.

And Spot wasn't the only friend the Summac crew made on the Playboy Mansion project. "The place is not anything like you'd think it would be," said Watson. "They're very good people. They raise a lot of money for charities with the parties they have. Other than that, it's kind of a normal place. We are very happy with the friends we met out there, happy to help them. Really, this has been a feather in the hat of our company, and a great cap to a career I've been working for 40 years."



It's been a feather in Watson's cap and a story for the books.

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