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Canberra Airport has highly combustible cladding

Michael Bleby, *Senior Reporter*



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Canberra Airport, through which Australia's political leaders and diplomats pass as they travel in and out of the nation's capital, is built with 24,000 square metres of the most combustible form of aluminium cladding, similar to that used on London's Grenfell and Melbourne's Lacrosse buildings.

The terminal building itself has about 8000 square metres of the Vitrabond aluminium composite panels with a 100 per cent polyethylene-core and the adjacent car parks account for the rest.



Canberra Airport terminal and car park are clad in highly combustible aluminium composite panels. **Karleen Minney**

Litigation funder IMF Bentham and William Roberts Lawyers have just filed a product liability class action against Vitrabond supplier Fairview.

Canberra Airport managing director Stephen Byron downplayed the danger of fire to passengers and staff, saying the majority of the terminal's facade was glass and that a low-rise commercial building with sprinklers, fire stairs, smoke and thermal detection systems and trained staff made it a low-risk environment.

"There is a range of risks in the use of the product ... and they are not all the same," Mr Byron told *The Australian Financial Review*.

"We're at the very lowest category of risk for the use of this product."

Others are not so sure. Sahil Bhasin, the national director of building services consultancy Roscon said the design of Canberra airport's terminal, with combustible panels around passenger entrances to the building, created avoidable risks from ignition sources such as cigarettes.

"If a building was being designed in 2019, you would remove any combustible product like aluminium composite panels from a ground floor where there is an ignition source," Mr Bhasin said.



Aerial view of Canberra Airport. **Ginette Snow**

"In an airport, directly outside a terminal where people come off a plane would be considered [a] highly probable [place] to light up a cigarette after four hours of not having any nicotine."

Car parks ‘risky’

Mr Bhasin also said multi-storey car parks were a risky structures to clad in the combustible panels because cars could catch fire.

“Car parks are risky based on the fuel loads – potentially cars that could catch fire or explode - in that environment,” he said.

Canberra Airport’s stance is the opposite of some other commercial property owners, who have started replacing ACP panels on their buildings – even when they are of a less combustible variant – to avoid being tainted by the growing perception of risks around the panels.

Mr Byron said the perception issue was “fundamentally important” but it could be resolved by explaining that the airport was relatively safe.

“There is a range of risks in the use of the product and they are not all the same,” he said.

Canberra Airport has not joined the class action against Vitrabond.

“At this point the airport has not considered that at all,” Mr Byron said.

Fire authorities approved building

The airport, and adjacent Brindabella Business Park, are all owned by Canberra Airport Group, the business of Rich Lister Terry Snow. Office buildings in the business park, which range up to five levels in height, are also clad in 100 per cent PE-core panels.

Mr Byron said ACT fire authorities approved the building for construction and also approved the building’s occupancy certificate upon completion. He also said tenants in the business park, such as Border Force, which has its headquarters at 3 Molonglo Drive, were all aware of the cladding.

Such extensive use of the panels on Canberra’s airport, completed in 2013, is ironic, given that fire authorities in ACT were the first in the country to alert state governments and their building regulators to the risks of the combustible panels in 2010.

The [Financial Review reported in March](#), based on documents obtained under a Freedom of Information request, that after ACT and then NSW fire authorities raised concerns about the growing use of 100 per cent PE-core polyethylene panels, state and territory building regulators, and ACT government representatives said they would draft a formal advisory note about the risks of such cladding. But they never did.



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Michael Bleby writes on real estate specialising in construction, infrastructure, architecture based in our Melbourne newsroom. *Connect with Michael on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). Email Michael at mbleby@afrc.com.au*



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