



Who rules the rulers?

Have our associations and regulators had a good year? In his 2007 report Jerry Tyrrell reviews the scene in plain language.

I've been working in the building industry for 35 years, and this is the 14th article in my CPD series.

Most of the pieces have focused on ways of building well through knowledge and teamwork. This one is more about CPD for the 'big boys' – the industry associations, public servants and politicians in charge of our industry.

You know what? These people and groups aren't required to undertake any continuing education. They aren't accountable to us.

As far as I can see they haven't developed an understandable way of telling us how well they are performing. In fact, the only way we know whether they are learning and improving is by comparison.

For instance, the Building Code of Australia (BCA) was a great improvement compared with the six State building rule books we had to deal with. And preservative-treated timber is so much better than rooted ... no, rotted ... non-durable exterior softwoods. In many ways, things change for the better, but it is so, so slow.

I marvel at how buildings come together; so many ideas, materials and people are involved. For such an inexact science, the participants do a wonderful job. But there is so much confusion – different names for the same item, misunderstandings and many things not included as a result of ignorance or short-term thinking.

Every year legislators and associations report various statistics in an attempt to describe building performance. The common ones focus on numbers or dollars – such as number of projects, dollars spent on renovations, building cost per square metre or average size of house.



These stats are interesting, but I think the focus needs to be on things that are more relevant to people doing the work and paying the bills. This info should include:

- Number of customer complaints against contractors;
- Cost of remedial work after the job is supposedly finished, so we can work out the real benefits in preventing problems;
- Number of disputes;
- Non-building cost of disputes, ie: the legal and expert costs (so we know how stupid it is to give control of a dispute away to the courts and tribunals);
- Value of home warranty insurance premiums paid;
- Number of insurance claims;
- Cost of actual claims paid;

- Cost of building work only in the claim.

Last but not least, there's a real teaser for everyone. It's got to do with improvements in the education courses we all do when we are training to become a contractor, consultant or other professional.

We need an indicator that rates whether courses are teaching the same thing, eg: do they recommend the same cavity drainage that the BCA Vol 1 recommends for walls above habitable rooms.

Lost you eh? Well, it should all be easily understood and should always be the same message and diagram.

When all of this information is published it needs to have the results from previous years shown alongside so we can see whether we are reducing the main problems. ►



I've hit my thumb a few times over the years, had lots of cuts and bumps, given myself an electric shock when installing a dishwasher and nearly fell eight metres when a timber triple extension ladder slid sideways on a sloping site. All these mistakes helped me to learn and make really good decisions on the best way of doing things.

So we don't need to be afraid of mistakes. And if we are not so scared, it is less likely we will continue this silly culture of wanting to blame and punish each other if something goes wrong.

Don't get me wrong, we need to know

why a mistake happens. But we also need to start thinking 'no one wants to make a mistake' and, in most cases, 'the mistake was unintentional – even the incompetent ones'.

If mistakes are seen as OK, we can learn lessons from them. Here's the opposite of what we need – this is how our industry treats mistakes:

- A pattern of problems occurs on the site, eg: rusting of site welds on steel handrails.
- There is no simple way for this to become common knowledge.

- If an association or legislator does find something we need to know, they get it put in unintelligible language by journalists or lawyers.
 - They tell us this essential information in a new Standard or trade handbook, which is often costly or difficult to find. We try to read it but cannot understand it.
 - Eventually, manufacturers make a product that sort of fixes the problem. But we don't know why it works.
- Educators start thinking about the problem but no one co-ordinates inclusion of a clear principle in the courses for everyone involved in building. For instance, 'Never site weld externally within 500m of the sea. Treat all site welding as the most important part of corrosion control. Use a proprietary system. Prepare steel strictly in accordance with this system. Quality assure priming and ensure top coats are completed as per specification'.

A drawing would be useful, showing how far to extend the primer. Maybe a table showing the rate of corrosion of untreated steels in marine versus inland locations, and then some *relevant* information sources, preferably the web address of the paint manufacturer or steel producer.

I've met thousands of contractors, engineers, designers, building surveyors and clients over the past 35 years. They all know what they want, but they expect someone else to fix the problems.

Historically, very few things stand out as successes. The BCA does. But even then it needs simplification and many more diagrams. The end of the really toxic anti-termite chemicals in 1995 was good. The Home Building Centres in New South Wales that were based on prevention were a stroke of genius by the Department of Fair Trading in the 1990s.

Too many other things are just the same old, same old – mistakes, blame, dispute, no profit, whingeing. In 2008, I'd like to see more contractors contribute and get what

	Comment	Mark
2007 Report		
Teamwork - Does everyone involved know who should do what?	No	3/10
Building regulations - Are regulations in easily understood pictures for us 'practical guys'?	No	2/10
Feedback and continuing education - Has everyone been told how to avoid mistakes the industry made last year?	No	1/10
Builders being unfairly blamed - Is this still being accepted?	Yes	4/10
Disputes - Have lawyers and tribunals been removed from disputes and are disputes easier to sort out?	No	1/10
Home warranty insurance - Is this really needed when most builders want to fix their mistakes?	No	1/10
Education - Has it improved significantly (is CPD improving contractors' knowledge)?	No	2/10



A successful building project

What people want	How to get it
Customers want a building that is good to live/work in	Employ a good designer who interprets what you want and what you can afford
Customers/contractors want to get what they are paying for	Proper quality assurance – make sure someone responsible ticks off the high-risk items, eg: waterproofing, termite protection, major structures
Everyone wants the building to work and last	Legislation that requires everything to be fit for purpose, eg: external fixings must last 20+ years
Contractors want to be paid for everything they do to achieve the above	Improve consumer education and stop the culture of blame, ie: no more disputes

they really need:

- More vision;
- Working together;
- Rejection of unintelligible words;
- Demand for illustrations and web-based info portals;
- A source for feedback;
- Common information on building and detailing so we finally all talk the same language;
- Rejection of any process that stops us from building well or fixing a mistake

without interference from outsiders – including insurers, lawyers and so-called building experts.

With your help next year's report will be different. Tell me if you really understand the BCA and Standards. Please email me any thoughts or experiences at jwtyrrell@tyrrells.com ■

Jerry Tyrrell is co-founder of Tyrrells Property Inspections. He has more than 30 years' experience as a labourer, tradesman, contractor, architect, mediator, building consultant and author. He has been involved in the inspection and building of more than 60,000 properties (including 30,000 timber pest inspections and 3,000 disputes).

Next issue: Back to basics – how experts (that's you) solve problems.