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Real Estate

Cladding failures: Warnings of combustibility go back to 1990

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Australia's building regulators were discussing the dangers of combustible cladding in 2010, but the warnings started much earlier.

Canadian researchers were among the first, with a 1990 report titled *Fire Exposure to Exterior Walls and Flame Spread on Combustible Cladding*.

In Australia, testing in 1995 by the CSIRO showed the problem but the first formal publication in this country came in 2000, with the publication of reports by the Fire Code Reform Centre, says fire engineer Jonathan Barnett.





Aftermath of the Lacrosse fire in November 2014: Warnings about the combustible nature of polyethylene-core panels started in 1990. **Wayne Taylor**

"The issue with combustibility of external cladding was recognised in 1990," Barnett says. "The issue should have been recognised from day one."

While state and territory building regulators failed to warn industry that polyethylene-core panels would not pass the Building Code of Australia's combustibility requirements, last week's [Lacrosse damages case judgment](#), over the Melbourne residential tower that caught fire in November 2014, revealed that construction industry professionals also had little knowledge of the quality of materials they specified and certified and made insufficient effort to determine whether those materials were safe or not.

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There is even a link to the key Australian report titled [Fire Performance of External Walls and Claddings](#), published in April 2000 on the Australian Building Codes Board website – but as of Sunday, the link was not working.

In Australia's biggest-ever housing construction boom, authorities failed to act on information they had but professional players in the building chain were also ignorant or unquestioning about the materials they were using.

"If you want to know more about the fire performance of external walls and claddings, click on the link below."

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for the damages award, architect Elenberg Fraser 25 per cent and fire engineer Thomas Nicolas 39 per cent.

The Lacrosse fire raced up from the balcony of apartment 805. **BADROCK, Gregory**

"[Gardner Group building surveyor] Mr [Stasi] Galanos agreed that in 2010 and 2011, he was not aware that polyethylene was highly combustible, highly flammable or that it was a plastic," Judge Ted Woodward says in his ruling.

"Mr Galanos failed to give adequate or reasonable consideration to the compliance and suitability under the BCA of the Alucobond Specification and proposed use of the ACPs as disclosed in the architectural drawings before issuing the stage 7 building permit."

The judgment also found that the architect failed in its duty by not being more aware of the risks of products it specified.

"Elenberg Fraser may have been less expert in the application of applicable provisions in the BCA than Gardner Group and Thomas Nicolas, but it was nevertheless sufficiently expert to be alert to the need to ensure that the materials it specified did not unduly contribute to flame spread," it reads.

"Mr [Callum] Fraser's evidence that he thought [builder] LU Simon should have selected [the less combustible variant] Alucobond Plus suggests he, at least, was alive to this issue."

Last week's Lacrosse ruling also found that the fire engineering consultancy engaged for the project, Thomas Nicolas, bore the biggest share of liability of any of the three consultants contracted to the builder. While Con Nicolas, a director of the

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"He knew that ACPs with a polyethylene core were combustible and could constitute a fire hazard... Thomas Nicolas's agreement to conduct a 'full fire engineering assessment' imposed on Mr Nicolas at the very least an obligation actively to enquire about what ACPs were proposed and advise accordingly. He failed to do this."



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Michael Bleby writes on real estate specialising in construction, infrastructure, architecture. Based in our Melbourne newsroom, Michael has two decades of journalism experience, having worked in the UK, Japan, South Africa and the Middle East. *Connect with Michael on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). Email Michael at mbleby@afrc.com.au*



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
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