

# Australia: Lacrosse apartment residents speak out over Grenfell Tower disaster

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Since last month's Grenfell Tower inferno in London, Australian authorities have issued a flurry of announcements and claims of concern about the dangers of a similar disaster in Australia. Various audits and investigations have been promised into the use of flammable aluminium cladding.

While fire safety and engineering bodies have warned that the cladding is rife in the Australian construction industry, only a handful of buildings covered with the material have been identified officially since the Grenfell Tower fire.

The real attitude of Australian federal and state governments is indicated by their failure to conduct investigations into the use of combustible cladding since the near-fatal Lacrosse apartment block fire in Melbourne's Docklands area in November 2014. Nor has action been taken against any builder or property developer using this material in violation of building codes.

The fire in the 23-storey Lacrosse building began on a balcony at about 2 a.m. and rapidly spread up the outside of the building, reaching the top floor within 11 minutes. The building was covered in the same type of cladding used on the Grenfell Tower.

Over 400 occupants were evacuated from the sprinkler-fitted building while more than 120 firefighters fought to extinguish the blaze. No-one was killed or injured, but many residents were left homeless for weeks as investigations and repairs occurred. Almost three years after the blaze, the apartments are still occupied and the dangerous cladding remains in place, with no deadline for replacement until July 2018.

Eight months after the Lacrosse fire the federal government established a Senate committee to report on the use of flammable cladding and other non-conforming products in the building industry.

Two years later, the Senate investigation still has not issued any findings, and the deadline for its recommendations has been extended several times. According to the *Fifth Estate* web site, the committee is not expected to hand down its findings until next year.

The Victorian government recently announced a bipartisan taskforce to investigate flammable cladding. It will be headed by former Labor deputy premier John Thwaites and ex-Liberal Party premier Ted Baillieu. Both presided over the development of the Docklands area and building deregulation that enabled non-compliance to flourish.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited the Lacrosse building and spoke with residents. A notice posted in the apartment lift said the Melbourne City Council Municipal Building Surveyor had "requested that a Management Plan be implemented to reflect the heightened risk of fire."

The "Plan" includes a ban on using balconies for storage, barbecuing and smoking. It warns residents that if any smoke from their kitchens sets off smoke detectors in the corridors they may be liable for the cost of a fire brigade callout.

In other words, while the Lacrosse developer, Victorian government and Melbourne City Council have not replaced the flammable cladding that caught fire, residents are being held responsible for any future fires.

One of the almost 300 apartments was advertised for rent and open for inspection. At \$450 per week, the flat was tiny. It had two small bedrooms, one of which had no window. The lack of space explains why residents utilised balconies for storage at the time of the 2014 fire.

**Francesco**, originally from Italy, works in the hotel industry and moved into the Lacrosse building early

this year. “The developer here cut corners,” he said. “They made a good profit using cheap materials and now it’s dangerous for us but no-one is fixing it.

“I was totally shocked when I saw Grenfell. I didn’t know a building could burn that fast. Now I realise how important it is to have proper fire controls. Most of the people living in this building have no idea of the risk. Many are students and many don’t speak English very well.”

Commenting on the overcrowded conditions, he added: “I wouldn’t be surprised if you find eight people living in an apartment here. It’s expensive, especially for students. It’s the only way they can afford to stay in the city.

“The developer is responsible. They used an illegal material that was much cheaper than what they should have used. Then there is the person who is supposed to control what happened ... The apartment owners are not responsible. They are not the experts in materials. They shouldn’t pay for this.”

**William**, a postgraduate electronics student, moved into the Lacrosse building this year. In 2011 he lived in London and had friends who lived on the 12th floor of Grenfell Tower before shifting to another government housing estate in 2015.

William said there was a false fire alarm in the Lacrosse building at midnight a few months ago but he was asleep and found it hard to hear it. “If it had happened like this in London I would have died. We need to know whether the alarms and facilities are reliable.”

William said those responsible for the Grenfell disaster, including the mayor, should be charged.

An IT worker, who wished to remain anonymous, was living in the Lacrosse building during the 2014 fire. She said her three-year-old son had been traumatised.

“When I heard about London I was very upset for a week,” she said. “I had tears in my eyes for them because we had been through the same sort of experience here.

“Why has nothing been done in this building? Is it safe inside? Is it just the balconies? We have been told to not keep things on the balconies but we don’t know how safe we are.

“The London authorities should have taken example from this building. If they already knew about it, they

should definitely have done something about it. They’re just money-making and they have paid with the lives of people.”

**Lucy**, a health worker, has lived at Lacrosse for three months. For those who died in London, she said, it must have been like “being in a cooking pot. They were trapped. The worst thing was the authorities told them to stay put. In my view when there is a fire or smoke they should make a move and use the emergency staircase, not tell the residents to wait.”

Lucy continued: “My sister is an architect and I know how it works. Sometimes when people get into business they think about money and money. The safety of the humans is not a priority for them; it’s about money.”

Speaking about the London disaster, she said: “They wanted to make something look beautiful. From the outside it looked nice but how about the construction? Whether the residents were rich or poor it doesn’t matter. They are not professionals. The engineers or architects who built the building they are the ones who are more knowledgeable.”

**Eric** moved into Lacrosse after the 2014 fire. “When I moved in I hadn’t heard of the incident but one of my colleagues told me about it,” he said. “I heard that this building used exactly the same material as Grenfell and that scared me a bit.

“Grenfell is a human disaster. They did that purely for the enjoyment of the rich people living around and that’s definitely not the right thing to do. I work as an accountant in the building industry. Although I don’t have much to do with materials or the engineering side of the work, I know it’s cost-driven. It’s the same everywhere in the world.”



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