



Reviewing the principles – festively

Christmas is a perfect time for reviewing your work. Jerry Tyrrell looks at current practice compared to best practice to help start the new year on the right foot.

For more than 35 years I have been watching our industry closely.

Many of the age-old principles of building, such as sill and cavity flashings, still work well. However, builders are constantly punished by a few issues – for example, termite protection and designs without stepdown at thresholds.

We are often largely defenceless against the legislators, associations and manufacturers who created these problems in the first place or approved the processes. In the end it means an unnecessary cost that comes off our bottom line.

Yet if it was up to us, we would never shoot ourselves in the foot more than once – it hurts too much and is easy to

avoid with a properly maintained nail gun and good technique.

Some things do improve, but so very slowly.

My argument is this: Microsoft or Nokia or Stihl or Bosch rarely, if ever, repeat an error; they need to get it right to stay on top and to make a profit.

Many builders repeat mistakes, like paying too much for indemnity insurance, continuing with outdated practices or using products that are poorly tested and have inadequate warranties. Most builders don't bill the customer for the many things that improve the life of the building.

Here are some matters we need to eliminate from next year. Best practice often saves you money, and it certainly saves your client money over the life of the building.

Keeping a slab edge exposed will save more than \$1,500 for the reticulation system and prevent the need for the ongoing toxic maintenance that is contaminating our soils and kids.

A subsill is cheaper to install than

dodgy alcove flashings flopping around a threshold – and for goodness sake, charge for the additional cost of stainless, fibre cement, subsills and so forth.

The best Christmas present we can give our customers is a carefully built building with no major problems.

The best Christmas present we can get is a healthy profit, no call-backs and the reputation we deserve.

I extend my best wishes to you, your family and team for Christmas. May you continue to construct great buildings in 2009 and encourage the legislators, associations and manufacturers to make overdue changes more quickly. This will keep our foot out of harm's way.

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.

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Current practice	Best practice
Termite management Chemical-impregnated membranes and irrigation systems.	Use termite-resistant frames and access to slab edges. It is worth noting that I have never used reticulation systems or chemical membranes in 35 years of building.
Saturation damage in wet areas Staining to floor tiles/stone. Dampness around wastes.	Get falls to wastes. Use puddle flanges. Check that all stone used in wet areas will not watermark, and establish the specific sealer recommended and its wet slip rating – then get it in writing.
Thresholds No effective drainage and tiles above front edge.	Use subsills with end caps and make sure tiles are never laid above the drainage slots. Never tile above base of weepholes.
Exterior materials Using non-durable softwoods. Using plywood or particleboard under tiled balconies. Using plasterboard for external balcony ceilings.	Use H3 pine or Class 1 timbers. Use fibre cement flooring with brass or stainless screws. Use fibre cement or villaboard linings.
Steel fixings and materials Site welding close to the sea. Using passified zinc or low-durability external fixings.	Avoid site welding or use a recognised anti-corrosion system on areas where coating is damaged, eg: inorganic zinc. Use galvanised or preferably stainless or brass fixings – brass cannot be used in contact with aluminium.
Salt damage Allowing salt to leach from tiles over the balcony edges.	Use hobs on all balcony edges or get the client's written acknowledgement that hobless balcony edges will leach efflorescence. Tell clients salt will leach/stain from all tiled faces such as stair risers.
Falls in concrete driveways and balconies Ponding or negative falls.	Set out the slope with the client. Always tell concreter to get at least 1:60 slope to drains or street.
Coatings Failures with limewashes and specialty coatings.	Avoid coatings you are not familiar with, unless the manufacturer selects the contractor and warrants the work and the product.
Home warranty insurance Expensive and last-resort insurance is offensive and never used by any other profession.	Follow the Queensland model – do not buy from your association because of the obvious conflict of interest illustrated in the recent Senate inquiries.
Access to technical help The Building Code of Australia is complex. No centralised resource for builders/clients/professionals.	The principles of the BCA need to be extracted for all trade and professional courses. Press for a government-sponsored national helpline to help prevent tricky building issues becoming expensive mistakes.
Disputes The industry is not focused on dispute prevention and co-operative solutions.	Consumers need very clear information about their responsibilities. Everyone should select an agreed troubleshooter at the beginning of each project.
Variations The scope of work changes on almost every job. It is also a fact that most builders handle the documenting of these changes very poorly.	Arm yourself with properly formatted variation forms, take the time to price a variation accurately and get the client to sign on the dotted line – before you do the work.

