

# Building Code turns 25

This year marks 25 years since the New Zealand Building Code came into effect.

**BEFORE THE** early 1930s, many New Zealand councils had their own building bylaws, although some had no requirements at all. Often adjacent councils had different rules, causing difficulties for architects, builders and material suppliers. While some local issues were considered, the bylaws were often based on overseas experience - notably Britain.

## **Changes after Napier earthquake**

The 1931 Napier earthquake changed everything. Overnight, it became evident that construction methods that worked well half a world away and had locally for some years were unsuitable for use in the Shaky Isles. The poor performance of heavy unreinforced masonry that was widespread around the country but had caused significant loss of life in Napier was cause for particular concern.

The country clearly required some form of building standard. In 1935, NZSS 95 *Standard Model Building Bylaw* provided a uniform but prescriptive basis for local bylaws. It was followed in 1964 by NZSS 1900, but local changes still led to unnecessary difficulties.

It was an easily enforced cookbook-style of building control, but many believed it stifled innovation and the use of new materials. Nevertheless, the system remained in place until the early 1990s.

## **1992 saw performance-based building controls introduced**

The Building Act 1991 was a remarkable departure from the old way of doing things. Not only did it merge many of

the existing Acts and regulations, it introduced the concept of performance-based building controls. At the centre of this sea change were the Building Regulations 1992, in particular, Schedule 1 - the New Zealand Building Code.

The Building Code marked the beginning of a new way of thinking about quality for the building industry. The old, prescriptive guidance was gone. In its place was a new set of minimum performance requirements that all new buildings had to meet.

Local authorities became the day-to-day administrators of the new system, taking responsibility for ensuring that all building work in their jurisdiction met or exceeded the new performance requirements. For a period, the owner could choose to use a private building certifier to check technical proposals and perform inspections.

## **Guides helped to overcome confusion**

In the absence of practical guidance explaining how to build, the change caused some confusion. A series of guides explaining performance-based building controls and how to implement the Building Code went some way towards helping the industry embrace the new system.

Over the last two and a half decades, the Building Act and the New Zealand Building Code Acceptable Solutions and Verification Methods have been changed and updated many times. However, the Building Code, with its forward-thinking performance-based requirements and focus on occupant health and safety, remains in place to this day. ◀