

Balcony Collapses—Prevention and Protection

The recent balcony collapse in Lane Cove that injured 12 youngsters is a critical reminder to everyone to ensure their decks and balconies are safe enough to hold large gatherings. While this incident was highly alarming, luckily no-one was critically injured.

These worrying cases are becoming more and more common and the risks increase as winter abates and people head outdoors to enjoy the warmer weather. Another factor contributing to an expected spike in balcony collapses is the trend for more people to incorporate balconies and decks into home designs as a way of adopting the 'alfresco' lifestyle.

So the time for due diligence in checking these structures is now! Figures published by the Building Commission estimate that as many as 40% of properties have an elevated deck or balcony. While most of these are built and maintained correctly, many are not and sadly the price paid is often very high for the injured individuals.

The challenge to home owners and Owners Corporations (when responsible for a balcony or a deck) is to find out which ones present a safety hazard before a collapse occurs.

Here are some tips to help ensure you are not exposed:

1. Check documentation—buyers should ask to see evidence of building approval before purchasing a property as decks can easily be built without the statutory checks and balances.
2. Check Timber—have timber decks checked for rot and rust as timber or metal fixing failure can trigger a collapse.
3. Check Concrete—have concrete balconies checked for cracking or flaking as water may penetrate here and corrode steel reinforcing particularly in coastal areas.
4. Be Wary of Loads—Large, well-watered pot plants can accelerate timber deterioration whilst a gaggle of guests grouped for a photo in one corner of a deck can bring a party to an abrupt end.

As well as the trauma of a collapse and the injuries, there is the cost to repair damage and even the possibility of legal action as claims are taken out against the owner or Owners Corporation so make sure your decks are checked.

Water Damage

Apartment owners across Australia face repair bills of tens of thousands of dollars or more in repairs because of faulty workmanship, poor design or poor quality materials in relation to water leaks.

Water leaks are one of the biggest issues facing the ongoing boom of apartment building as major cities consolidate with high rise buildings and suburban areas undergoing revitalization with increased apartment developments.

As one common example, balconies constructed above another unit only need one leak caused by a poor sealing job or a broken tile or a blocked drainage point to cause substantial damage to an adjoining property.

The replacement of defective tiling on a number of apartment balconies as the balcony waterproofing had failed and water leaks were being experienced.

Recent inspected balconies in an apartment block with over 100 balconies, nearly all of which had a similar leak impacting on the apartments below. Intrusive inspections of selected balconies revealed waterproofing problems leaving the property owners with substantial repair bills.

With the drought broken and rainfall increasing, the level of complaints and costly issues facing apartment owners over leaks have increased.

Water has a number of ways of impacting on apartments including:

- Poor sealing of balconies.
- Lack of roof maintenance.
- Lack of maintenance of windows.
- Deterioration of tanking for below ground car parks and basements.

Electrical Safety—What you need to know

It's an alarming statistic—about 1/3 of homes have some kind of electrical fault. This is usually one of 3 things:

1. An original meter box without safety switches (required for all new homes and recommended for old ones).
2. A dodgy power point or two (incorrectly wired, loose or damaged).
3. Home wiring (electrical wiring has to be done by a licensed electrician).

If you're arranging work on a property make sure the electrician is licensed and make sure they are going to provide a Certificate of Electrical Safety on completion. If the answer is "no" to either of these questions find someone else!

Certificate of Electrical Safety must be issued for either Prescribed electrical work (up to the meter) which must be inspected or for Non-Prescribed electrical work (within the home) which may be inspected. The COES will be either \$5 or \$20 depending on which sort of work it is.

There are two critical areas relating to electricity safety:

1. Proper installation of new or replacement electrical appliances.
2. Correct maintenance and use of existing appliances by following manufacturers instructions.

It is recommended that an electrical home safety inspection of a property is done at least every two years. When was the last time one of your properties underwent an electrical safety check?