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— Exclusive

Cladding just 'the tip of the iceberg'

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Combustible cladding is just the "tip of the iceberg" of defects for high-rise apartment owners in Australia, who will also have to pay to fix widespread problems such as water penetration and incomplete fire safety systems, the author of a new report into building defects says.

While the crisis of combustible cladding is making apartments unsaleable and preventing owners from renewing insurance policies on their buildings, nearly every building in NSW and about three-quarters of all buildings in Victoria and Queensland had defects that pointed to much bigger costs for owners to come, according to the report by Deakin University's Nicole Johnston and Griffith University's Sacha Reid.

"I think you've got a crisis in this country"

— Deakin University's Nicole Johnston

"I don't want to downplay the issue in relation to combustible cladding, but I think water penetration issues in buildings are much, much bigger," Dr Johnston said.

"It is very widespread. I think you've got a crisis in this country."





Crisis proportions: Other building defects represent a much bigger problem than combustible cladding, Deakin University academic Nicole Johnston says. **Angela Scott**

The proliferation of high-rise apartment buildings in Australian cities since the 1990s has exposed the weakness and lack of consumer protections for buyers that has now become apparent with the discovery of flammable aluminium composite panels on thousands of private buildings.

Massive problems

But the report by Dr Johnston and Associate Professor Reid - to be made public next week - shows the range of problems is much greater.

The pilot study, based on 212 building audit reports, showed 97 per cent of all apartment buildings in NSW had at least one type of defect and that the average number of types of defect (not individual incidences of the same problem) in each building was 16.

As many as 74 per cent of all buildings in Victoria had at least one type of defect and the average number per building was 11. In Queensland, where defects were found in 71 per cent of apartment buildings, the average number was 12.

While building fabric (masonry, joinery, plastering and slab work) and facades were parts of a building where the most defects were encountered, faults such as poor sealing and insulation made water ingress and moisture the most common problem.

While combustible cladding could be remedied by removing non-compliant panels and replacing with a safer alternative, the remedies for water ingress, which could lead to dampness and mould and trigger respiratory conditions, often required removing superficial layers such as room walls and balcony surfaces to access and replace the construction work behind them.

Builders are legally responsible for construction that fails to meet required standards, but seeking redress is often impossible because the entity has closed,

gone under or gone into administration. That gives owners no option but to pay their own costs.

Building problems widespread

The wide range of defects would only be borne by owners, Dr Johnston said on the sidelines of the Strata Community Australia conference in Auckland.

"It's too big for the government to step in," she said.

The problems were likely to be repeated throughout apartment buildings because the repetitive nature of the work meant a fault that occurred in one apartment would happen again and again in the same building, Dr Johnston said.

"If you've got a problematic [waterproof] membrane on floor one in these first five apartments, you'll have it all through the whole building," she said.

After building fabric and facades, fire safety systems were the aspect of buildings most likely to have defects. These sometimes meant fire separation walls between units - intended to contain a fire occurring in one apartment from spreading to another - being cracked and made of inappropriate material.

Another common defect was in the "fire collars" put around pipes that went through walls and floors.

'Harder to diagnose'

"Every apartment is supposed to be designed with what's called 'fire separation' around it," Dr Johnston said.

"So any type of pipes cutting through things are supposed to have fire collars. They're a problem everywhere in this country. They either haven't been applied properly, are missing, so when a fire starts, it goes straight up."

And while waterproofing problems were apparent because water would show up where it wasn't supposed to be, problems in passive fire protection systems were harder to diagnose, she said.

"Getting really good information about that is problematic because you have to take apart the building to see if there's a problem there," Dr Johnston said. "Until you remove the wall you can't see what's behind there."

The report, which comes after the well-publicised construction failures of buildings such as Sydney's Opal Tower, will increase pressure on state and territory governments to step up reforms they have pledged to implement, based on recommendations of a separate report last year.

One author of that report, construction lawyer Bronwyn Weir, said more failures would occur if governments didn't make great changes to the way construction was done in Australia.

**Michael Bleby is attending the SCA conference in Auckland as a guest of the association.*



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