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Lick of paint could save homes in the bushfire zones

By **CHRIS GRIFFITH**, TECHNOLOGY REPORTER
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With more than 3000 buildings destroyed in the bushfires, should rebuilt homes replicate the houses they replace? Or, given the predictions of a hotter, drier and more fire-prone future, should homes be built from fire-retardant components?

It will be months before rebuilds get under way, but architects and researchers are looking at housing suited to a hotter future.

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There is no guarantee fire-resistant homes will survive an inferno but they are more likely to, and have. Ron Weir's beach home is case-in-point. It survived fire at Rosedale in southern NSW on New Year's Eve thanks to non-combustible cladding. Houses nearby were lost.

The University of NSW has been developing new materials that can reduce the likelihood of homes catching fire. And where they do catch fire, materials can give residents more time to evacuate.

Professor of mechanical and manufacturing engineering at UNSW Guan Heng Yeoh said his department, in partnership with Flame Security International, had developed a fire-retardant paint that it says can be sprayed onto cladding.

He said the paint could withstand fire at 1000C and would not be expensive, about $2 to $4 per square metre.

"It's a silicon-based material, which is weatherproof and also UV resistant," he said. "The material is infused with flame-retardant compounds."

He said testing soon would take place for compliance to Australian Standard AS5113, which involves large-scale facade fire testing.

“We are quite confident that it will comply because we know that the heat flux impacting on the material is as high as those of the full-scale fire.

“We have tested to 1½ hours without the cladding burning.”

He said the tests used flammable Polyethylene cladding, “the most dangerous cladding you can find”.

He said the university and its partner had been contacting developers and builders about the product and hoped to have it on the market this year.

Professor Yeoh said it was one of many products that would aid homeowners and those rebuilding.

“We just want to put it out there ... for the public to consider. We know there is existing cladding out there that requires some remediation.”

CHRIS GRIFFITH, TECHNOLOGY REPORTER
Chris is one of Australia's most experienced technology reporters, with an involvement in the computer industry spanning almost 50 years. He learned to program in the late 1960s, studied computer science in the... Read more

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