

Fire safety problems in Australia's tallest apartment block

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ABC Radio National's "Background Briefing" revealed last Sunday that Q1, an 80-storey \$260 million apartment block on Queensland's Gold Coast, has fire safety problems. Completed in 2005, Q1 has 527 apartments and over 1,000 residents. It is Australia's tallest building and one of the highest residential blocks in the world.

The weekly current affairs show reported that Q1's northern fire escape stairwell is unsafe and could quickly fill with smoke, endangering hundreds of people if the building were hit by a major fire.

The revelations are another indication that the private certification of buildings and other measures deregulating Australia's multi-billion dollar property and construction industry have led to serious fire safety dangers in recently built apartments.

The program began by referring to the September 6 apartment fire in Bankstown's Euro Terraces, which killed Chinese student Connie Zhang, seriously injured her friend Yinuo Jiang, and forced the evacuation of hundreds of residents. It noted that a roof built over a central atrium in the 10-level block in the Sydney suburb had trapped smoke from the blaze, filling the building with dense smoke. Residents had to be rescued by emergency service personnel, with scores treated for smoke inhalation.

Both Q1 and Euro Terraces were signed off by private certifiers as safe for occupancy and endorsed by the respective city councils where they are located.

Stephen Goddard, chairman of the Owners Corporation Network, a peak body representing strata

title owners, told "Background Briefing": "We have always assumed that we lived in a safe society, that we had a building code that would be delivered to us and we would be protected. The reality is—and it has been the case for ten years now—that we are building buildings that have significant threats to life safety."

According to a recent survey of strata title owners by the University of New South Wales' Centre for the Built Environment, 85 percent of apartment owners in NSW report serious defects in their buildings, with 15 percent of these complaints involving a lack of, or defective, fire safety measures. Examples of residents spending years in largely fruitless attempts to force construction companies to rectify sub-standard buildings, poor design and fire safety problems are commonplace.

The unsafe conditions in the Q1 building were discovered by Laddie Assey soon after the building was certified in 2005. Assey, a mechanical engineer and apartment owner in the Gold Coast tower, has been trying to have the problem rectified for the past seven years.

Assey told "Background Briefing" that the building's northern fire stairs did not conform to stair pressurisation standards because residents had to walk through a garbage room to reach the fire escape. Stair pressurisation, a basic safety requirement, prevents smoke getting into fire escapes, thus allowing residents to safely evacuate buildings in the event of fire.

Assey, who has extensive experience in commissioning high-rise buildings and large shopping centres in the Middle East and Australia, lobbied the

builders and the tower's strata management for three years to rectify the problem, which was part of the original design accepted by the building certifier.

Assey eventually made an official complaint to the Queensland Building Services Authority (QBSA). As he explained in an email quoted by "Background Briefing": "smoke will enter into the stair at the rate of 1.7 metres per second, killing anyone on the way down from any floor by asphyxiation in the time taken to walk down the 76 levels to the ground floor." These concerns fell on deaf ears.

The construction company responded to Assey's complaints by claiming that the issue was strata management's responsibility. Assey complained to QBSA, which ultimately hired consultants to inspect the building. The consultant's report admitted that the north stairwell "does not comply" with Australian fire safety standards. The construction company was directed to fix the problem. Nothing was done, however, for more than a year.

The construction company then commissioned a report from another consultant, which claimed there was a low risk to safety and proposed the removal of garbage bins. Another proposal suggested the addition of a small hole in the fire escape doors.

These so-called solutions were rejected by Assey and, seven years on, the fire escape problem remains at a stalemate.

"Background Briefing" obtained a copy of the second consultant's report, which stated that its fire scenario modelling indicated "low risk." The report admitted, however, that if there were a serious fire at Q1, "evacuation of the building could not confidently be predicted by quantitative analysis." In other words, there was no guarantee that occupants of Australia's tallest apartment block could be safely evacuated if a major blaze erupted.

On Monday, Bankstown City Council announced a "conditional go-ahead for the staged reoccupation" of Euro Terraces Building B, the scene of the September 6 fire disaster. A press release declared that council

officers had inspected the building and were "satisfied sufficient work, including the removal of the roof over the atrium as recommended by Fire and Rescue NSW, has been completed."

The press release said construction work to resolve future drainage problems caused by removal of the atrium roof would continue and these options would be discussed by residents with strata management and building insurers.

While the Bankstown City Council is thus now reassuring Euro Terrace residents that they can safely return to their homes in coming weeks, the atrium roof was only one of the reported safety issues. The press release made no reference to the false fire alarms that had plagued the building before the September 6 fire or other vital safety concerns.

There have still been no official statements from the local, state or federal governments or emergency service authorities on what caused the intense fire and why it engulfed the fifth floor apartment so rapidly. Nor are there any plans to install sprinkler systems inside the apartment block because it is not legally required under the Australian building code.

The construction industry and its allies in the local, state and federal governments are seeking to brush aside the issues highlighted by the Bankstown blaze. Revelations about the sub-standard fire escapes in Queensland's Q1 building further expose the subordination of ordinary people's basic social right to safe and affordable housing to the private profit interests of the corporate elite.



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