

POLITICS VICTORIA DEVELOPMENT

# Smoke alarm order with no sign of fix to Melbourne's cladding crisis

By Clay Lucas and Cameron Houston

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Owners of buildings covered in highly flammable materials are being ordered to move smoke alarms closer to danger zones as a stop-gap measure to prevent deadly fires from spreading.

The order comes as Melbourne City Council's chief building surveyor warned one building's owners that cladding had made their tower "a danger to the life, safety or health of any member of the public or of any person using the building".

As [the fallout continues](#) from this month's fire at Spencer Street's Neo200 apartments, scores of buildings identified as being covered in combustible material remain unchanged – with little or no plan to remove the cladding.

## KNOW OF A BUILDING COVERED IN FLAMMABLE CLADDING?

Tell us more

Among those highlighted to *The Age* is Southbank's Quay West tower. A 23-storey residential and serviced apartment tower constructed by a Lendlease subsidiary in 1990, the building is made mostly of concrete.

But it also features a "fin" architectural feature that runs the building's length – and is made of highly flammable aluminium composite panels.

Melbourne City Council last October ordered building owners to urgently install smoke alarms in all bedrooms that faced onto the fin.



The Quay West tower in Southbank, has a "fin" made of flammable cladding that Melbourne City Council has ordered be removed. SCOTT MCNAUGHTON

The Municipal Building Surveyor also issued a building notice asking the building's owners corporation to "show cause" within 60 days why the dangerous cladding could not be removed.

"The building is a danger to the life, safety or health of any member of the public or of any person using the building," the municipal surveyor's notice said.

Works to remove the flammable fin have been quoted at more than \$1 million.

A spokeswoman for Melbourne City Council said building owners were now working with the Municipal Building Surveyor "to bring the building into compliance".

The spokeswoman said five buildings had been ordered to install additional smoke detectors over the last year "in order to raise the level of safety for occupants".





Fire quickly too hold at the Neo200 tower on February 4. JASON SOUTH

Melbourne City Council "has 49 show cause notices currently active in relation to combustible cladding", she said.

But the Quay West example – of a well-resourced building with an organised body corporate still struggling to quickly comply with a building notice to remove dangerous cladding – shows the depth of the crisis.

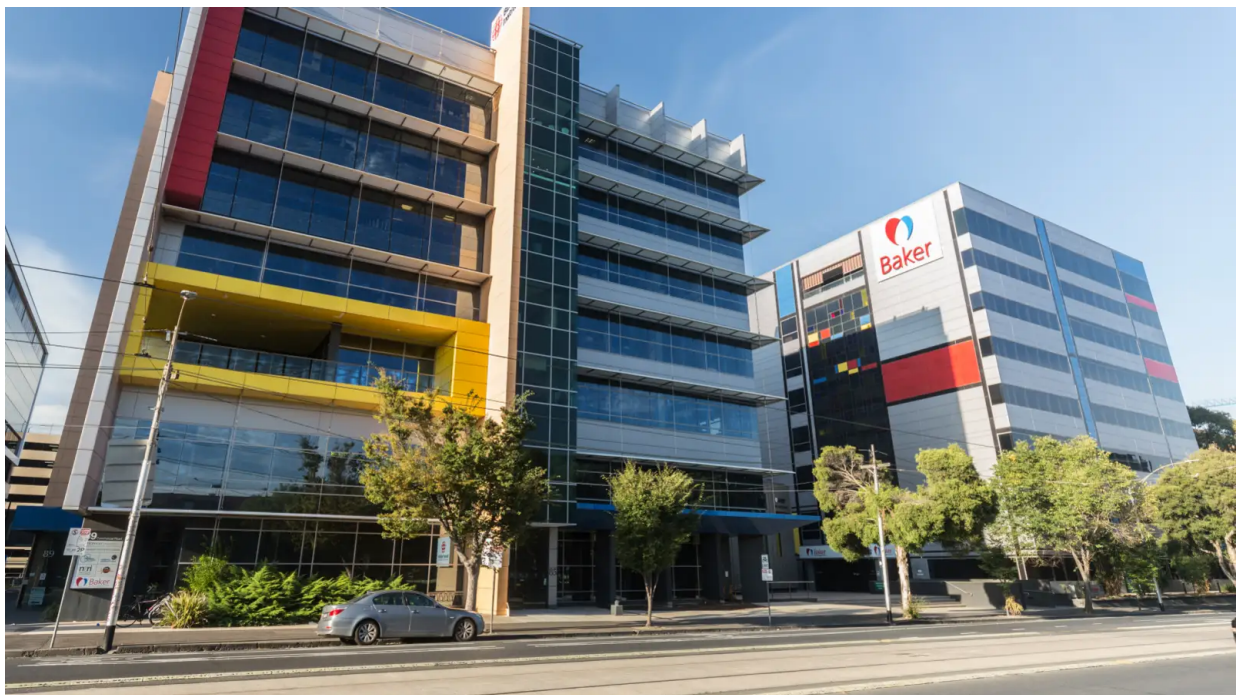
Due to lax building checks in the property industry and the popularity of the light-weight cladding, thousands of homes, offices, hospitals and factories around the nation are covered in the material.

The worst of the cladding catches fire and burns quickly.

But despite two high-profile Melbourne fires and London's 2017 Grenfell tower blaze in which 72 people died, there is little sign cladding is being removed with any urgency.

Scores of buildings around Melbourne remain covered in flammable "aluminium composite panels". Among them are two major healthcare centres adjacent to South Yarra's Alfred Hospital.

The Burnet Institute and Baker Institute, on Commercial Road, are clad with a flammable material similar to that involved in both Melbourne cladding fires.



The Burnet Institute (left) and the Baker Institute (right) in South Yarra are both covered in combustible cladding. SCOTT MCNAUGHTON

A builder involved in the construction of these buildings said the heat generated by a power drill could cause the cladding to ignite.



And signs to the rear of the Baker Institute warn drivers not to park any petrol-powered vehicles within three metres of the building.

A third building, the Alfred Centre, is also clad in panelling but a spokesman for the centre said it had complied with an audit by the Department of Health and Human Services in 2017.

They also pointed out that the Baker and Burnet buildings did not have patients in them overnight, and were therefore not as high a priority as major hospitals, such as Sunshine – which is now having its flammable cladding removed.

Similar situations existed at many other buildings across Melbourne, said Sahil Bhasin, national general manager of the Roscon Group, which advises building owners and body corporates.

His company has worked for many owners with cladding issues, and he said almost no buildings in Melbourne had rectified problems with non-compliant materials.

“As far as I am aware there aren’t many buildings that have carried out any rectification whatsoever,” he said.



A sign at the Baker Institute.



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