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I've just discovered my building is covered in flammable cladding

By James Lesh

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Last week I found out that I am one of potentially hundreds of thousands of Australians who live in a fire-prone and unsafe apartment.

My five-year-old building has combustible cladding on it. If a faulty combustible panel is ignited, the building could become engulfed in flames in minutes. By not immediately resolving the combustible cladding crisis, government and industry are shirking their responsibility to make our cities and homes safe and habitable.



One of the many buildings that have used combustible cladding, in this instance in Prahran. JUSTIN MCMANUS

Since the 2014 [Lacrosse Tower fire](#) in Melbourne, we have known that flammable cladding is

on thousands of buildings in Australia. But few of us who live in these hazardous apartments know that we do. And even if we do know, we are effectively powerless to act. Authorities and industry are dealing with the danger of combustibile cladding at a snail's pace and behind closed doors.

Given the apartment boom of the past two decades, more and more of us will soon realise that we are affected. The failure of regulators and the highly profitable development industry to construct safe buildings is a growing global issue.

Stories and images of the horrors of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London will be forever imprinted on our minds. Residents of Sydney's Opal Tower are dealing with the fact that internal concrete panels are cracking. In Melbourne, [the Neo200 apartment fire in February](#) was a reminder that not enough has been done to make our buildings safe in the five years since the Lacrosse Tower fire.



Neo200 tenants Nisha Mehrotra and Dion Aleksovski outside the fire-affected tower. JASON SOUTH

My letter from the Victorian Building Authority, which is doing a state-wide cladding audit, inspired little confidence. Apparently, the building is still suitable for occupation. However, the letter does not tell us the level of risk associated with staying in our home, the fire-mitigation measures that will be required, the cost and inconvenience of rectification, or who is legally and financially responsible. There is no fixed timeline for answering any of these questions.

Nobody chooses to live in an unsafe place, yet every person who calls an apartment like ours home now bears the risks and burdens. The owners of these flats also experience a dramatic drop in their resale value overnight. Are landlords and agents required to tell their tenants? The government letter holds us residents responsible for our own safety. Seven "fire safety tips" are suggested, from extinguishing cigarettes to avoiding having BBQs near flammable

cladding. Although I wanted to move my BBQ, like many of us, I have little idea what the flammable cladding actually looks like.

We have stronger legal rights in shops – where I could obtain an instant refund for my exploding smartphone – than in our combustible homes.

Authorities have both the responsibility and power to make our cities safe. After the Great Fire of London in 1666, which engulfed the medieval city over days, steps were taken by authorities to ensure such a catastrophe never happened again. The city was rebuilt in stone rather than timber and a municipal fire hydrant system was installed. From the late-19th century onwards modern city planning, as we now know it, had an overriding ambition to create healthy and safe cities and homes for societies and people. Critics slurred the exponents of modern planning as socialists.

The dramatic and well-intentioned interventions by governments and authorities to make our cities safer and healthier was generally perceived as a positive thing early last century. In Melbourne, interwar slum reformer and Methodist Frederick Oswald Barnett agitated for improvements to living conditions in the inner suburbs. The 1936–37 Victorian Slum Abolition Committee sought to remedy run-down, poorly insulated and vermin-infested houses. It would take another four decades before every Australian home had running water and sewerage: Gough Whitlam took this issue to the 1972 Federal Election, and then set a budding generation of motivated public servants onto the task.

Our cities, buildings and homes are supposed to be healthy and safe. In different ways, we have been here before. As citizens, we should maintain the expectation that our urban authorities will dramatically intervene, when necessary, to eliminate known and pressing safety risks in our cities such as the spread of fire. Authorities must take the bold steps necessary to fix the cladding crisis on our behalf. Individual people should not bear the brunt of this regulatory and industry failure.

Governments and industry are evading their moral and financial responsibility to keep us out of danger in our homes. They are being opaque about the extent of the combustible cladding crisis and are not taking immediate steps to fix this issue. If our state governments will not immediately launch powerful inquiries, the next Australian federal government should establish a royal commission into the state of housing in Australia.

As my family goes to sleep each night, fire should not be a real and present danger.

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