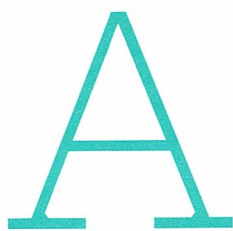


# Hidden hazard

Despite the best efforts of surveyors many buildings will still contain asbestos. **Paul Phillips** explains how to deal with any encountered unexpectedly during refurbishment projects



ny maintenance or planned works will need to have asbestos surveys carried out prior to any potential disturbance.

While many of

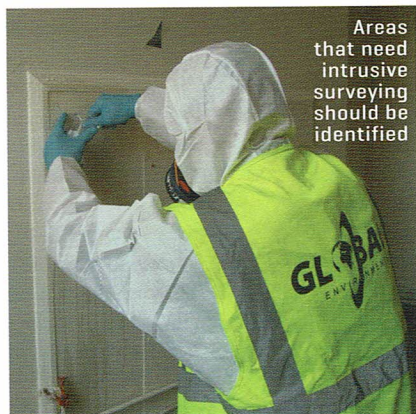
the obvious asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) have been removed from buildings over the past 30 years, it is estimated that 2.4m homes and as many as 75% of commercial, industrial and municipal properties still contain some, most of which are hidden in the fabric of these buildings.

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), asbestos accounts for more than 4,000 deaths each year in the UK – a figure expected to go on rising for at least the next 10 years. Asbestos is therefore a key health and safety issue for building surveyors to manage throughout a building's lifecycle.

## Inadequate information

As many as one in 10 building projects involving properties built before 2000 encounter significant quantities of unanticipated ACMs. There can be several reasons for this, but it tends to be due to inadequate asbestos information.

A common misconception is that a management asbestos survey is sufficient to inform maintenance or refurbishment.



Areas that need intrusive surveying should be identified

However, such surveys typically only assess surface materials, and if the works are likely to involve disturbing the building fabric then hidden asbestos not identified on the report may be encountered.

Some ACMs are located beyond the reach of even an intrusive refurbishment and demolition survey, which assesses all areas associated with the works. For instance, the removal of asbestos insulating board (AIB) often reveals another layer behind it, contaminated debris in the void or even redundant pipework lagged with asbestos insulation.

The additional costs of remediating such situations may well be overshadowed by the inevitable delays to programme and the disruption to the project team, other contractors and the building's occupants. By the time the asbestos consultant visits the site, samples the material and verifies that it contains asbestos, you may have already lost three or four days.

You then need to contact your licensed asbestos removal contractor, who will visit the site to assess the work and give a quote; in turn, you may have to get the additional spend authorised then place an order with the contractor.

If the material is deemed licensable – that is, it is AIB, sprayed coatings or pipe lagging – the contractor must inform the HSE, and a 14-day interval must be observed before a start date can be agreed. If we suppose three or four days are needed for set-up and removal before the analyst can issue a certificate of reoccupation, you have probably lost three or four weeks on your programme – and this is the best-case scenario, assuming consultants and contractors are already procured and available at short notice.

## Asbestos survey

So how can you mitigate this eventuality?

First, make sure you appoint a reliable, competent organisation to carry out the refurbishment and demolition

asbestos survey. Although it is not mandatory, UK Accreditation Service assessment against ISO 17020 is a good benchmark for an asbestos consultancy. Make evidence of such accreditation mandatory, and obtain evidence that the consultancy has experience of working on the type of buildings involved.

Also, give the consultancy as much background information as you can about the building and project to let it plan the survey accordingly and match its methodology to the works involved. If you have a scope or specification for the building works, pass this to the consultancy so it can accurately target areas for intrusive survey. For complex works, you might consider providing the building's plans so it can also locate service ducts, voids and risers where much ACM is likely to have been placed.

You may also consider commissioning an asbestos specification before you procure any removal works. Prepared by an independent consultant – possibly your survey company – this will provide a forensic interpretation of the inventory of ACMs in the surveyor's report, which will have recorded the findings but not necessarily assessed the implications.

The specification should be prepared in consultation with stakeholders such as the facilities management team, building contractor or wider design team, so it accounts for the locations, methodology and extent of planned activity.

The specification can then be used in the procurement of a licensed contractor and remove the uncertainty that can lead to unforeseen or unquoted work arising later in the project.

This will require some investment, perhaps costing a few days' work to compile and complete, but such a forensic approach could reduce removal costs by as much as 30% and provide the detailed analysis that should prevent any nasty surprises from occurring. ●



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