



## From the Editor

### Changes to Part B - Fraught with Danger

## Proposed changes to the Building & Fire Regulations

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*Murphy's Law*, first formulated during an air crash investigation, states that 'if an accident can happen it will happen'. This law applies equally to building construction and is just as valid when expressed as its inverse - 'If an accident can't happen it won't happen'. This could arguably describe the fire performance of masonry construction in multi-storey buildings such as apartments. Concrete is incombustible and its performance in fire is such that nearly all of the dangers associated with the use of combustible materials - simply can't happen. Notably, masonry structures do not add to the fire load, do not produce fumes, and retain their geometry/structural stability in the event of fire.

The reverse is true of multi-storey timber framed structures. They are combustible, add considerably to the fire load, will burn at a far higher temperature, produce more fumes, are extremely difficult to extinguish and the structure can re-ignite from within the cavity when the fire has been put out. Holes formed for electrical & lighting installation can add considerably to the fire risk. Most significantly, multi-storey timber framed structures can lose their geometry/structural stability in fire relatively quickly.

The proposals of the Timber Frame Consortium to make major changes to part B of the Building & Fire regulations to make way for 4 storey timber frame dwellings and the parallel proposal to introduce timber staircases in apartment buildings are proposals to lower fire standards. It is not clear who will shoulder the responsibility for the additional risk and of course 'if it can happen it will happen' - sometime, somewhere there will be loss of life as a result of lowering fire standards. To the families and relatives of those who lose their lives or are injured, this will not have been an 'acceptable risk'.

At national level we are currently introducing a wide range of legislation to reduce risk in the workplace, on the roads, in sporting venues etc - and rightly so! To replace incombustible structural materials such as masonry, with highly combustible materials such as timber, is to knowingly and wittingly introduce a risk into public life where previously no risk existed. Were such a change to be implemented, it would be contrary to public safety policy, particularly when totally safe options are available to the consumer at no additional cost. This additional risk is not in the best interest of the consumer. As guardian of the public interest, the DoEHLG have a responsibility to protect consumer interests. Professionals & professional bodies such as the IEI & RIAI have a legal responsibility to the consumer & a moral responsibility to protect the interest & well being of clients.

The proposals of the Timber Frame Housing 2002 Consortium to relax the Building & Fire Regulations would expose unsuspecting house buyers to a risk they hadn't bargained for. Apart from the moral issues - this is hardly fair to customers who are paying some of the highest prices in Europe for property.

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