LIVING WITH THE LEAKY BUILDING LEGACY

There’s plenty of work repairing leaky buildings, but these projects can be a mixed blessing for builders, as the costs involved can be hard for owners to accept.

By Phil Stewart, Technical and Engineering Writing, Auckland

The remediation of leaky buildings will be a significant part of the New Zealand building industry for decades to come. In many ways, it has created a mini-industry that involves thousands of building surveyors, builders, designers and lawyers.

So how well is this mini-industry coping with the multi-billion dollar fix-up? Looking at what happened, how it can be fixed and considering the views of industry practitioners illustrates the current state of play.

Some common problems

During the 1990s and 2000s, tens of thousands of New Zealand houses and commercial buildings were built that did not properly address the weather tightness of the structure.

One claimed major issue is the use of monolithic direct-fix cladding systems. These provide limited or no drainage or drying ability between the external wall and the framing, and the joints between cladding sheets, windows or doors are susceptible to water ingress.

Buildings also included details that increased the exposure of walls to water (no eaves) and used details that relied on sealant rather than flashings.

Approximately 42,000 houses and apartments, 150 schools and over 100 commercial buildings were affected, with the total repair cost estimated at more than $12 billion.

Training upskilling industry in remediation

Training courses are being run and technical guidelines are available in recognition of the challenge leaky home remediation presents to the construction industry.

The New Zealand Institute of Building Surveyors, for example, has been running a weather tightness training modular course to upskill building surveyors specifically for leaky building assessment. In the last 6 years, approximately 200 building surveyors from across the country have completed this course.

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment – Building and Housing Group also runs 1-day workshops on leaky home repairs for builders and provides a suite of guideline manuals on weather tight design and construction that can be downloaded for free.

The nature of repair

Repair options basically come down to two types – targeted repair and recladding.

- Targeted repair involves replacing individual areas or elements, such as saturated beams, or leaky window frames. Often, the cost of targeted repairs can escalate once an individual element is stripped back and the damage is assessed.
- Recladding is more extensive and involves removing and rebuilding complete exterior sections and often the entire exterior cladding of a structure. Although expensive, a full reclad is often the only way to ensure a home is made weather tight.

Experiences from the frontline

Some practitioners have been fixing leaky buildings for years and have views on what works and what doesn’t. A building surveyor, a builder and an advisory service provider share what they’ve learnt.

THE BUILDING SURVEYOR

Steve Alexander runs building surveying company Alexander and Co, which has been managing the repair of leaky apartments, commercial buildings and large houses for the last 12 years. He believes that targeted repair is almost always inadequate, and once a building is found to be leaky, the entire exterior inevitably has to be made right.

Steve feels that many building owners and homeowners do not appreciate the scale of work needed. ‘Many people think that reclads are a Rolls Royce type of repair that is beyond what is necessary. It is hard to get them to see that, in almost all cases, even the minimum work to get a building repaired is a big – and expensive – job.

‘You need to remember that the building was built inadequately in the first place; you have to put back something that was better than originally there. Most work is actually the minimum necessary. It’s just expensive.’

Alexander and Co concentrates on commercial repairs and spends a lot of time upfront working with legal teams. It only works on larger and more expensive homes where the owners can afford to do the repairs properly. Steve
Leaky buildings a 50-year issue

Steve Alexander sees leaky buildings as a 50-year issue, partly because of the slow litigation process and also because of the sheer challenge of getting different parties to agree on the best solution for each individual structure. ‘There is a career in leaky buildings – some builders might work on it all their lives. The key to solving the problem is better education levels across the industry in terms of fixing damaged buildings and also in new construction.’

Warren Rhynd has considered pulling out from leaky home repair work, given how draining it can be for his team. However, he acknowledges that it is going to be a source of business for a long time yet. He says his teams are getting efficient at the process and that dialogue with council regarding consents and compliances has improved greatly in the last 6 years.

Everyone seems to agree that education and training in the building industry is essential so that builders and building surveyors can properly identify the full extent of damage and then the best way to address repair. While the original buildings were built the wrong way, the repair work needs to be done right first time.

‘Many homeowners cannot afford a reclad or a proper repair, and they may be attracted to the lower cost fix that these builders offer. Minor targeted repairs will be quickly performed without building consent, and the building might look perfectly repaired in the eyes of the homeowner. However, a few years down the track, the same failures are going to emerge.’

John also raises concerns about liability for the work. ‘If a building is patched up and then sold and then starts leaking again 2 years later, the builder can be tracked. Often, these small-scale builders don’t have the financial means to survive legal action. They’ll go out of business, which will leave the house still in a leaky state, and no one will be able to produce the money to get it properly repaired. This kind of quick-fix action could result in leaky homes staying unrepaired for decades.’

He supports building surveyors taking control of projects and directing what needs to be done. He believes this helps ensure a proper fix, but he also believes the scale and cost of work will always surprise building owners, who often struggle to understand why remediation costs so much.

Advisory Service Provider

John Gray is the president of HOBANZ, the Home Owners and Buyers Association of New Zealand. HOBANZ provides independent guidance and support for homeowners, including owners of leaky single dwellings or multi-unit complexes.

He says that education for builders and the public is essential to prevent builders from doing low-cost and deficient remedial work. ‘There is a growing group of non-LBP builders specialising in simple repair and maintenance work who turn to leaky home repairs as an extra source of income.'