

HOW ONE SUPPLIER'S SIMPLE SOLUTION COULD BE

THE KEY TO AUSTRALIA'S CLADDING AND WEATHERPROOFING CRISIS



INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of the morning of 25 November, 2014, a fire started in an apartment block at 673 La Trobe Street in Melbourne's Docklands. The time was approximately 1.30am when a cigarette, only partly extinguished was left burning in a plastic bin.

The plastic bin caught fire and in turn, set fire to the wooden table it was sitting on. The flames grew and spread to the balcony's southern wall. If the cladding system that encased the apartment block had been non-combustible the fire would most probably have stopped there. Sadly, however that was not the case, the southern wall of 673 La Trobe Street was covered in combustible aluminium cladding.

Once ignited, the fire spread rapidly upwards, with levels six to twenty-one affected by fire and many more affected by water damage.

The 2014 fire at the Lacrosse tower in Melbourne sent shockwaves through the nation's construction industry, sparking major concerns over the aluminium cladding used for over four decades on thousands of Australian buildings.

Fortunately, there were no fatalities or serious injuries.





However, it is frightening to think what could have happened. The aluminium cladding was the exact same material that was responsible for the Grenfell tower disaster in London where 72 people lost their lives.

Evaculife Managing Director, Bruce Bromley, said the La Crosse apartment building in Melbourne's Docklands could have easily experienced a similar fate to Grenfell Tower if it were a different time of day.

"A few more sprinkler heads activated, a different time of day, a different wind, the system would have been overrun and we could easily have had our own Grenfell UK disaster," he said.

"What most people do not realise with the La Crosse fire in Docklands is the wind blew the smoke and flames away from the building, and we got lucky in terms of the low water demand in the surrounding area at the time, as the number of sprinklers that operated exceeded the design capacity."

Five years after the fire, many of the Lacrosse apartments have been repaired - but there are at least 1,400 buildings in Victoria that have high-risk cladding on them still to this day.

So how do these materials get onto our buildings? What are the checks and balances? How do we make sure that we avoid any more disasters with so many buildings in Australia failing to meet basic non-combustible requirements?

THE FIRST PROBLEM LIES IN ACCREDITATION

Product accreditation in Australia is hit and miss, with many of the new products being supplied and installed without proper accreditation or review.

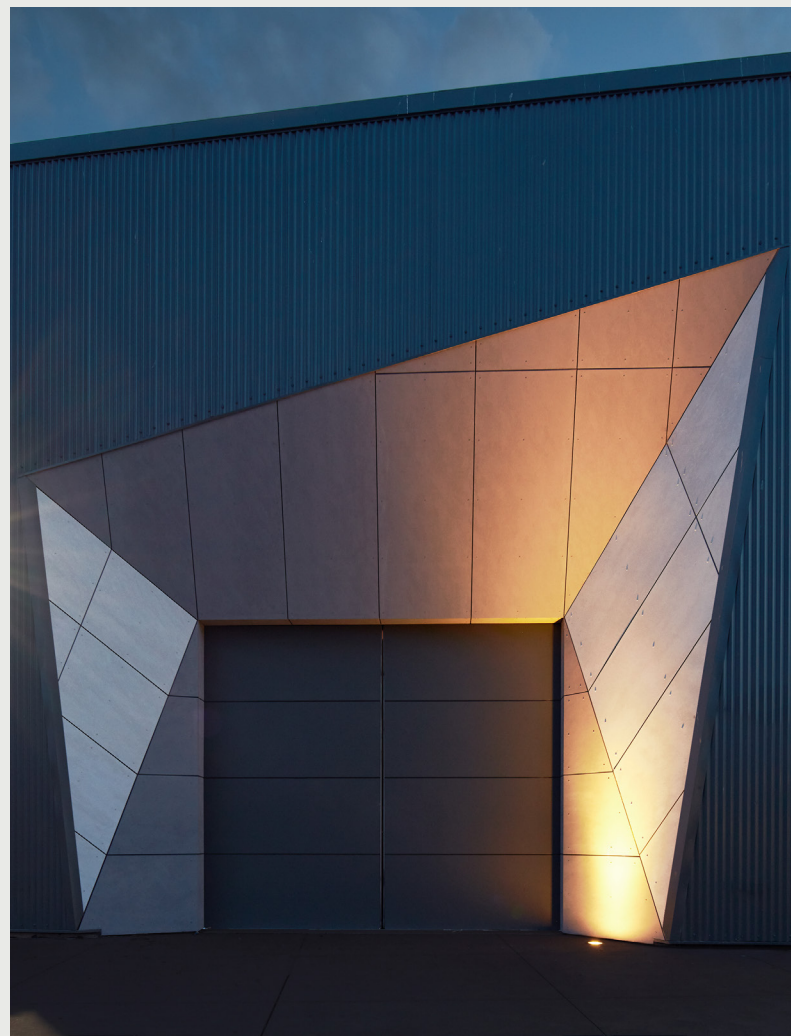
Common products which may have been accredited are being replicated in part and provided without equivalent accreditation. Although there has been an accreditation process in place, it has recently come under intense scrutiny and the process of providing the information to the relevant building surveyor or supervising architect is rarely done.

Taking into consideration the complexity of building today and the variety of building products and methodology it has become almost impossible to police. The result is cheaper, inferior products with no proper accreditation being used to cut costs.

THE SECOND PROBLEM LIES IN SUBSTITUTION

To compound the situation, product substitution on building sites occurs on a daily basis. The due process under contractual requirements is for the builder or sub-contractor to make application to the supervising architect or project manager to change a specified material.

However, once again this is hit and miss, with substitutions happening continually with inferior products being used to save construction costs. There is no evidence that this was the case in relation to the Lacrosse tower. However, it is common knowledge that this happens on a daily basis on construction sites across Australia.



WHEN LIVES ARE AT RISK, THERE SHOULD BE ZERO COMPROMISE

EQUITONE ANZ Managing Director, Nicolas Macor said “It happens all the time. Architects will specify the materials they require and contractors will substitute them for alternatives. Now we’re seeing the effects of these decisions with thousands of lives and buildings in danger all across Australia. It goes without saying that when lives are at risk, there should be zero compromise”

EQUITONE is one of the solutions to this crisis, a material designed by and for architects, EQUITONE have been producing facade panels since the 1950s. The panels are non-combustible, 100% weatherproof and 100% safe having passed all Australian regulatory testing standards. So why are they not used more?

Nicolas responds “We’re often the first choice for Architects but not for contractors or builders. There is a myth that as a premium European product, our panels are hard to fit. But nothing could be further from the truth. Our panels cut easily, shape easily and fit easily and we’re immensely proud of the stunning aesthetic results we can achieve too”.

“It’s always going to come down to the bottom line for contractors” adds Mehdi Malekian, EQUITONE Technical Manager, ANZ, “Our products pass all Australian and international safety and quality standards, but many of the inferior products we are being substituted for are not.”

A MEDIA MYTH. USING A NON-COMBUSTIBLE CLADDING ALONE DOESN'T SOLVE THE ISSUE

The media have dubbed the whole debacle ‘The Cladding Crisis’ which is an oversimplification for anyone who knows the business. Using a non-combustible cladding like EQUITONE fibre cement panels does not make a building non-combustible. If the whole façade system is compromised with substandard materials then the building is still unsafe and susceptible to life threatening fires and water damage.

In the wake of Grenfell tower disaster in London, an out of cycle amendment was made to the building code to increase fire safety of the entire façade system. The key change was to tighten up requirements for the use of combustible materials in the whole façade system including all components incorporated in them; external walls, façade coverings, framing and insulation.



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THE FIRST AND ONLY 100% SAFE FULLY VENTILATED FACADE SYSTEM IN AUSTRALIA

Mehdi says “You could use our non-combustible cladding panels yet the rest of the facade system could still compromise the weatherproofing and fire resistance. It’s why we’ve become the first supplier to provide an all-in-one fully ventilated facade system that ensures 100% safety across the entire building exterior”.

“We’ve partnered with Pro Clima and our sister company Siniat to develop a full system that is the first of its kind in Australia. EQUITONE will not only provide our own fibre cement panels, but we now have a full system which includes the weather barrier, framing and fixings. This full system meets Australian Standard AS/NZS 4284 for weathertightness and all the requirements and provisions of the National Construction Code.”

This is an industry changing move from EQUITONE. Architects will now be able to specify the EQUITONE system and rest assured that the entire system is safe, weather tight and non-combustible.

Having a full system also ensures that there is a lower chance of architects’ specifications being swapped out for alternate cladding, fixings and wall backings if it is all available from one place.

“It’s now even easier to fit. The ventilated façade and the breathable membrane prevents the formation of condensation and mould, which not only makes the building low maintenance, it also means a healthier place for people to live and work.” adds Cedric Pinto, Architectural Sales Manager for EQUITONE.

It is the only fully ventilated waterproof tested façade system available in the industry and it is long overdue. Hopefully this is a sign of things to come in an industry that needs better regulation, accountability and prioritisation if Australia is going to avoid our own Grenfell disaster.

SAFETY CAN BE STRIKING.

EQUITONE fibre cement panels have been used in impressive projects in Australia over the last few years. With a fully ventilated tested facade system available for the first time in Australia, now contractors, builders and architects can create stunning results whilst ensuring the safety of residents and buildings is 100% guaranteed.

For more information on the EQUITONE range of materials or to request your free samples, visit www.equitone.com.

REFERENCES:

Bromley, Bruce. "We could have easily had our own Grenfell UK disaster" <https://evaculife.com.au/blog/we-could-have-easily-had-our-own-grenfell-uk-disaster/>

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