

-  DAILY NEWS
-  SECTORS
-  POST ARTICLE
-  SEARCH
- CORPORATE

Engineering

What's it Like to Be Trapped in a Burning Building?'

by David Cox July 19th, 2017

 26,434 Total Views



I woke at about 1 a.m. after hearing sounds of fire engines nearby and the muffled sounds of people in the corridor outside my unit. I was not woken by a fire alarm, because it either did not work or had not been activated.

I thought "this could be serious and I should leave the building quickly."

Instinctively, I put on a pair shoes and non-nylon clothes consisting of a pair of cotton track suit pants and a woolen suit coat and hurried out of the unit. I was surprised to walk into a smoke filled corridor filled with a group of panic stricken people.

I then noted one of the first of three things that will be indelibly etched in my memory. It was the 'click' of the door to my unit which automatically closed behind me. I had left the unit without taking my key and I was soon to learn that everyone else in the corridor had done the same thing!

I experienced these events whilst living in a recently constructed apartment building in East Perth in 2009. There are many lessons to be learnt from this event.

Although there were only about eight people in the corridor, I found it difficult to communicate because most could not speak English and most were hysterical. To calm the tension, I confidently beckoned the group to follow me to the fire escape.

I then discovered my second unforgettable instant. When I entered the southern side fire escape, I was shocked to learn it was filled with dense smoke! Not the pleasant smell of smoke from an open campfire but the vile smell of burning plastic.

I recall starting to panic a little but tried not to show it by reassuring the group that there was a second fire escape and beckoned them to follow me to the same.

It was there that I uncounted my third unforgettable instant. I entered the fire escape to find that it also was filled with dense smoke and was worse than the first escape.

What I had discovered is something the others in the group probably already knew. We were trapped in a burning building and that is why they were hysterical.

The next 20 minutes or so were spent to no avail knocking on all the doors to the units on this level. We were trying to get fresh air and escape the smoky corridor.

We tried kicking one of the doors in but couldn't do so. I knew the doors would be fire doors in steel frames and attempting to kick them in would only result in injury without opening the door. We looked for implements to assist and only found the PVC capped end of a fire house reel, which was useless. The other fire cabinet was locked. In summary, there was nothing we could use as an implement to try to open one of the doors.

We were fast running out of time and needed to have a plan of escape.

I talked to a lady who spoke English. She had come from an upper level some time before and noted that the situation was just as bad above our level. It was therefore no use going up. We were on the fourth floor and the only possibility I




Express Two Storey Living
Perth, WA



TECBEAM® JOISTS
The premium lightweight floor solution

TECBUILD SYSTEMS






RELATED COVERAGE

-  **Understanding Smoke Control in Buildings**
-  **How Commercial Buildings Could Generate Their Own Energy**
-  **Overhaul of Standard Will Unleash Masonry Design Opportunities**

Smart System. Exsulite®



LATEST NEWS

-  **Australia Must Build Heat Resistant Homes**
-  **Property Industry Confidence Plummet to Five Year Lows**
-  **Landscape Architecture Makes Strides in Gender Equity**
-  **Building Approvals Plummet to Five Year Low**
-  **WA's Planning System Must be Cleaned Up**

[View All →](#)

could think of was to make a run going down the stairs. The concept was that it may just be possible that the fire was on the floor below us. If that was so, then it was likely that there would be no smoke in the staircase below that level and that I could breathe fresh air and escape from the building and get help.

It wasn't much of a plan but I could not think of anything better. After trying to explain the plan to the others I then held my breath and ran down the stairs. I remember being very surprised by how little distance I covered before running out of breath. I only reached a bit past the level below and noticed that the smoke was still very dense. About then I must have involuntarily tried to gasp for air because my lungs instantly ached. It was a sensation similar to swallowing water in a swimming pool. I felt sick and panicked with the realization I may not get back to where I came from. It was a desperate climb. It sounds rather silly now because it was only one level, but at the time the stairs seemed never ending.

It was about then that it dawned on me that this might be the end. We were not going to last too long in this smoky corridor without oxygen and there was a fire below us which was obviously coming up the building to where we were. And the smoke was obviously going to kill us before the fire.

The group at this stage was totally disorientated and were simply running up and down the corridor in a panic using up what precious oxygen we had. There was no plan as we had run out of options.

Lessons learnt at this point? Strangely during this encounter, I seemed to be gauging my own reactions to the situation as it developed as if I were testing a behavioral studies experiment. In doing so, the patterns of behavior we learnt in architectural school were validated! The fear of venturing into areas away from the original path of entry, the tendency to follow familiar routes without logical basis and the gradual loss of cognitive thinking in this type of situation all happened!

Academically, this was all very interesting but unfortunately it did not allay my fears for our safety nor come up with any ideas that might get us out of this mess!



by David Cox

[G+](#) [Twitter](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Facebook](#) [StumbleUpon](#) [Pinterest](#) [Reddit](#) [Email](#)

David is a widely experienced architect who has worked on major projects in the private and pub... [View Profile](#)

COMMENTS

[+Add Comment](#)

[JOIN THE CONVERSION](#)

Don't:

- Use sexist, classist, racist or homophobic language
- Libel or defame
- Bully, threaten, name-call or troll
- Troll patrol, instead, downvote, or flag suspect activity
- Attempt to guess other commenters' real-life identities

Do:

- Verify facts, debunk rumours
- Add context and background
- Spot types and logical fallacies
- Highlight reporting blind spots
- Ignore trolls respect and curiosity
- Treat all with respect and curiosity
- Stay on topic
- Connect with each other



DAVID COX
23/07/ 2017

Thank you Geblues. You are quite correct. I need to explain more. I will try to do this. The lessons learnt were more than could be summarized in a single article. Appreciate your comment. David

[Report](#)



DAVID COX
23/07/ 2017

Charles, thank you for your comments. I think you have good reason to be concerned about your situation. Maintaining security as well as safe fire exit often produces conflict and quite often security often prevails. This is a common problem unfortunately and is largely due to a lack of understanding by the security staff or managers of the premises. It was also an issue in the case referred to above. In your case uninterrupted fire access should not require persons to activate the access for obvious reasons. (those persons may not be there!). I suggest you are quite correct in bringing the matter to

[Continue Reading](#)

[Report](#)



Geblues
20/07/ 2017

David, now you've left us all hanging! What happened? You've obviously lived to tell the tale, but where is the ending?

[Report](#)



Charles Litho
20/07/ 2017

Thank you David for this article. A year ago visiting a Government office, and running late I took the lift even though my meeting was only on the third level. Finished the meeting went



SETTINGS

a A

back to the lift pressed the buttons over and over again, waited ten minutes and nothing happened. I went looking for the fire escape to find it locked. I could not understand why a fires escape door was not opening. I started pushing and then I panicked and started kicking the door. After a few minutes a

[Continue Reading](#)

  Report



DAILY NEWS

Industry News Alerts

Daily coverage you can't afford to miss

[Subscribe](#)



SECTORS



POST ARTICLE



SEARCH

CORPORATE



SETTINGS

a A