

Fire & Durability Performance – Insurers and Mortgage Lenders Will Limit the Scope for Lightweight Prefabrication

by Brian Ó Murchú

Views of British Insurers on fire and durability of lightweight modular homes, shared by the Irish Insurance Industry

Although storms and flooding in Ireland are on a lesser scale than those experienced recently in the Mexican Gulf, scenes of devastation caused by hurricane Katrina to New Orleans and parts of Mississippi and Texas will do little to calm the fears of Irish insurers and mortgage lenders in relation to fire, wind and durability issues concerning lightweight framed housing. The recent tragedy highlights the susceptibility of lightweight homes to damage and raises questions in relation to the durability of Ireland's future housing stock.

A recent article in Ireland's Off-site Construction magazine highlighted the growing concern of insurers and mortgage lenders in relation to fire and durability performance aspects of lightweight modular buildings. The article entitled 'UK Insurers could kill off modular market' said that 'despite the current push for off-site manufacture in the UK, it looks like prefabricated homes may not be a solution to the UK's housing shortage if mortgage lenders' views are anything to go by.

The article reported that a prominent developer in the U.K. had experienced 'severe scepticism' from mortgage lenders regarding modular homes. This comment refers to modular homes constructed using lightweight timber and steel frames. The article went on to report that a spokesman for the Association of British Insurers has upheld concerns regarding the long-term durability of these (i.e. lightweight modular) buildings against fire, wind and flood.

In an article entitled 'Insurers raise prefab fire alarm' the UK Architect's Journal (AJ) reported that the British insurance industry is increasingly fearful about the risk of fire resulting from the current trend towards the use of prefabrication. The article alerted readers to the fact that the Association of British Insurers (ABI) had warned its members that off-site manufacture methods,



increasingly used for low-cost housing, are often more of a fire hazard than other construction methods. The ABI also expressed concern that the cost of repairing such construction after fire 'can be significant'. 'The social and economic costs of major fires in such constructions will be enormous', an ABI spokesman said. 'The cost of repair can be significant, particularly where the structure has to be disassembled in order to slot in a replacement module. Our concern about modular housing is over its resistance to perils. Modular buildings are of various fire-resistant quality. Adequate consideration needs to be given to the techniques used to provide significant levels of resistance'. The spokesman added that the association was worried that fires in lightweight affordable housing, especially those developments funded in the social sector, could put a strain on the public purse.

Irish Insurance Industry Skeptical about lightweight framed housing

Speaking at the Fire Safety Conference on 30th June 2005 in the Radisson hotel, Stillorgan Dublin, Mike Byrne, senior

insurance assessor with Allianz insurance, opened his presentation by stating that if the insurance industry had its way that all buildings would be constructed in concrete, because of the inherent durability and fire resistance of that form of construction. Referring to lightweight steel frame construction, Mr. Byrne expressed deep reservations as to its insurability in the housing context. In relation to lightweight timber frame housing, Mr. Byrne said that although timber frame did not have the same level of fire resistance as concrete, his company Allianz did offer insurance cover for timber framed housing. In private discussion after his presentation, Mr. Byrne confirmed that Allianz did not offer insurance cover for timber frame apartment blocks above two stories in height.

The reluctance of one of the country's leading property insurers to offer cover for multi-storey timber frame offers credence to the position put forward by the Irish Concrete Federation that Multi-Storey timber frame buildings pose an unacceptable fire risk and should not be permitted under the building regulations.