



Council orders Brunswick block owners to get a \$2m flammable cladding fix



Clay Lucas

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Owners of an apartment block in the inner north covered in combustibile cladding will receive an emergency order to get it covered in safer materials within three months – at a cost estimated to be upwards of \$2 million.

The building is one of hundreds across Melbourne clad in the material that fuelled London's Grenfell Tower fire, where 71 died.



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Grenfell warning for Australia

Warnings have been issued about Australia's lax building laws and the risk of a Grenfell style fire happening here, during a Senate inquiry into non-compliant cladding.

The Anstey Square apartments in Sydney Road, Brunswick, are clad in a mix of expanded polystyrene and aluminium composite panelling, the same material that was used on the Grenfell Tower

The Lacrosse Tower, in Docklands, where there was a quick-spreading fire in 2014, had similar cladding.

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Both types of cladding are combustible, and can fuel a fire instead of stopping it.

On Friday afternoon, Moreland Council will hand the Anstey Square owners corporation orders to carry out works to make the 105 apartments safe.

Owners of the seven-year-old building were last month also hit by an insurance bill that climbed from \$29,000 last year to \$134,000 this year.

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Their excess also rose from \$1000 to \$100,000.



Residents of this block in Brunswick will have to come up with \$2m to pay for recladding. Photo: Justin McManus

It is likely thousands of Melburnians who own apartments clad by builders using combustible materials in the past decade will face a similar hike in their insurance bills, as understanding of how widespread the issue is spreads.

Owners in the Brunswick apartments have begun legal action against builder Hickory to recover the costs of fixing the nine-level tower.



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A fire caused major damage to the Brunswick building earlier this year. Photo: Justin McManus

Other apartment owners in buildings around the city are likely to follow a similar legal path, owners corporation and construction industry experts warn.

It follows the Andrews government's refusal last week to release a confidential list of 1369 apartment buildings across the state that may be at risk of burning.



Some of the cladding on the Brunswick apartments is the same as that which was used on London's Grenfell Tower Photo: AP

The list was compiled by its Victorian Cladding Taskforce, which released its interim report after five months' work and \$1.2 million in public funding.

Owners of each apartment on the taskforce's list are being told separately if their building has combustible cladding.

But with 50 per cent of residents in Victorian apartments renting, there are fears that – if the list stays confidential – tenants will never know their building is a heightened fire risk.

Buyers of apartments may also learn too late they have bought into a building that must have millions spent replacing its facade.

The confidential list of apartments, compiled only from a desktop study, includes the Brunswick apartments.

Planning Minister Richard Wynne declined to release the list when asked on Thursday.

He said the taskforce was contacting affected property owners.



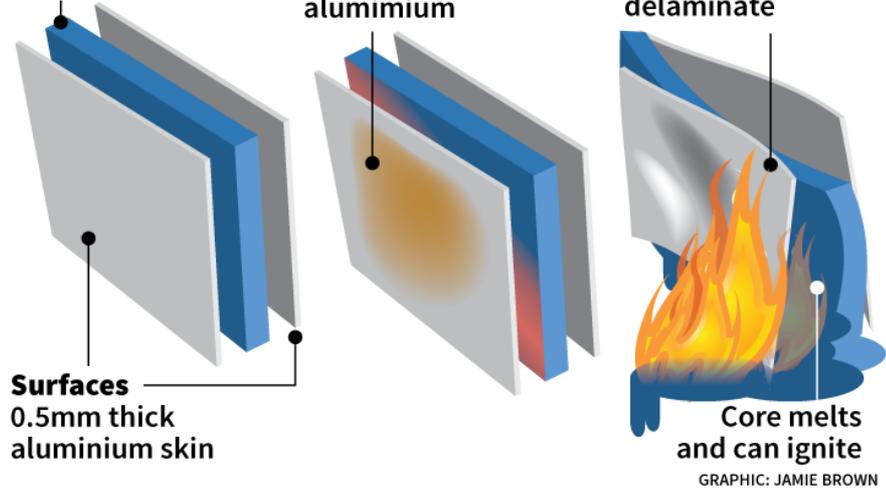
"Owners corporations have a legal obligation to contact any tenants or other residents to inform them of the status of their building," he said.

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Anstey Square suffered a small, quick-spreading fire earlier this year that brought attention to its cladding.

In the wake of that fire, the owners corporation researched replacing the cladding, and was told it would cost between \$2 million and \$3 million.

Residents in the building have also been warned of emergency evacuation procedures, and have been told not to store any combustible materials including several types of furniture on their balconies.





Replacing the cladding could cost as much as \$3m. Photo: Justin McManus

Anstey Square is one of nine buildings on a list that the Metropolitan Fire Brigade has released publicly.

Those buildings are on its "enhanced response list" because of their heightened risk of burning rapidly. Among them is the Royal Women's Hospital.

The Brunswick tower is the third to receive such emergency orders. The others are the Harvest apartments in Clarendon Street, South Melbourne, and the Infinite 8 buildings in Clayton.

Sahil Bhasin is general manager of Roscon, a company specialising in identifying building defects. It has done costing reports for cladding replacements on 130 apartment buildings across Melbourne.

Mr Bhasin said that the Victorian Cladding Taskforce "should make its list of buildings public so all occupants know the risk of their dwellings. Over 50 per cent of occupants residing in apartments are renting, so providing the information just to owners is not adequate."

And the existence of combustible cladding would affect a building's re-sale price, something buyers should know, he said.

The group representing owners corporations, Strata Community Australia, described the cladding crisis as a "total regulatory failure".

"Right now, there are tens of thousands of Victorians with potentially dangerous cladding," said the group's Rob Beck.

"The discovery of non-compliant cladding on an apartment building places owners under extreme financial pressure, and we're urging the state government to consider a funding model that helps [owners] avoid financial ruin," Mr Beck said.

He said there was a real possibility owners would launch a class action against the Victorian Building Authority if the government did nothing to help homeowners hit by the cladding crisis.

"In the majority of cases, owners, not builders, not developers, not surveyors or suppliers are the party responsible to rectify unsafe buildings and a better system must be in place to see defective buildings dealt with swiftly, when issues arise."

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