

Standards play a significant role in building design and construction. There are over 100 standards referenced in the Building Code of Australia, Volume 1, alone. Additional standards are referenced in Volume 2. Most of these standards have been prepared by Standards Australia. These standards, by virtue of their reference in the BCA, become a part of Australia's building regulations framework. There is no doubt that these standards play a highly valuable role as a technical resource, as well as setting benchmarks of acceptability.

Two significant aspects of Australian Standards warrant attention in my view:

1. Cost. It would be a beneficial exercise for the Commission to calculate the purchase cost of the standards referenced in the BCA. It will no doubt be thousands of dollars, for the directly referenced documents alone. (In addition, there are secondary references – those standards not directly referenced by the BCA, but referenced in the standards that are referenced in the BCA).

The cost of purchase of these documents is a heavy burden on small design and construction practices. As a result, many do not carry copies of the standards that are a vital part of the regulatory framework within which we operate. In my experience, small firms of both designers and builders often do not carry current copies of standards, or may not even carry any copy of a particular standard. (This does not necessarily mean that they are working to a lesser standard. In many cases, work to obsolete standards is effectively work to superior standards). The cost of keeping up to date with a plethora of standards, that are in turn updated on a regular cycle (and therefore theoretically need to be re-purchased) is a heavy financial burden on small and medium businesses in design or construction. It is a burden that significantly erodes the profitability of such businesses.

2. The ethical framework. Standards are written by committees. Committee members are often volunteers, who donate their time and the travel costs of attending meetings, to produce documents that will benefit users of those industries in which they operate. Standards Australia has in the past been a not-for-profit organization, and theoretically still is.

Once a standard is published, however, it is the prerogative of a publicly listed company, SAI Global, to market and sell the document. SAI Global, being a public company, has obligations to its shareholders to maximize profit. There is an inherent conflict between these two arms of the standards producing system in Australia. This conflict has not gone unnoticed by volunteers on standards writing committees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is an argument for more government subsidy to Standards Australia, to lessen its reliance on income from sales, and to at least reimburse out of pocket expenses to committee volunteers. An increased government subsidy, to a field which consists largely of supporting the regulatory framework, would enable the purchase costs of standards to be reduced, and facilitate their wider use.

2. There is similarly an argument for less frequent revisions of standards, so that users are not compelled to pay for a new copy of a document that is largely unchanged from the previous version. Perhaps a system where only those pages that are changed are revised, (ie a loose-leaf format), would be more equitable.

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