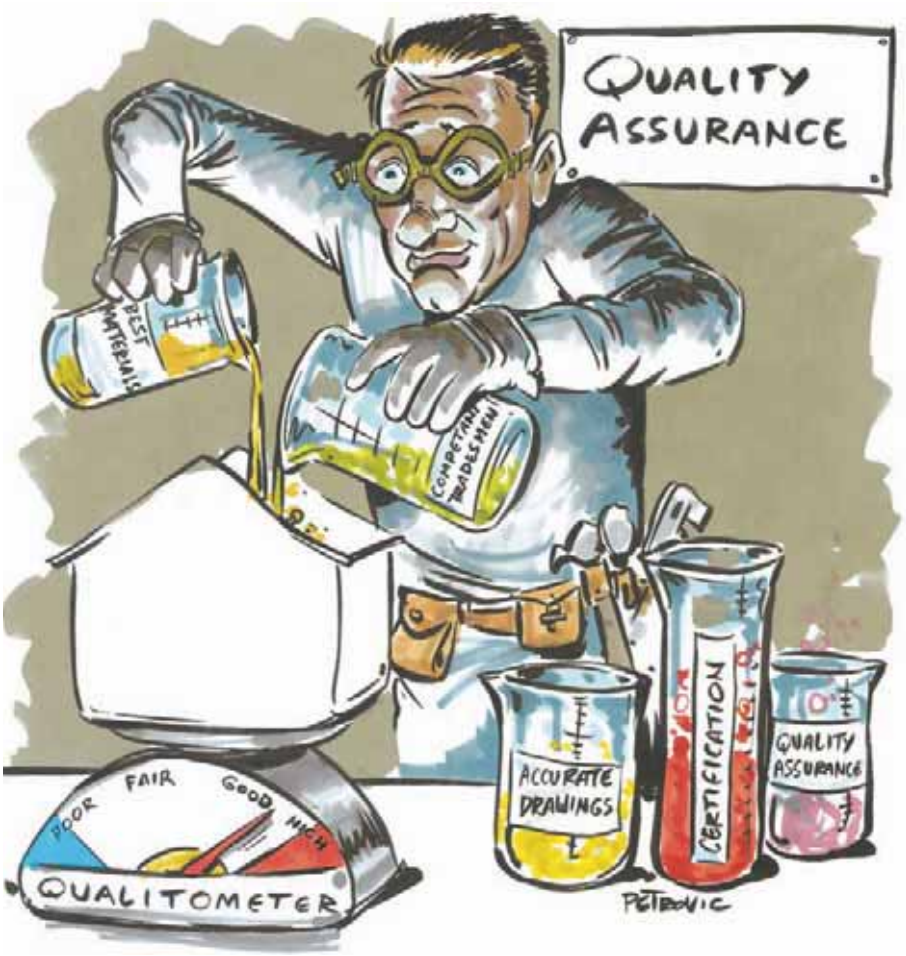
Inspector general

If building work is not audited properly things will go wrong. In the first of two articles Jerry Tyrell explains his system of planning, methodology and clear thinking to help approach a building inspection.



Building is a puzzle made up of a series of brain teasers or problems. Training and education gives us the answer to most mind benders, or else we couldn't do our job. Common sense and instinct helps solve some of the others.

One of the most important pieces of the puzzle is quality assurance. Maybe I learned a few hints in hundreds of seminars on building-related issues over the past 35 years, as no-one is teaching how to use quality assurance the right way – not in six years of full-time university or four years of TAFE courses.

The Building Code of Australia doesn't mention anything, the Standards set out benchmarks and some do's and don'ts, and we continue to mistakenly rely on Clayton's inspections by supervisors, local councils and certifiers.

Competent inspection of the work is one of the best ways of getting good quality. If the work is not properly audited or inspected, things will go wrong. Who does the client, architect or manager call if something goes wrong with building work? You – or your partner after hours.

Then the insurer calls because of something you never thought would go wrong. And how silly do you look when you say 'I used a readily available product'? Or 'I followed the architect's drawing', or 'the work was inspected by the PCA'.

These next two articles will tell you everything I have learnt about inspecting building work. I don't intend to base my process on the Inspection of Building Standards. These refer to pre-purchase and timber-pest inspections only. Sadly, the Standards have not developed an overall approach that encourages clear, consistent reporting.

When I inspect a building, I always know exactly what I'm doing; to me it's easier than building a frame. I've managed to break down a complex task into a really simple one by using a combination of planning, methodology and very clear thinking.

The structure or game plan of a good inspection is:

- What type of Inspection is needed?
- Who is it for?
- What will I inspect?
- How will I describe the issues?

With new building work, including renovations, the inspection required is most commonly a:

1. Progress inspection;
2. Final inspection;
3. Technical inspection of a single issue;
4. Defect inspection of completed work that is causing big problems.

The second thing to get right is the recipient of the information. For ➤

most contractors, the information you collect during an inspection is to help you, your subbies and suppliers fix up faults or complete the work.

I repeat: the main rationale for inspections is to quickly identify and solve problems, and finish incomplete work.

My next stage is to plan the inspection procedure. If it is a building I haven't inspected before, I always walk around the exterior.

Then I usually start on the interior, room by room. Where possible, I use the same room names shown on the approved plans. Then I do the roof interior, followed by the roof exterior, the building exterior and the subfloor if it has a suspended floor. I always try to see everything.

Once I know who wants the info, I describe each issue the way it will be used. I don't say anything ambiguous unless it is something I can't answer, such as a lift that is not yet in service.

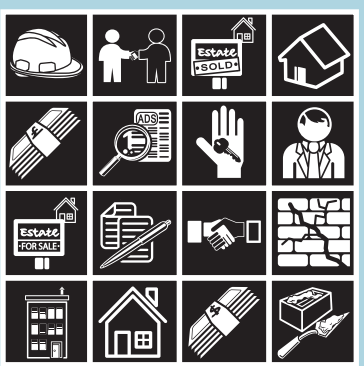
Typical 'inspection speak' is simply telling the person what work he needs to do. For example, 'Fill and polish blemishes in benchtop around sink' or 'Complete sealant between tub and tiles' or 'Paint bottom of bathroom door' or 'Cut jamb embedded in ensuite clear of tiles'. Simple.

If I inspect as a supervisor, I prepare the report as a list of issues. As a contractor inspecting, I would split the issues for each trade so everyone knows what they need to do.

Many people ask me how I 'measure' the quality of what I inspect. After many years of inspecting and studying the inspection reports from more than 60,000 buildings, I've come up with a few trade secrets.

1. Make sure the work is substantially similar to the contract documents – a left-hand hung door is not a right-hand hung one. A 316 stainless box gutter is not a zincalume one.
2. Check in with the client – get their local knowledge by asking them to prepare a list of items they want you check. This way you engage them in the process, they like being listened to, and they get to know how thorough your quality assurance is.

'Fit for purpose' rules would help



Mistakes cost everyone at least 10 times the cost of doing it correctly, and unnecessary building failures increase maintenance costs and reduce life of most buildings.

Governments via the Building Code of Australia could cure more than 30% of the big problems in our industry by:

- **Setting in place 'fit for purpose rules', ie: all products/materials shall last at least 50 years if properly maintained. All exterior products (except clear timber finishes) must have a minimum 25-year life without maintenance.**
- **Displaying product information, life, maintenance (in earlier articles I've shown how this could be put on most products with a simple sticker).**

Eventually consumers will become more expert about the homes they are building or renovating. They will help you deliver the quality that you and they want. They will be pleased to know you can quality assure or audit the progress and quality of what you are building.

As you journey into this 'Merlin's' realm of building inspection, please listen to what all your builder mates want from your inspection. Do not:

- **Blame;**
- **Find unnecessary fault;**
- **Assume that the person who made the mistake will not want to fix it;**
- **Drift into meaningless, aloof, ambiguous language.**

Stay well clear of lawyers unless they are the real good ones who want the problem solved on site, where it should always be solved.

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3. Know the minimum standard – the basic minimum you should accept is:
   - it works and will continue to work;
   - it is constructed the right way (same as the display home or basic trade standard);
   - it looks OK (properly prepared, paint coverage, even coating).
4. Everything technical checks out – all the certification from consultants and contractors is in place.

There are a couple of other tests I use when assessing quality of work in which it is easy to be over critical. The first one is 'does it really matter'. For instance, I have rarely been critical about a small area of uneven plasterboard corner jointing inside a cupboard unless it is a top-quality project of $3,000/m^2.

Then I ask 'is the solution worse than the problem?' Many times I have seen silly inspectors criticise a small fault that would be very difficult, if not impossible, to fix.

For instance, taking up a small area of nicely finished, well-jointed driveway on a very flat site that ponds for a short period after heavy rain. Or asking a bricklayer to re-lay a wall because of inconsistent alignment of perpends – even though no one has noticed it.

Finally, you always have a duty to tell your clients about anything unsafe, wrong or missing, even though you have built it into the plans. For instance, if a planter allows children to climb over a balustrade, or your client decides not to install a shower screen and some expensive veneer finishes will be water damaged.

Please email me any thoughts or experiences at jwtyrrell@tyrrells.com ■

Prevention is easier than repairs

Even the best buildings will have faults. Getting things right the first time is the best way of preventing long lists in reports – so sticking to the documents is vital. Choosing people and products that meet the minimum standards will stop you being phoned after the job is finished. Checking the quality before paying the final claim aligns everyone with what is required.

Jerry Tyrell is co-founder of Tyrells Property Inspections. He has more than 30 years' experience as a labourer, tradesman, contractor, architect, mediator, building consultant and author.

Next Issue: How to inspect your building work Part 2.

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