

OPINION

Combustible cladding issue in Australia a dangerous mess

Whenever the issue of combustible cladding is raised, the builders blame the architects or the surveyor, the architects blame the builders and the surveyors blame anyone they can think of, writes Peter Moore

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Grenfell Tower victims file lawsuit against US companies

If you had said to me, at any time over the past 12 years I've been writing for the Addy, that I would pen a story about building surveyors I would probably have laughed myself silly.

But hey, never say never because that's exactly what has caught my eye this week.

On July 2, the last surviving underwriting company that offers professional indemnity for building survey

practitioners will cease to insure this section of the construction industry.

Ten years ago, a dozen or so insurance companies offered professional indemnity; last year this reduced to two only. It now stands at one, which has indicated that it will vacate the market in a couple of days.

If you're starting to yawn at this early stage in the piece, I suggest that you turn to the comics or the sport pages. But, honestly, it does get more interesting.

On June 14, 2017, a fire broke out in the 24-storey Grenfell Tower block of flats in North Kensington, London killing 72 occupants. The cause was the composite cladding that had been applied to the building just a year previously.

The cladding was a composite type with aluminium bonded to a polyethylene core, known to be highly flammable. Subsequently throughout Australia thousands of buildings were found to be clad with similar products. So in Australia, we are faced with a crisis to replace, repair or even knock down these fire traps and a crisis in where do we go from here.

Private surveyors were first given the power to issue building permits in the early 1990s in Victoria to augment municipal surveyors who were previously tasked with this duty. At the time, the argument supporting private surveyors ran along the usual lines of "will ease the delays in building approvals", "will facilitate lower costs as competition is introduced, with a vastly increased choice of qualified personnel", etc, etc.

You'll get the drift when I tell you that this was a Jeff Kennett initiative. You'll also get the drift when I remind you that this is the same man who sold off our state-owned gas and electricity to private companies on the basis that increased competition would result in a more efficient energy supply and lower costs through that very same competitive element. Well that worked out well, didn't it?

This is what a building surveyor does to earn a crust, and I quote: "Our role is to ensure that the documents endorsed to form part of the building permit 'substantially' meet the requirements of the building

regulations, codes and Australian standards”. The word substantially is highlighted as it is the building surveyor’s call on what is deemed to comply.

Well, regarding the cladding issue their interpretation of “substantially” and what is deemed to “comply” seems to fall well short of accepted community standards.

Of the 2000 buildings audited so far in Victoria, 360 have been found to be high risk, 280 of moderate risk, and 140 of low risk. It is estimated that it would take at least two years to rectify the problems if all went well — which of course it won’t.

Presumably all the defective buildings were passed by the building surveyors as “substantially” or were “deemed” to have complied with building regulations.

Back in 2015, the Victorian Auditor-General’s report warned that private building surveyors might be unwilling to challenge substandard or illegal construction because they were reliant on the builder for ongoing business. It went on to note that building surveyors were more than seven times more likely to have their registrations cancelled than any other class of building practitioner.

And it said 10 per cent of the state’s registered building surveyors were found guilty of an offence in the five years to December 2013.

Of the 58 hauled before the board, 16 appeared more than once. That is concerning, given the critical role of surveyors in ensuring the safety and accessibility of buildings. We — or the industry — obviously learnt nothing from this report.

Let’s be clear that building surveyors are not solely responsible for this latest crisis. Whenever the combustible cladding issued is raised, the builders blame the architects or the surveyor, the architects blame the builders and the surveyors blame anyone they can think of.

While all this is happening, the owners of apartments and the government for their own buildings are left holding the baby as responsibility is teased out but forcefully defended by all concerned.

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