

‘Serious safety risks’: Hundreds of dodgy balconies found during flammable cladding removal

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Hundreds of defective balconies have been discovered on Victorian apartment buildings, sparking concerns about serious safety risks to residents – and warnings that the problems could be widespread.

Inspections of 339 buildings that received government funding to remove flammable cladding found half had other faults and one-in-four had balcony defects. More than 550 balconies were found to be defective.



Cladding Safety Victoria has warned that balcony defects are likely to be prevalent in apartment buildings across the state. NEELIMA CHOHAN

While the discovery triggered concerns about safety and standards, it also delayed the replacement of hazardous flammable cladding by an average of three months.

“Defects with balconies can arise as a result of either poor architectural design, defective construction by builders or maintenance issues and have the potential to present serious safety risks to residents,” Cladding Safety Victoria [said in a research paper](#). The government agency warned defects were likely to be prevalent in apartment buildings across the state.

“Cladding Safety Victoria is concerned that the situation in relation to defective balconies is widespread and has proliferated over at least two decades; this is not a new issue,” the analysis says.

“While the source of the issue is primarily attributed to the builder, the problem of building defects more generally is, in Cladding Safety Victoria’s view, symptomatic of broader underlying levels of non-compliance with the National Construction Code, including serious fire safety deficiencies, inadequate waterproofing and even black mould in new buildings.”

Cladding Safety Victoria administers a \$600 million fund to fix the highest-risk buildings with combustible cladding.



Timber framing to balustrade rotten from water ingress. CLADDING SAFETY VICTORIA

However, when other defects – including faulty balconies, pervasive black mould, rotten framing and insufficient or no waterproofing – are identified, building owners must fix them before the government begins repairing the cladding.

Cladding Safety Victoria said of the 339 buildings that had received funding for cladding repairs as of October last year, 84 had been identified as having balcony defects.

“This impacts directly on the program’s ability to progress these buildings and on the safety of owners who need to complete the rectification works,” the research paper says.

A [2014 fire at Docklands’ Lacrosse tower](#) raised public awareness about hundreds of apartment blocks and high-rise towers across Melbourne that had been clad in dangerous materials.

After [London’s 2017 Grenfell tower fire](#), where 72 people died in a building covered in the same material as the Docklands high-rise, governments stepped up efforts to make these buildings safe.

In 2017 [two women were killed](#) when a balcony collapsed at a house in Doncaster East, with the [coroner finding](#) it was constructed with an undersized load beam and, combined with poor maintenance, failed to provide adequate support.

In 2019, the Victorian government announced [a \\$600 million package](#) to fix buildings with combustible cladding, to be overseen by Cladding Safety Victoria.

The agency has now approved funding for 363 of the highest risk buildings and the cladding has been repaired on 250 of these.

The research paper – *Research analysis on issues and risks associated with balcony defects* – was published on Cladding Safety Victoria’s website in April.

Veteran building inspector Stephen Kip said the report’s findings were consistent with the scores of building defect inspections he had undertaken in the past decade.

“The results are very concerning and highlight a lack of knowledge and experience for some architects, building designers, engineers, builders, building surveyors and building inspectors,” he said.

“I think we will continue to see significant numbers of building defects emerge until the industry upskills and more stringent design documentation and inspection systems are introduced and enforced.”

Association of Consulting Architects Victorian president Paul Viney said it was well known in the industry that the quality of many apartment buildings was substandard.

“I believe the majority of issues are in the middle to low tier projects, largely in the apartment market. They have been built to an absolute minimum price and a minimum standard.”

Viney said Victoria needed to take a similar approach to NSW, which mandated that apartment designs must be prepared by experts before they are submitted for a building permit.

“What is needed is a minimum standard of documentation, that goes down to the level of waterproofing and basically sets a requirement for regulated professionals to provide the design and for that to be signed off as compliant by the building surveyor.”

The report said that 52 per cent of the defective balconies were caused by water ingress, 19 per cent had insufficient or no waterproofing and 10 per cent were caused by lack of maintenance.

“In addition, seven buildings appear to have balcony defects relating to poor design.”



Water ingress to balcony. CLADDING SAFETY VICTORIA

In 17 per cent of the 84 buildings with balcony defects, black mould had spread from wall cavities into insulation, timber and plaster, caused mainly by water making its way into the building.

Cladding Safety Victoria says fixing the defects had been challenging, as this work must be completed and paid for by the building owners before the government-funded cladding removal begins.

On average, it says, there is a three-month delay on the removal of cladding from buildings which also have balcony defects.

“Delays and increased costs to owners corporations further has the potential to impact the program’s reputation and create a false impression that Cladding Safety Victoria will incur the additional costs to ensure completion of the non-cladding rectification works.”