City blaze sparks furore over materials

PICTURES: MATTHEW SMITH, HOLLIE ADAMS

Flames surround the exterior of the Counsel’s Chambers building in Macquarie Street, Sydney, yesterday morning.

A dramatic fire in Sydney’s central business district rapidly spread through highly flammable and widely used construction materials yesterday morning, sparking concerns over the prevalence of the material.

Twenty people were evacuated and one was taken to hospital to receive treatment for smoke inhalation as about 70 firefighters fought to bring the blaze under control.

Several construction workers were on the building when the fire started.

Flames shot up the building through black mesh covering the scaffolding yesterday just before 8am.

Fire & Rescue NSW Commissioner Paul Baxter said the mesh was highly flammable and widely used. “That’s (the mesh) a highly flammable material. It’s a kind of nylon material which is used quite commonly, unfortunately, to stop debris from falling down in construction spaces,” he said.

The fire was contained before it could reach the internal structure of the building, which is on Macquarie Street next to the NSW Supreme Court and across the road from state parliament.

A CFMEU spokesman said the mesh was imported from China and was misleadingly sold as flame-retardant. “Obviously there’s grave concerns with this product … a lot of these products are being sold to builders as fire-retardant or fire-resistant,” he said. “It’s quite the contrary with this product. The most minor spark or flame not only causes it to light up but it actually ignites.”

A SafeWork NSW spokesman said companies must comply with all work and safety laws, including the use of the mesh on construction sites. “SafeWork would consider the use of mesh in the context of whether construction companies are complying with their work health and safety obligations.”

The 13-storey building is owned by mediation service Counsel’s Chambers and houses Lockhart Chambers and a number of legal offices.

The building had cladding removed last Friday because of concerns sparked by the deadly Grenfell Tower blaze in London last year.

Mr Baxter said it would have been a “dramatically different set of circumstances” if the cladding were still in place, and said the building’s owners had set an example by removing the flammable building material.

Wayne Quirk, who has owned a snack kiosk on Macquarie Street for 12 years, said the fire spread rapidly. “We only saw a little flame up on the awning here and all of a sudden it all went. It just went really quickly,” he said.

The fire was extinguished by 8.30am.

An investigation into the cause of the fire is under way.

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**OHS ALERT**

**DYNAMESH DANGER**

Shade cloth does a great job, however we need to make sure it complies with all Australian Standards after the dramatic fire in Sydney recently.

This wasn’t the first serious incident involving this particular product, which is Dynamesh.

Make sure whatever shade cloth you have on your scaffolds is independently tested for combustibility.

Safety is union business. Stand up. Speak out. Come home.