

Clad in secrecy: Mounting pressure to reveal Melbourne firetraps

A *Sunday Herald Sun* investigation has uncovered three Melbourne apartment buildings which residents were not aware had been deemed a safety risk, and there are likely to be dozens more cases where occupants are being kept in the dark.

Ellen Whinnett and [Alanah Frost](#), Exclusive, Sunday Herald Sun



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July 18, 2019. Victorian planning minister Richard Wynne speaking to media after a meeting with his state and federal co...

Thousands of people across Melbourne are unwittingly living in potential firetraps because they haven't been told their buildings were made with flammable aluminium cladding.

A *Sunday Herald Sun* investigation has uncovered three apartment buildings where residents were not aware their building had been deemed a safety risk.

There are likely dozens more cases where occupants are being kept in the dark because there is no specific legal requirement for owners' corporations to tell owners and tenants if flammable cladding had been identified.

The revelation puts further pressure on the government to publish the list of 1400 buildings found to have combustible cladding.

The *Sunday Herald Sun* can reveal:

THE owners' corporation of the 185-apartment Ark building in Bridge St, Richmond, believed it was acting in "good faith" when it decided to delay telling owners the Victorian Building Authority had found the cladding on their building in April,

OWNERS of a 40-apartment complex in bayside Melbourne weren't told their building had combustible aluminium panels, and

AT a property in Elwood, a tenant had no idea she was living in a building deemed a fire risk.



Opposition planning spokesman Tim Smith has called for a public register of clad buildings. Picture: Peter Ristevski

The *Sunday Herald Sun* has obtained copies of the Ark owners' corporation committee's minutes from its May meeting, where a Bencorp strata manager discussed quotes to replace the cladding. The meeting discussed concerns the VBA had not provided enough information about the cladding problem.

"The strata managers noted the following: They believe that the committee is acting in good faith by not disclosing the notice from the VBA to all residents and owners until we know the extent of the cladding ... the cladding has been in place for over seven years now and we consider one more month does not increase the level of risk," the minutes stated.

Bencorp in a statement would not say why owners weren't told the building had cladding. The VBA did not answer specific questions.

Opposition planning spokesman Tim Smith called for a public register of clad buildings.

A government spokeswoman said: “It’s completely unacceptable that an owners’ corporation would not tell their residents that their building has a combustible cladding issue.”

The government was considering ways to improve the disclosure of cladding-related notices, she said.



Flammable cladding alight on the Lacrosse building in Victoria’s Docklands.

NEW CONCERNS OVER RICHMOND BUILDING

Material used in a striking facade on a Richmond apartment complex triggered a six-month stoush over concerns it might be flammable.

The Ark building owners’ corporation says tests in recent days have revealed no problems with the materials used on the Bridge Rd complex.

It was brought into question after the Victorian Building Authority said the facade was made of fibreglass.

Residents — who were kept in the dark about the problems — are now awaiting a report to confirm the facade has an official all-clear.

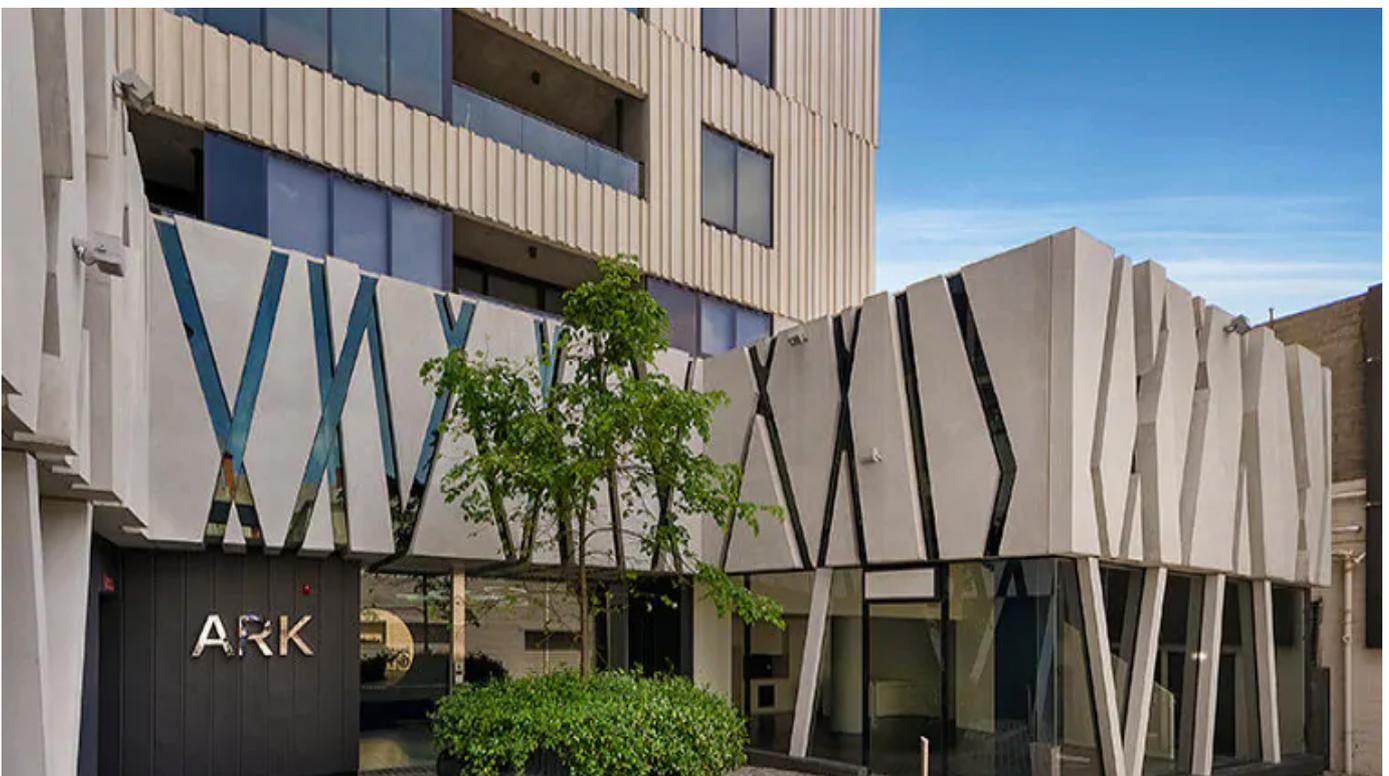
VBA officials in March inspected the modern apartment block — a month later issuing a 97-page report to the owners' corporation advising flammable aluminium composite cladding had been found in two locations.

The owner's corporation obtained quotes to replace it, including with the builder H Buildings, a branch of the Hickory Group which has since gone into administration.

But there remained a standoff between the owners' corporation and the VBA on whether another large part of the façade was clad in fibreglass or cement.

The report has been marked up by the VBA to show fibreglass across the façade.

However Hickory maintained it was glass-reinforced concrete and provided documents to the owners' corporation to support its view.



The Ark Building, Bridge Rd, Richmond.

The VBA maintained it was fibreglass but wouldn't say if it posed a fire risk.

Stata managers Bencorp told the *Sunday Herald Sun* tests had been carried out on the facade material at the request of Yarra City Council.

“The testing conducted in recent days by the owners' corporation shows the material to not be flammable. We are waiting on the official report,” Bencorp said in a statement.

Meanwhile, flammable aluminium cladding has been found on the Ark building as part of a statewide audit.

Minutes of the owners' corporation meeting in May obtained by the *Sunday Herald Sun* show a Bencorp strata manager discussing quotes to replace the aluminium cladding — about \$6000 for the lower level and about \$150,000 for cladding found on level seven.

“It was noted that the VBA have now provided their report which indicates three sheets on ground level are ACP and the balcony soffit on level 7 was ACP (aluminium composite cladding),” the minutes state.

“Members noted their relief at how little the building was discovered to have and considered it to be very low risk when considering the quantity and the little risk posed by the specific locations where it's mounted.”

“The Strata Managers noted the following: That they believe that the Committee is acting in good faith by not disclosing the notice from the VBA to all residents and owners until we know the extent of the cladding...the cladding identified has been in place for over 7 years now and we consider one more month does not increase the level of risk.

“Whilst the VBA has just advised that the building has been found to have combustible cladding, they have not disclosed how much, where it is or whether the risk is minor or major. Further, the builders report that, to the best of their knowledge, they did not use any ACP cladding in the construction. Our visual inspection does not reveal any cladding. Therefore we are not able to offer any information on what precautions the residents should take.

“For this reason we recommend that it should not be disclosed until we have more information, except for within Owners Corporation Certificates, which form part of a Section 32.”

The VBA declined to comment.

Minutes for the August owners' corporation meeting show discussions were held about the fibreglass/concrete dispute.

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“It was noted the VBA believed the grey concrete across the building's façade was actually fibreglass. Another flammable material they would force to be removed,” the notes state.

“Hickory to date has contested this statement and claimed it is actually glass reinforced concrete. This claim was being addressed with Hickory’s help and it was hoped to be refuted by sourcing evidence confirming its construction.”

A spokeswoman for Hickory reiterated to the *Sunday Herald Sun* that the façade material was glass reinforced concrete and was “non-combustible and compliant.”

“Hickory can confirm that the installed façade at the Ark building in Richmond is GRC concrete and is non-combustible and compliant,” she said.

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