

Australia: Safety experts discuss Bankstown apartment fire

Our reporters

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Senior fire safety professionals in Australia have begun commenting publicly during the past fortnight over the causes of the intense fire that engulfed an apartment in a Bankstown multi-storey block on September 6 and led to the tragic death of Chinese student Connie Zhang.

Speaking at the recent “The True Cost of Fire” conference in Melbourne, two leading fire safety experts said the disaster highlighted the need for urgent changes to safety rules for multi-storey buildings.

The fire in the fifth floor apartment of Euro Terraces Building B spread within 15 minutes, forcing Zhang and fellow student Yinuo Jiang to jump from a window to escape the fire. Dense smoke poured into a central atrium area and scores of residents had to be rescued with several hospitalised for smoke inhalation.

While a sprinkler system would have rapidly doused the fire, it is not mandatory under Australian construction codes if the building is less than 25 metres high. The ten-storey Euro Terraces is 24.92 metres, just under the official limit.

American fire safety expert Jonathan Barnett told the conference that “it was a fairly simple fire” but one that quickly escalated. “There were a number of bedrooms [and] there was some polyurethane foam, whether it was a bed or a sofa, in the lounge ... and the kitchen was open to the lounge ...

“The girls at some point retreated to bedroom three, and then, as the fire progressed,” he said, “they jumped out of the window—they had no choice.”

Barnett said the balcony was partly open and “the door to the unit partially opened ... probably to take advantage of the wind cooling the apartment that day.”

Greg Buckley, senior safety expert from Fire & Rescue NSW, said the open door “had two very serious effects. It created quite a massive wind-tunnel effect,

because the winds were blowing from the west that day ... which exacerbated the growth of that fire quite dramatically. It closed off the means of escape for those two girls in the apartment.”

Many questions remain about the disaster, including the role played by the building design, the additional bedroom added to the apartment, ongoing false fire alarms and the alleged unauthorised addition of a roof on the atrium.

Buckley pointed to rising rents in Sydney and the dearth of affordable accommodation for low income residents. This led to the sub-division of apartments to produce more bedrooms, a practise, he admitted, that was “not unusual”.

“We do find occasionally a two-bedroom apartment with 20 people living in it,” he said. “This is a huge problem, a huge fire risk ... We need to consider safety design for the way people actually live, and not the way we would think or hope that they live.”

Buckley also referred to the frequent false fire alarms at Euro Terraces and said they were part of an “increasing problem for fire services, internationally as well as here. We’re starting to see moves towards people not responding to smoke and activation of an alarm.”

Fire Protection Association Australia (FPAA), the fire safety industry peak body that organised the conference, used the event to announce a “feasibility study” into the current Building Code of Australia, and in particular, the impact of the current 25-metre ruling for sprinkler systems.

FPAA chief Scott Williams told the media that the Bankstown tragedy and increasing numbers of people living in multi-storey apartment blocks highlighted the necessity for changes to the building code.

Williams said it was “quite clear” that some

developers were purposely building to just below 25m to avoid installing sprinklers and cut costs.

Some of these concerns were echoed on ABC Radio National's "By Design" program last Saturday. The discussion included Professor Jose Torreo, head of the University of Queensland's School of Engineering, and Hazel Easthope, from the City Futures Research Centre at the University of New South Wales.

All voiced their concerns about fire safety in high-rise apartments. Easthope pointed out that a survey conducted by the City Futures Research Centre revealed that 72 percent of those surveyed in multi-storey strata units were living in buildings with defects and 15 percent of these related to fire safety.

Easthope said that although residents were aware of these problems, they confronted major obstacles—financially and legally—when they tried to overcome these issues and make their apartments compliant under the building code.

Torreo emphasised that the primary objective should be to make buildings safe "not just compliant". There was a "fundamental problem" in Australia, however, he said, because it had "no definition of [fire safety engineering] competence."

New and increasingly more complex constructions "require a level of scrutiny of the professionals that is extremely high and that doesn't really exist in Australia," he said. "This is a problem and it means we tend to design by disaster."

The issues discussed at the FPAA conference and on ABC Radio's "By Design" program indicate that serious fire safety experts are becoming increasingly concerned about the dangers facing residents in new multi-storey construction.

About 100 people attended the FPAA conference session on multi-storey apartment fires but many of those in attendance were mainly preoccupied about the financial cost of any safety legislation.

Several people who spoke in the Q&A session suggested that fire safety restrictions, in fact, should be reduced to improve the health of the construction and property development industries. One speaker even claimed that fires in many Asian countries were less common than in Australia and that this demonstrated the need for further deregulation.

Euro Terraces Building B residents reoccupied the building early this month and have still not been given

any official explanation for the fire in the fifth floor apartment. Nor do they know what fire compliance orders were issued by the Bankstown City Council, either before or after the fire, and whether all these have been implemented. The cost of any installation of sprinklers and other fire safety measures would have to be borne by the owner occupiers.



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