

Assessing Buildings Constructed Post 1990 for Asbestos

“This building was constructed in 1992. Do I really need to have it assessed for asbestos-containing materials?” Many property managers find themselves asking this question, and surprisingly, the answer is usually “yes”.

There is much confusion in the property management industry as to whether an asbestos assessment is required for more recently constructed buildings. This is mainly due to the manufacture of asbestos-containing building materials being phased out across Australia in the mid-1980s. Despite this large-scale shift away from the manufacture of asbestos-containing building materials, asbestos products can still be found in many newer buildings.

National and state legislation requires that a controller of a building should firstly, identify whether asbestos is present in their buildings and secondly, implement control measures to prevent building occupants and other persons from being exposed to airborne asbestos fibre. There are numerous reasons why asbestos products can still be found in newer buildings.

Some of these reasons are listed below:

- There was no legislated mandate to dispose of surplus asbestos products during the late 1980s. This resulted in asbestos products remaining stockpiled with wholesalers and retailers for a number of years after the mid-1980s. The products were eventually used in building construction after the mid-1980s.
- The use of friction based asbestos products in plant equipment was not banned in Australia until 2004. These friction products can still be found in

newer buildings within lift motor rooms, engines and other plant equipment. These products include brake pads and clutch plates.

- Special purpose plant and building fixtures that were constructed prior to the mid-1980s are often found in newer buildings. This is particularly true in laboratory and workshop settings with such items as workbenches, autoclaves, ovens, stockpiled brake pads, gaskets and other equipment containing asbestos components within them.
- Another case where asbestos products are present in newer buildings is where structures and foundations of an older building are retained and incorporated into the construction of a newer building. This might have been done to reduce the cost of constructing the newer building. The existence of these older building structures might not be immediately apparent to the building manager but can present an asbestos related risk during refurbishment or building services works.
- Lastly, there are special cases where asbestos products have been unwittingly imported into Australia. Such materials include decorative tiles and sandwich board panels.



Asbestos-containing decorative stack-stone wall tiles

Auditing of older buildings for asbestos products requires a sometimes costly and methodical visual inspection and sampling program. While buildings constructed after 1990 do not require the same level of investigation needed for older buildings, some investigative work needs to be conducted to assist the building manager with meeting their occupational health and safety responsibilities.

With the exception of Queensland, authorities in each state have moved away from specifying dates of construction after which an asbestos audit is not required. This is because of the increasingly common occurrence of buildings found with asbestos materials which were constructed post 1990. Queensland's Workplace Health and Safety Regulations 2008 remain the only state statute which specifies a cut-off date of 1990 after which an asbestos audit is not mandatory.

It is expected that as asbestos regulations move towards national harmonisation all states will remove cut-off dates and it will remain the builder owner/controller's responsibility to undertake an assessment whether asbestos containing materials may be present.

Prensa recommends that while an audit may be unnecessary for some newer buildings, a statement confirming what information/ observations were considered when making the assessment should be documented.

For more information or assistance with the assessment of post-1990 buildings, please call David Hood on (03) 9508 0100 or Derrick Scott on (02) 9033 8634.

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