

VIBRAFORM

Notes on cement block and brick making with a Vibraform machine

There are numerous factors to be taken into account when making quality blocks and bricks. For example the type of aggregate and cement use as well as how the bricks and blocks are cured will have an influence on block and brick quality.

It is always very important to do trial runs and with different mix designs to find out the best mixes for strength and costs.

THE BASICS OF BLOCK AND BRICK MAKING

Input materials for a cement block or brick.

Aggregate

Aggregate is the stone, sand and ash you want to vibrate and compact down and bind together with the cement. A good aggregate is an aggregate that is free from chemicals, clay and organic material. A good aggregate will bond well with the cement paste and not react with it.

As a rule of thumb the denser the finished brick or block is the stronger the brick or block will be. You must choose your aggregates according to your needs.

To achieve a dense block with an aggregate that can be vibrated and compacted down easily you need to have an aggregate with evenly graded particles ranging from fine dust up to larger stone of around 9mm. Blending different aggregates often produces the best results.

See Appendix A . Aggregates.

Cement

Vibraform only recommends a SABS marked 42.5 MPa ordinary Portland cement.

Cement is your most costly material and by doing trials with different aggregates you will be able to minimize on cement content and so decrease your costs.

Cement should always be stored in dry place, off the floor and should be use within three months of the date of manufacture.

Never use cement that has lumps in it and only use cement supplied by a reputable company that has an SABS mark of approval on it.

Water

Only clean clear potable water should be used in the manufacture of the blocks and bricks.

Any organic material in water will prevent the cement from setting. Chemicals and impurities could also affect the strength of the end product.

Never use salty or brak water.

It is advisable to get your water tested for impurities.

Brick and Block Making

Getting started

Concrete Slab

A concrete slab on which you will make and cure your blocks and bricks is advisable. Your slab size would be dependent on the daily production of your machine and should be around 400m² for a weekly production of around 21 thousand bricks or 6 thousand blocks. Put a very gradual slope on your slab to allow for sufficient run off of water.

A concrete slab gives you the following advantages:-

- Less block or brick breakages
- Less contamination of aggregate
- A better surface to cure on
- Easier to move blocks/bricks

If you have at static machine it should be bolted down onto a thickened slab to prevent excess vibration transmitting through to your stacked and curing blocks.

Cement Storage

Cement can be supplied in 50kg bags or in bulk.

For large daily production bulk cement stored in a cement silo is recommended.

Bags of cement should be stored under cover off the floor and away from any damp conditions. Packing the bags close together also prevents any moist air circulation around the bags.

Always store the cement bags so that they are used on a first in first out basis. This will ensure that the oldest cement is used first.

Aggregate storage

The stockpile of aggregate should be protected from rain by storing it under a roof or covering it with plastic. Do not let the aggregate get contaminated with ground soil or any organic matter such as leaves from a tree. Position your aggregate close to your mixing plant.

Block Making process

Batch mixing

For high quality bricks and blocks a pan mixer should be used. For low quality bricks and blocks hand mixing on the ground can be used.

Always run a series of trials with different mix proportions. By evaluating your results you can adapt your mix to be more cost effective.

Start your trial mixes with 1 part cement to 6 parts aggregate. This translates to one bag of cement to 3 level wheelbarrows of aggregate. Test your block or brick strengths at 28 days. (1 wheelbarrow = 65 litres)

Mixing process

Pan mixer

Place half of your aggregate into the pan mixer then add the cement followed by the remaining aggregate. Allow the cement and aggregate to mix dry until a consistent even colour is produced. Then start adding in water until the correct moisture content is reached.

By Hand

Spread your aggregate out over a concrete surface. Then add your cement by spreading it over your aggregate evenly. Shovel your aggregate up into a pile. Spread the pile out again and build it up into a second pile. Spread the second pile out again and add water by sprinkling it evenly over the spread out aggregate. Mix water into aggregate and then pile the mixture up for a third time. This method usually adequately mixes your batch. Hand mixing is labour intensive and time consuming. It also tends to be more wasteful.

Water content

The moisture content within you mix is crucial. It is important for the following reasons:-

- The correct water content allows for good dense compaction by lubricating the aggregate. Too much water will lubricate the aggregate to such an extent that the block/brick will fall apart or sag when removed from the mould.
- With the correct water content the block/brick will release easily from the mould. No suction between the mould and block will be created.
- A very slight water rippling effect can be seen on the sides of the green blocks/bricks when the correct moisture content is reached.

Do not allow your mixed batch to stand for more than half an hour. This will prevent strength loss in your cement and the lubricating water will not dry off.

Your mix and aggregate may need to be adjusted to get a quality looking brick. See Appendix A for more details on type of aggregate.

CURING OF BRICKS AND BLOCK

Curing is one of the most essential parts of brick and block production. Correct curing has a big effect on the quality of the end product and also the cost of the end product. Often with good curing the cement content of your blocks can be reduced drastically.

It is recommended that the freshly made green blocks are covered immediately with a 250micron black plastic and cured by keeping the plastic over the bricks/blocks for a minimum of 7 days. Remove the curing plastic briefly to thoroughly wet the blocks/bricks twice a day starting from the day after production.

A record should be kept of when the curing blocks were produced so the curing plastic can be removed on the morning of the eighth day after production.

With 7 days curing the bricks/blocks will have reached approximately 75% of their final strength.

APPENDIX A: AGGREGATES

There are a number of types of aggregates that can be used for brick and block making. These aggregates may need to be blended to suite the quality of the final product.

Never use aggregate that has clay, organic matter or excessive salts in it.

SAND

There are different types of sand. Some types are more suitable than others for use in brick and block making. Some types of sand may need to be blended with other aggregates to get the correct consistency and suitability.

COARSE RIVER SAND

This sand is usually very good for block/brick making. It should have particle sizes ranging evenly in proportion from fine dust up to 5mm in size.

Suggestions for use:-

- Unblended
- Mixed with fine sand
- Mixed with ash or slag
- Mixed with crusher sand and dust

Some coarse river sands do not have enough fines in them. This could result in the block/brick sagging and/or breaking when they are removed from the mould. Add crusher sand or dust to help prevent this.

RIVER SAND

River sand of medium or fine grade can be used for block/brick making but choose sand that is evenly graded from fine dust up to 3 or 4mm in size. River sands are not as cohesive as crusher run sands and natural mined sands.

Suggestions for use:-

- Unblended
- Mixed with fine sand
- Mixed with ash or slag
- Mixed with crusher sand and dust

CRUSHER RUN SAND

This is usually very good for block/brick making. It tends to be more cohesive than other sands. This means that the block/brick compacts down well and the freshly made product does not fall apart easily. Crusher sand is also evenly graded from dust to larger particles. Always check that the crusher sand does not contain clay. Particle sizes should all be smaller than 5mm.

Suggestions for use:-

- Unblended
- Mixed with river or natural sands
- Mixed with a little stone

NATURAL MINED SAND

This sand is mined from quarries and occurs naturally. Slightly coarse evenly graded natural sand is the best for use with blocks and bricks. Natural sand is usually cohesive and makes a strong fresh product. Make sure the natural sand does not contain clay.

Suggestions for use:-

- Unblended
- Mixed with crusher run
- Mixed with a little stone

FINE SANDS, SEA SAND

These sands are not good for making blocks/bricks for the following reasons. They tend to have a high cement demand. They do not compact well and they do not produce a very cohesive mix.

Suggestions for use:-

- Always try and blend this sand with crusher run sand

STONE

Stone ranging from 5mm to 9mm can be used to blend in with finer aggregates. Stone used on its own will not work. Adding stone will often add strength to your cured product but could make the surface of the blocks/bricks more rough and porous.

ASH AND SLAG

Ash and slag by-products from power stations, metal works and other industries are often used in block production. These materials are usually obtainable for very low costs.

It is important to get any ash or slag you use tested for its suitability for use with cement and other aggregates. Ash or slag may contain high quantities of unsuitable chemicals.