

COMMERCIAL REALITIES PART 1 - RESPONSIBILITY

Prefabricated timber roof trusses and frames have traditionally been used in the area of housing construction but they are also regularly supplied for structures other than Class 1 buildings.

These other projects are generically termed "commercial jobs" and the trend towards using timber structures in commercial construction has grown in recent times.

Housing (Class 1) buildings are required to be constructed by suitably trained and qualified builders who hold a licence to carry out such works.

Although he may rely on manufacturers' certificates and inspectors or private certifiers checking on design and installation compliance, the builder still takes the ultimate responsibility for the structural performance of the house that he has built.

On the other hand, commercial buildings are not usually constructed by "hands on" builders but instead are co-ordinated or managed by professional project managers/engineers, who in turn, sub-contract various aspects of the job.

They then collate certification from all designers, suppliers and installers responsible for their part of the work.

The tender documents for commercial work are often more detailed and complex than for houses.

In making the distinction between housing and commercial jobs, it's important not to incorrectly assume a classification - the BCA classes apply to building usage rather than building type - the same type of structure (of shape, size and materials) could be used as a house (Class 1) or multi-residence (Class 2 or 3) or commercial office (class 5, 6 or 9).

This distinction often causes

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confusion for a frame and truss supplier. The normally accepted paperwork provided to a builder is not necessarily acceptable to a project engineer on a commercial job.

An engineer's signed certification of the framing design, and in some cases installation is often demanded instead.

For some fabricators, the realisation is not made until progress payment is sought.

The requirement for certification is



often written into the contract documents but has been missed by those not familiar with the system.

It cannot be assumed that this part of the "spec" will be effectively communicated to fabricators tendering for this work, especially when they may be second or third down the line of sub-contractors, receiving only a limited selection of drawings at the outset.

Always read the fine print - just as it is unwise to quote a job without reading the specs fully, so it should go without saying that signing a contract without reading it is very risky indeed!

The installers of frames and trusses

on a commercial project may not be familiar with timber frame construction.

Nor, usually, are the project engineers, so they often insist the installation gets a final sign-off.

The certifiers engaged for residential structures are often not qualified to work on commercial jobs.

In the commercial sector, certification from professional engineers is often insisted upon. If this is a requirement of the project - ensure that it is priced into your quote.

Your nailplate supplier should be your first port of call for engineering support of this nature, and it is advisable to involve them early on in the process; their experience over many commercial jobs will be of great value.

In addition, commercial contracts often contain liquidated damage clauses that may hold a supplier financially responsible for project delays.

These clauses are not always reasonable and may not even recognise wet weather as an unavoidable delay.

Always be sure to read a contract carefully, and do not sign it if you are not comfortable with all clauses specified.

There are many sound financial reasons to enter into commercial projects.

They often contain repetitive work that suits prefabrication well, the competition is not always as fierce due to the lower numbers of capable or willing suppliers, and profitability is regularly better than a similar volume of residential work.

Take advantage of these benefits by all means but be careful - an uneducated approach may bring financial damage rather than the expected benefits.