

NATIONAL NSW CLADDING CRISIS

'They should help': Sydney cladding crisis leaves big bills for owners

By **Matt O'Sullivan**

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The large yellow cladding on the side of the 19-storey Distillery apartment tower in Pyrmont has made it one of the most recognisable residential high rises in the inner Sydney suburb.

Yet the flammable nature of the cladding has also made it an expensive problem for its owners, who are finally nearing the end of a three-year saga to remove it that has cost them more than \$3 million.



Apartment owners Colin Knowles, left, and Matthew Summerill say the state government should help pay for cladding removal. STEVEN SIEWERT

With thousands of [apartment owners across Sydney](#) facing a similar predicament, owners of the Distillery tower say the NSW government needs to help pay for the expensive work removing cladding that only a few years ago complied with regulations.

"They should be helping pay the poor old apartment owners overcome a problem created by lax rules," said Colin Knowles, the building's former strata committee chairman and retired engineer.

Owners in the building, and a neighbouring tower which is part of the same strata scheme, have paid about \$15,000 each for the cladding to be removed and replaced.

Apartment owner Matthew Summerill said the episode had created a "lot of anxiety for a lot of people", and the government should take responsibility and offer financial assistance.



Cladding is removed from the Distillery apartment tower in Pymont. JANIE BARRETT

"It is no different to helping farmers or others who are in trouble. But the government seems prepared to bury their heads in the sand," he said. "The whole thing is morally corrupt."

Owners Corporation Network, a not-for-profit body representing apartment owners, said the federal government's [\\$25,000 Homebuilder grants](#) would have been better spent fixing apartment buildings cloaked in flammable cladding which posed a risk to lives. "Once again, strata owners have been left to fend for themselves," executive officer Karen Stiles said.

The Victorian government is spending [\\$600 million to fix dangerous cladding](#) on buildings, and last month announced plans to accelerate the work to create more jobs.

The NSW government declined to say why it was not helping to cover the cost of removal, instead reiterating that it had recently introduced new laws to protect

building owners and had established a support unit to expedite the assessment of high-priority buildings.

There are various types of cladding on the market, with some being more fire resistant than others.

A [government register](#) shows 414 buildings in NSW are under review, assessment or remediation for flammable cladding. The crisis is worst in the inner city where the City of Sydney has issued fire-safety notices for 130 buildings due to concerns about combustible cladding.

The distinctive Distillery building, often used as a backdrop for TV commercials, has had one of the most extensive cladding removal jobs of any building in Pyrmont.

After the experience, Mr Knowles said his advice for owners facing a similar situation was to hire professionals early on to ascertain the size of the problem and avoid "ridiculous quotes".

"You need to get competent, professional advice right from the outset so you have certainty about what you are trying to do and what needs to be done," he said.

The initial estimate for the Pyrmont building was more than \$7 million, which was a "pretty scary number" as it amounted to about \$30,000 for each owner.

But proper planning and assessments, such as using facade engineers to remove a handful of panels to work out



what was hidden behind them, meant the owners were able to put out a tender for the remediation which ended up costing just over \$3 million.



The Distillery in 2018 before the cladding removal began. PETER BRAIG

"It really is about removing as much uncertainty as possible in a situation where there are potential unknowns behind the facade," he said.

The rectification work on the Distillery tower is expected to be completed by the end of August.

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