

Time to press the reset button?

Does the ABCB recognise the problem?

The best way to show how bad the problem is would be for the ABCB to gather 20 building professionals in a room and ask questions on the content and accessibility of the BCA and the Standards.

Once the board members realised that people are generally perplexed by these publications they would soon find better ways of arranging the structure and content.

The solution is probably simple – extensive use of diagrams, summaries and tables.

And someone with a brain needs to integrate relevant issues from the various Standards and regulations in each summary.

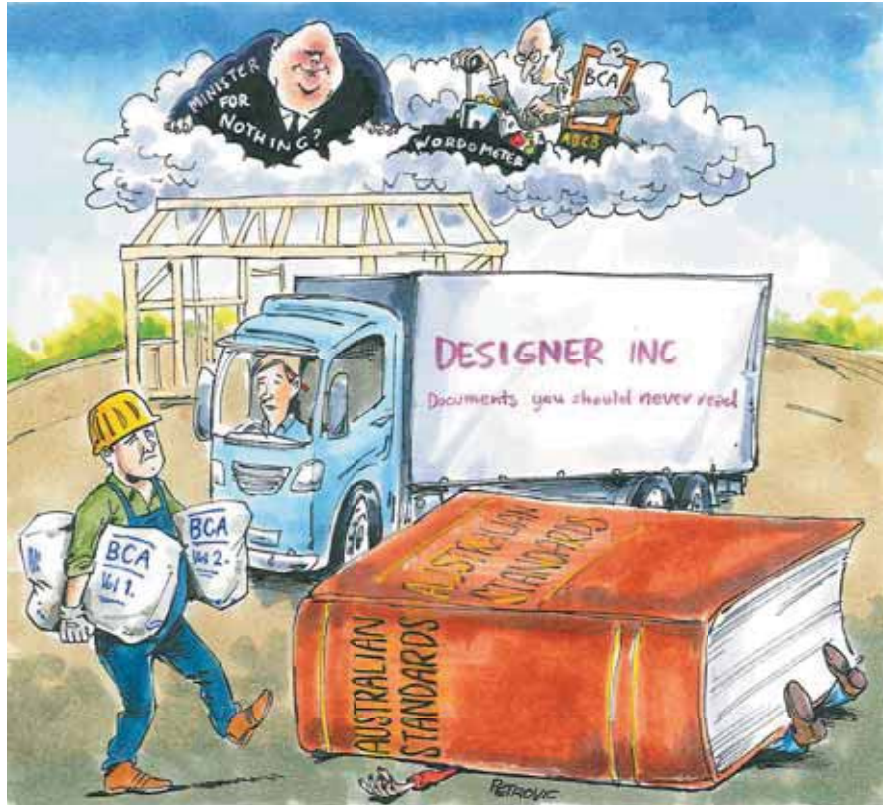
For example, a balcony threshold sub-sill needs to be integrated with waterproofing, tiling, access, thermal performance, life cycle, durability and cavity flashings.

The summaries would probably be 10% of the actual text, with hyperlinks to key supporting detail.

What the customers say

Plumber David Mikkelsen: "I usually ring someone for technical advice. Going to the Plumbing Code is the last resort. I can figure most things out, but it is not easy to read."

Architect Tone Wheeler: "Never has compliance with the BCA and Australian Standards been more demanded and important, and never has access to those documents been more difficult. We are in the electronic age with freedom of information, but these vital documents have text and publishing from the steam age."



Combining the BCA and Standards is overdue if this industry is to remain competitive and profitable, writes Jerry Tyrrell.

The multiple rules and regulations governing building and construction in Australia can be as dense as an ancient religious text.

Many dedicated people compile and administer amendments to the Building Code of Australia (BCA) and guide Standards committees, but too many still need attention.

To be productive and profitable, the building and construction sector needs to work in an environment of rapidly developing technology and sustainability, yet with the threat of litigation hanging over every move.

It is time to stand back and completely overhaul how crucial regulatory documents are marketed and in what form – and that means more than selling the current versions online.

The building and construction sector is primarily made up of small and medium businesses, and the people involved simply don't have time to conduct research, cross-reference or ask questions.

It seems that no one has overhauled the document business model since it came into being, except to sell the Standards marketing rights to a publicly listed company a few years back.

Yes, there are constraints – the work of the Australian Building Codes Board is limited by funding levels, as is the Standards writing process. But therein lies the first problem – money, or lack of it, for want of a better business model.

Confusion, lost time, poor integration, errors and misunderstandings for everyone using the BCA and Australian Standards are costing us all an estimated 1% of total construction income, or about \$1.5 billion every year.

This does not include the wasted \$100 million in expert, barrister and solicitor costs in analysing and interpreting these complex documents when there is a dispute. (I approve of a National Construction Code and relevant Standards. However, the content is generally wordy, confusing and often not integrated between publications.) ➤

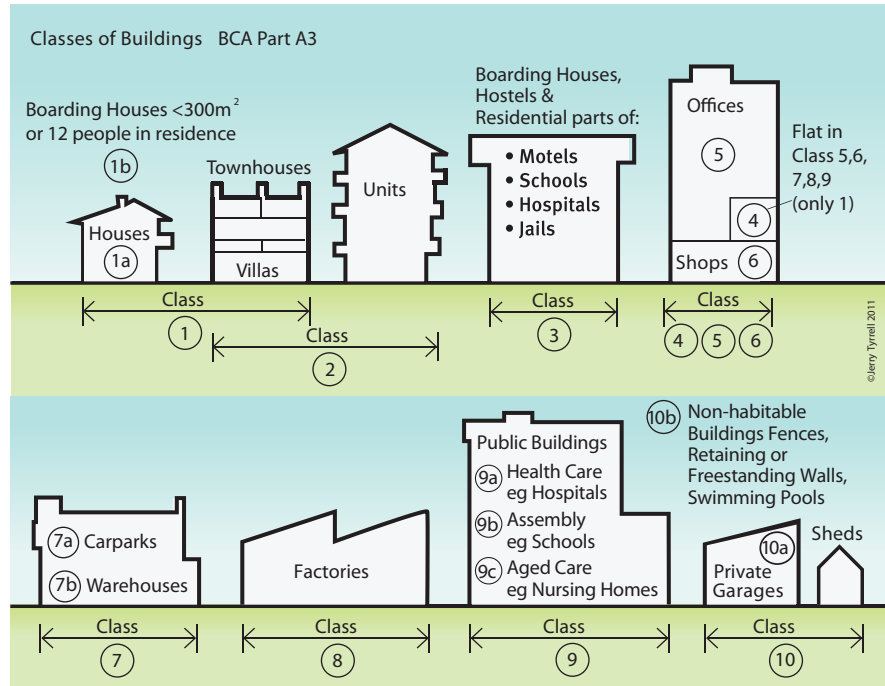
Aren't you just sick of it?

Most builders and contractors in charge of doing the work avoid the BCA, because all the basic best-practice information cannot be found. There are three un-indexed volumes when probably only one is needed. There is no effective co-ordination of:

- how key issues relate to different trades, such as:
 - electricians, air-conditioning contractors and plumbers need to understand fire-rated barriers;
 - tilers need to understand waterproofing and drainage principles; and
 - everyone needs to understand principles of safe access and energy efficiency, etc.
- how rules in one Standard affect another, such as:
 - the Premises Standard requires no steps at entries, yet the BCA stipulates the internal floor level to be 150mm above external finishes; and
 - no one has considered how the same Standard affects visible termite barriers or has warned contractors about dampness if thresholds are undrained (if you agree, let me know – jwtyrrell@tyrrells.com);
- how contractors can achieve the required energy efficiency, including simple methods for choosing materials with low carbon cost and specific ways of sealing around openings and ceiling penetrations;
- required durability for materials and systems, and how to achieve it simply;
- essential feedback about mistakes we keep making (the aviation industry analyses crashes, doctors do autopsies, and psychologists look carefully at patterns behind inappropriate behaviour);
- other key trade activities besides plumbing – why aren't high-priority activities included, such as waterproofing and electrical, or the footing and framing codes?

Change is overdue

Something is happening. The ABCB has recently edited the BCA and included Volume 3 on Plumbing.



Two or more classes within a building. Class as main use if secondary use is <10%. Ignore secondary use if a laboratory, Class 2, 3 or 4 part. Service areas, eg. plant or lift rooms, have same class as area they service.

However, the product is still so difficult to use and inhibits the education of all participants in the building industry. It wastes our time, effort and money. It retards exactly what the ABCB is trying to achieve.

So what can we do? I suggest a sustained campaign to make this vital publication Australia's premier source of information on the building process.

BCAplus 2012 would appeal to everyone from students to trade or association based professionals. This could expand circulation and awareness from a meagre 20,000 or so printed copies or DVDs a year to well over 500,000.

And here's the way to do it.

Stage 1 - Reduce the confusion, disappointing structure and excessive word count of the BCA and integrate all issues from the relevant Standards (see the accompanying diagram which, with minor improvements, could replace at least two pages of text).

Produce searchable, illustrated summaries with the major issues covered clearly. Users could then click through to

additional technical information in the more complex areas.

One would hope the offices of fair trading, licensing authorities, building associations, water and energy commissions, and the like would willingly fund a project that consolidated the BCA and the relevant Standards into a simplified best-practice resource online.

This would substantially reduce professional and consumer mistakes and interpretation costs. Perhaps the only losers would be the insurance companies (reduced premiums) and lawyers (less litigation).

Stage 2 - Make BCAplus free online (yes free, just like most other Government documents), attached to everyone's academic enrolment, licensing or trade association membership.

Wikipedia, Google, most parliamentary acts and regulations, and most technical data documents are free online.

Stage 3 - All education facilities, contractors, manufacturers and professionals could then use this online

resource to achieve the objective of a National Construction Code series: to incorporate all onsite construction requirements into a single code.

The online version should be a 'wiki' type document. The ABCB team could be tuning and updating the product to accommodate the corrections and improvements it regularly needs.

You can help

I propose a campaign comprising:

1. A petition to State and Federal Housing and Construction Ministers, Offices of Fair Trading and every Politician – email me now at jwtyrrell@tyrrells.com and I will add your name to the list;
2. Email me about any issues you think are not properly sorted out in the BCA or Standards, eg: Volume 1 does not include the same Queensland provisions for termite protection as Volume 2; and

3. Email me with any tips you have for making the BCA or Standards better.

Controversy precedes greatness

Look at history. Scientists were tortured and executed for believing the earth was round. No one believed people could fly. Doctors bled sick patients. Scholars had to write in Latin or Greek.

Yet throughout the ages humans have managed to come up with better ideas, great new ideas or ingenious inventions.

If the BCA was a mobile phone or a cancer drug, the systemic problems would have been fixed years ago. In fact, few private sector companies would have persisted with the structure and content of the BCA and the Standards.

Sadly, big changes happen only through dogged and effective protest or financial incentive. At the moment, no one believes we can have easily understood, best-practice information to help

everyone design and build efficiently.

Now we can do something. It may take time. It may start with reluctance by Standards Australia and the ABCB. But ultimately they will create the sort of product they are empowered to.

In 10 years, they will be proud of a decision to act on overdue improvements and allow their products to be online and free.

Please help yourselves, contractors in the future, and me. Email your support to jwtyrrell@tyrrells.com ■

Jerry Tyrrell is the founder of the Institute of Building Consultants and co-founder of Tyrrells Property Inspections. He has more than 38 years' experience as a labourer, tradesman, contractor, architect, mediator, building consultant and author.

Next Issue: Maintenance Part 2
