THE BURNING ISSUE

INCORPORATING FIRE SAFETY MEASURES INTO A RENOVATION OR NEW BUILD IS ESSENTIAL IN ORDER TO SAFEGUARD AGAINST THE POTENTIAL THREAT OF A HOUSE FIRE OR BUSHFIRE. BUILDERS, AND THE INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE, HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN BUILDING AND MAINTAINING FIRE SAFE HOMES.

Since the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, we have been bombarded with media articles about how unsafe we are in our rural buildings. And deaths in recent Sydney and Brisbane fires have stirred ill-informed journalists to tell their audiences how unsafe our buildings are if a fire starts.

We have had to listen to endless interviews of so-called 'experts' who know very little about how to build a fire safe building – they only know how to criticise without providing constructive solutions.

These journalists also fail to tell us that over twice as many people died of heat exhaustion in the week before Black Saturday. Or slips and falls are killing many more people than fire each year. Or the 80,000 homeless Australians who do not have a bed tonight are just as important as those made homeless by fires.

Sadly, most of those who do die in fires are victims of malicious arson or are single, elderly, drug/alcohol affected residents in buildings that were built before the current fire safety rules were put into place.

THE ISSUES TO CONSIDER FOR 2013

- Tradesmen, builders, designers and maintenance personnel are not trained about the importance of fire-rated products and services during their trade and university courses.
- The Building Code of Australia (now the National Construction Code Series) and the muddle of related Australian Standards do not clearly show tradesmen how fire safety rules relate to them. Specifically, what they need to know.
- Fire safety measures in buildings are not easily recognisable once they are installed, concealed or painted.
- Occupants harm themselves and others by doing silly, dangerous things.
- Every building site needs their safety systems to be fully operational from the start of the job. And the systems need to be added to and upgraded as the work progresses. For example, exit signs added at each new level and fire doors must be installed including closers.
- Bushfire safe building rules are confusing and most bushfire attack levels become ineffective after 10 years of garden/landscape growth.

LABEL FIRE-RATED AND SAFETY PRODUCTS

This is the centrepiece of my article. Every industry has rules – we immediately know what to do at a stop sign. We know to swim between the flags. Toxic and combustible materials are always clearly labelled. We even have signs for slippery floors.

However, except for fire doors, owners and tradesmen cannot easily recognise fire safety materials once a building is handed over.

The solution is simple. Every fire safety product needs to be identified for everyone involved – the installer, the inspectors, the owner, the painter and all future maintenance people.

I think a universal label like the one below is necessary; it should include the fire resistance level and possibly a reference number so tradespersons and consultants can check any technical information they might need to consider. I'm recommending a simple flame pictogram, similar to the logo of the Fire Protection Association of Australia.

60 FIRE RATING

TRAINING

Everyone in every building needs training about emergencies. They need to know how to:

- Identify and respond to high risk – usually the smoke alarm siren, smell of gas or an actual fire.
- Get out of the building using alternative routes.
- Alert other occupants without putting themselves at risk.
- Use extinguishers and a fire blanket.
- Prepare a property in a bushfire area if a fire is imminent.

This is no joke and it should be thought of as a life skill.

It should be part of the 'oral history' we pass on to our children.

The dreamtime story is compelling. Death hides in our buildings. It burns us. Trips us. Drowns us. Can kill us slowly.

The heroes are every one of us who, using instinct and knowledge to build well, can warn others and save the day. The storyteller should be one of the building team.

We know that we should have a Bushfire Plan if we own a rural home. But what about the homes and units located in urban areas? And even the little shops and workshops that are forgotten by the systems in place that only large buildings can afford to

In many cases, tradesmen, builders, designers and maintenance personnel are not trained about the importance of fire-rated products and services.

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implement? Here are a couple of tips: Get involved and be trained.

Evacuation diagrams should be accurate and easy to understand.

They are only useful to emergency services personnel to show people how to get out of the building or, at worst, help identify the location of missing people.

STUPIDITY AND CRIME

Self harm should not happen, but it does. Legislation can never make up for a lack of common sense. So let's not overreact to tragedies which are self-inflicted, like those who dead lock their front door, cook with oils carelessly, do not maintain their smoke alarms, obstruct exits in public buildings or build timber houses in a forest.

None of these silly people should cry 'fire' because of their own mistakes or mismanagement. Likewise, decisions about fire safety should not be biased by statistics extracted from fires started by criminals.

We have enough to worry about besides misinformation or things we should have known about.

Governments and building industry bodies should get together to make sure everyone knows the way to build and maintain fire safe buildings.

The burning issue will then be how silly these bodies were not to do something about it 10 years ago. ∎

Next issue: Basements.