

Publication Date: 20 November 2019  
YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 157. Fires, defects and short term lets: a building manager's perspective

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**Intro:** Welcome to Your Strata Property. The podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source. To access previous episodes and useful strata tips, go to [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au).

**Amanda Farmer:** Hello and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer, and this is Your Strata Property. Chris Sargeant is the building manager of Whitehorse Towers, Melbourne's tallest residential complex outside of the central CBD. With 514 apartments, 100 hotel rooms, 3 restaurants, and a handful of small commercial tenancies, Whitehorse is a major landmark in Box Hill. Chris' background is primarily in building, constructions and real estate. However, the last 4 years have seen him transition into facility building management. He now describes himself as being in his sweet spot and is living the dream. Outside of his role, Chris is a happily married father of 4 amazing young adults and is working towards competing his first Ironman in late 2020. Today, I am delighted to welcome Chris Sargeant. Welcome, Chris.

**Chris Sargeant:** Thank you, Amanda. It's been a delight to prepare for this. I'm thrilled to be here. I've used your resources just without shame, and it's been fantastic your generosity and how you've put all these resources out there for all of us that are working in a strata community. And so I just want to say, from the outset, thank you. It's just been a godsend, so thanks. And if I can help some of your listeners today with some insights from what it's like to be a building manager, happy to do so.

**Amanda Farmer:** Absolutely. Well, thank you. I'm very glad that you are part of our tribe, our Your Strata Property tribe, and it's wonderful to have you here with us today. And that is indeed what we are talking about, building management. What is it all about? What are the great building managers doing? You have had some very interesting experiences as a building manager, which we're going to get into, but I'm going to start by asking you, Chris, give us one misconception that strata residents have about building managers and can you clear up that misconception for us?

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes. It's a pretty simple one. Building managers look after common areas only. We don't look after what happens inside the apartment. So, if your oven's on the blink, it's not in our scope to come in and do that. Now, we can point people in the right direction, but generally, our role is to manage and take care of the common areas. A lot of my inquiries are about, "Can you come and fix my air conditioner?" Or, "My window wind is broken," and so there's a lot of internal requests that come my way.

**Amanda Farmer:** Is there ever confusion about that? I know, in my experience, sometimes it's not clear where the line is between what is part of the common property and the responsibility of the building and what is part of the lot and the responsibility of the owner. Have you found, in your experience, sometimes that's a tricky question or where you are at the moment at Whitehorse Towers, is that pretty straightforward?

**Chris Sargeant:** No, look, sometimes it just needs explaining to people. There are some people that are moving into strata for the first time. And an example might be the fire doors. So, we have the front face of their apartment door that needs to be inspected. It's classified as common property. And how can you come in then to my apartment to examine it? So, there's that kind of sort of gray area, but I think, by and by, as you explain it to people and that it's for their benefit and for their safety, they're usually okay with you doing those kind of things.

In the OC meetings when we have the general ones, a lot of questions do come up about if there's multiple OCs in the strata development, who's paying for what? And so, you can really give your residents clear guidance on boundaries and responsibilities at that point.

**Amanda Farmer:** You've just hit on something really key there, Chris, and that's about explaining to residents, whether it's in the context of them ringing you with a problem or you're sitting there in a meeting, explaining where the responsibilities lie. And if they're new to strata, this is not something they've experienced before, that can be really complicated, and it may not be intuitive. But having those open lines of communication, it is something I talk about, I feel, constantly on the podcast how important and helpful good communication is. And it's interesting to hear, from the building manager's perspective, that is just as important as it is

**Publication Date: 20 November 2019**  
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from a strata manager's perspective or a committee being able to answer those questions clearly and accurately for owners.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes. One of the great things, Amanda, with a new building, and I was very excited to be offered this role, was to set up from the ground up. Now this is probably a little bit late coming in 4 months after it opened up, but the implementation of the building management software and that has a community portal focused to it. And so there's the ability for the building manager to put all the documents pertaining to the building in that portal for the resident to then look at. So, all manuals for everything that's ever installed in their apartment, including the warranties and plan of subdivision; everything's in there for the person to have a look and see, well, I paid. This is the doc I'm looking for.

So it saves me a lot of time too and it just means that the information is there for everyone. It's a great thing.

**Amanda Farmer:** Excellent. Got to love technology when we can be achieving things like that.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes. That's it.

**Amanda Farmer:** Now tell us Chris, you've been in the job for a few years now. What do you say is the difference between a great building manager and a building manager who's just, okay?

**Chris Sargeant:** I would dare to say that the way the building manager personally presents themselves in their dress and grooming. It's almost, we set the minimum standard, as far as if we're presenting ourselves poorly, well, I try to think oh, he doesn't care. But if we're ordered, we present neat and tidy, hair combed, maybe a little bit of product then I think that reflects on everyone; from your cleaners to your contractors, to your residents that you care about yourself and their building.

I think a good building manager is willing to listen and to be wrong. It's not always right being wrong, but it's important to be and to admit when you are wrong. As a relative newcomer to facility management, I've been wrong on more than one occasion and caused a few problems. But the good thing is that I've come clean, I've admitted my mistakes and I've worked to fix those areas; and my OC committees have responded to that. So, I think that that's a good trait to have and being flexible. I've been helping a guy who's just moved into his first BM role and I describe being a building manager is being a mixture of sheriff, mayor and counselor.

In fact, I was going to ask you though, cue up The Good, The Bad and The Ugly music. Because it's a little bit like that because you have the rules and regulations which you've got to police, people are expecting you to do that and it's not always easy to do that. There's sensitivities, you have cultural sensitivities and you get, these are people's lives, this is people's homes, so you get all the issues that are associated with that. And so sometimes you just need to be a counselor and listen. I think good building managers somehow manage to keep all those moving parts moving and it's a challenging role, but it's very rewarding.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, indeed. And you've given us some great tips for building managers, for aspiring building managers and also for committees and for owners who are looking for a building manager. What to look for and who it's going to be. Who's going to make your life easier? Because the way I see it, as an owner, that's really what ... What I want from a building manager to do those things that I can't do or that I shouldn't be doing or that just won't get done unless somebody else does them and to make my experience of apartment living much smoother and much more enjoyable. So, I think all of those things would definitely lead to that result if you have that excellent building manager in place.

Now, Chris, I know that you were the building manager at Lacrosse apartments when the fire happened. Now, if you don't mind sharing a bit about that experience, particularly what you learned as a building manager in that unique situation.

**Chris Sargeant:** Well, it was my first foray into residential building management.

**Amanda Farmer:** Wow.

**Publication Date: 20 November 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 157. Fires, defects and short term lets: a building manager's perspective**

**Chris Sargeant:** And yes, it was an experience. It was very traumatic seeing people that you see on a regular daily basis have their lives just turned upside down. The thing that struck me most about the fire was how much damage water does. It was just breathtaking. The amount of damage that the water caused to the whole facility. What was completely, and many building managers and many strata owners will, we all have issues with cigarette butts. Just recently, I think I listened to one of your podcasts on smoking, stopping smoking in your buildings. And I think employing some of those suggestions within it.

But at Lacrosse, which the fire was caused by cigarette butt, 2 weeks preceding the fire, we put notices in the lift with a picture of an inferno saying, "Don't throw your butts out the window." You sort of spent an hour every week just cleaning butts off the rooftop. And sure enough, there it was and so it was pretty horrifying, horrendous. But if there was an upside, Amanda, it was that no one got injured, no one got hurt. We had people that required assistance on level 8, get out with no trouble. So, as far as having all the procedures and policies and practices under everyone's belt, it worked as it was supposed to. But it was an accident that could have been avoided but all these extra, the VBA and other people to make big calls on that.

**Amanda Farmer:** And have you found that you have taken any of the learnings, the experience that you had dealing with that emergency into your next role and the role that you're in now with Whitehorse towers? Is there anything in terms of communications or preparation for disaster or managing that emergency situation that you feel like you're using now in your role?

**Chris Sargeant:** I'm far more vigilant on cigarette butts and smoking. And I take any complaints of smoking or cigarette butts very seriously and seek to address that same day just because it does concern me. Now our cladding here's great, certified. So, the risk of fire is very low. But nevertheless, if you are living out in a balcony, it's reasonable to expect that you're not going to be tubbed in a hail of ash and cigarette butts.

**Amanda Farmer:** Sure.

**Chris Sargeant:** So, I think people need to change some of their habits. So, we have a lot of Airbnbs here as well. And so, it's educating them as well, as they come in about disposing off their butts appropriately. Other things I guess is, I guess communicating to the other team here about what can happen and how to respond in the case of an emergency. So we have drills here. We have a lot of hotel staff with our cleaners and the hotel staff as well. We have the restaurants. So, just being able to communicate to them firsthand experience. And it seems to resonate with them that, I'm not kidding here. These are serious things and we need to move calmly and coolly out and let the fire people do their job; and they do a fantastic job too.

**Amanda Farmer:** Now you've mentioned there Chris, Airbnb and it is a large development there. You've got hotels. I'm not sure whether the Airbnb is happening in the apartments on a service department basis or how that works. But from your perspective as a building manager, what's the difference when it comes to dealing with those shorter term tenants and they're coming in, they're turning over quickly. They may not necessarily know how to use the facilities, what all the rules are. How do you manage them differently to, for example, the owner, occupier, who's bought in, is going to live there for the foreseeable future; what are the issues that crop up with these short term Airbnb stays?

**Chris Sargeant:** Swipe keys is probably the biggest issue and parking. I push a lot back onto the agent representing the Airbnb. Now, I suppose we probably should refer to them as short stay rental agreements and those are providers. So I push back to them a bit because it's not all just Airbnb. And it was their responsibility to educate their guest as to the appropriate way to enter the building, exit the building and what those requirements are. I do charge, if they lose their swipe, I'll charge them for a new one. Sometimes if they can provide no ID, they won't be getting back to wherever it was, they'll have to contact their agent.\*

We get, some guests will treat the hotel front desk as their own Airbnb front desk.

**Amanda Farmer:** Oh, they're confused.

**Chris Sargeant:** And so they'll go there, "Hey, I've got no towels, can you get some towels?" So yes, it gets a bit funny at times.

**Publication Date: 20 November 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 157. Fires, defects and short term lets: a building manager's perspective**

The hotel are being [inaudible 00:15:16] about it. But it's a challenge.

**Amanda Farmer:** Now I know Chris, that you've also worked with buildings and I'm not sure if Whitehorse is still in this situation, but buildings who are in the middle of a defects liability period. So, these are brand new builds, builder is done and as part of the building contract there is a period at the end where the builder comes back and fixes defects and problems; big, small, usually small. The big ones tend to get ignored. Can you explain to us what is a defects liability period? From your perspective as a building manager, what role do you play during that period?

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes, it's a good question. It's funny, the builder thinks the building's done, but it isn't done. We've been very fortunate here, the builder, Maxcon has been very attentive to all defects that have been put to them. The defect liability period runs 12 months from when the occupancy permit was issued. I think it's 3 months prior to the liability period coming to an end, we engaged the building surveyor back to do a complete audit on the building. And we were given a list of areas that needed attending to.

And so we just chipped away at those things and have got ourselves in a position where all the defects have been attended to or are in the process still of being attended to. But certainly it can be challenging at times. It can be, well it's not my job or it's that tradesperson. But I feel for the builder at times if one of their tradespersons has let them down. But at the end of the day, the OC are entitled to have things functioning as they ought and be in good working order. And if it's not, then it needs to be made good. So, yes.

**Amanda Farmer:** Now in a development with 514 apartments, how do you coordinate residents who need to give access to their apartments for the builder to come back and have a look to inspect reported defects? And I imagine that you would have residents who maybe haven't been available to open up their apartment and may complain later, "Well I had a problem but nobody came to look at it." Or, "I had a problem but I didn't realise it until after." How do you deal with that on the ground? Because, that's something that I see clients struggling with, strata managers struggling with, just coordinating that whole process. And in such a huge development, I imagine that's a big job.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes, it's a huge job and it's almost outside the scope of a building manager's role. But as I said, one of the things with being a good or great building manager is that willingness to be flexible to go out and do those things that are necessary. And it's not going to be forever and so it's, just creates goodwill, it creates a community. So, by and large I've assisted the builder with coordinating with either the tenants. Now we have a, of my 514 apartments, I would say maybe 400 of them at least. I have an occupancy here of 95% Chinese; Box Hill was a very Chinese orientated community so we have the language issues as well. So, I have used my leasing team at times to communicate to the residents.

And so we just organise it up, we line our jobs up and if the resident is unable to give access to the tradesperson then we usually seek permission so that we can create access for them. So we use the master keys and that seems to work well. Because you've got to value that tradesperson's time as well. If there's some toilet issues on one, there might be toilet issues on 10. So, let's line them up, so it's a cost effective way of repairing things.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. And there's a real practical benefit there of having a building manager in place that you can leave your keys or the master key can be used to permit access for trades at any time. Whether it's in a defects liability period or whether there's a major works upgrade project going on or there is just a leak coming from one to the other. Having somebody on site who you know, who you trust, you're not having to leave things with a neighbour who you might not be comfortable with or stay home from work. Having a building manager like you there, Chris, that's a big bonus I think.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes, well a classic example, just recently a couple of our residents, they went overseas, over to England and left their windows open on the 28th floor. And the window arms aren't designed to sustain 80 kilometre an hour winds.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes.

**Publication Date: 20 November 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 157. Fires, defects and short term lets: a building manager's perspective**

**Chris Sargeant:** And as a result, they broke and so I've got big sheets of glass awning flapping around and that was quite scary for the residents below and above, hearing this banging noise. So, having the keys and being able to access it and provide prompt response to shut the windows was really critical and I'm glad we had it.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. Lucky you were there.

**Chris Sargeant:** Indeed.

**Amanda Farmer:** All right. Chris, I know you are an avid listener to the podcast, so you will be ready for this question. What books have had the greatest impact on you and why?

**Chris Sargeant:** Well, I'm wondering whether I could just say something. What episodes of Your Strata Property have had the most effect on me?

**Amanda Farmer:** Hey. Love it. Love it.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes?

**Amanda Farmer:** Go for it.

**Chris Sargeant:** I'll go back to episode 91. 91 was a lawyer from Western Australia who said don't copy and paste the Court of Appeal victory.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. That was Mark Atkinson from WA talking about the Ceresa River Supreme Court case. They're on a short stay by-law.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes. Correct. And your discussion with Tim Graham in episode 36. Look, I just love listening to Tim because it boosts my vocabulary. I have to listen to him with a dictionary.

**Amanda Farmer:** We all do, don't worry. We get our dictionaries out when he emails us. So, that's Tim Graham who is a lawyer in Victoria and he's also the president of the Australian College of Strata Lawyers on episode 136 talking about the black case and discrimination in our buildings. Whether we need to upgrade our common property to deal with disabilities and if we don't, is that discriminatory? So yes, another one of my favorite episodes

**Chris Sargeant:** And 142, your question and answer from your, was it a meeting you had where you actually had it ... It was great. You really hit the nail on the head with some of the questions and answers; it was great.

**Amanda Farmer:** Thank you. I think that was my presentation for Veronica Morgan and her company Good Deeds.

**Chris Sargeant:** That's right.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes, very good. Look, my favourite book that I guess has helped turn my life around was A Fortunate Life by A.B Facey.

**Amanda Farmer:** Okay.

**Chris Sargeant:** That's a book that I think that should be read, mandatory reading. Almost a lifetime ago, I sold a lot of real estate and at one stage thanks to Neil Jenman, I've got into the top 10 in Australia. I think I've sold a lot of real estate. And apart from Neil

**Publication Date: 20 November 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 157. Fires, defects and short term lets: a building manager's perspective**

Jenman, I credit Brian Tracy's book, Maximum Achievement as being a guidance on how to really sell. And Psalms, Proverbs for spiritual growth. The Fast 800 from Dr. Michael Mosley and had been whittling away from the kilos. So far, 12 kilos in just I think over 6 weeks.

**Amanda Farmer:** That's awesome.

**Chris Sargeant:** So, Incredible Shrinking Man.

**Amanda Farmer:** Nice one.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes, and a shout out to Todd Herman and The Alter Ego Effect. Steven Kotler, The Rise of Superman working and achieving flow state and Grit by Angela Duckworth.

**Amanda Farmer:** Nice.

**Chris Sargeant:** So there's some books for your listeners, if they're scratching around for something to read, there's some great reads there.

**Amanda Farmer:** Love it. We will make sure that there are links to all of those in the show notes for this episode over at [yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://yourstrataproperty.com.au). That's excellent. Chris, you are a nicely rounded man now even though you are 12 kilos lighter. Well rounded, well educated and training for this Ironman for next year as well. Goodness, I think you told me off air you're up at 4:00 AM to be able to fit all that in.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes, I get up early, I get up early. Some days earlier than others but it's a commitment. My kids are now grown up, I have a little bit more time. So, time to rebuild me. So, this is what this year is. Michael Hyatt Best Year Yet, there's another book.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. Yes.

**Chris Sargeant:** So, yes.

**Amanda Farmer:** Good on you. All right, well let our listeners know how they find out more about you and if there's anything you'd like to add before we wrap up.

**Chris Sargeant:** Well, look it's just been fantastic, Amanda. You're one of my heroes. I think the way you go about presenting Your Strata Property and the podcast and the resources you make available. I know I've mentioned it before, but it's just a fantastic service you offer us all. And you do it all without an invoice. Not everything has to have an invoice attached to it and you do that. And so thanks.

If people want to hook up with me, I'm on LinkedIn and they can do that. Occasionally, I write articles there; one of my longer term goals to perhaps create a little bit more content like yourself. And building management, it's an important part, it's an evolving job, but it's also one of the most exciting places to work. To know that you're dealing with people and no 2 days are ever the same. Unless you've got major rubbish chute problems, but all in all it's a wonderful field to be working in. So, thanks for your time. Thanks for the invite.

**Amanda Farmer:** Thank you so much Chris. Thank you for sharing your very actionable practical tips and making sure that we are all very well aware of what makes an excellent building manager. And I wish you all the best for continuing in this crazy world that is strata title. I think anybody who's involved from any perspective, whether it's lawyers or strata managers or even committee members, building managers, we all have our way of saying, you know what, this is tough and it is fast moving and it is fast changing, but it is very interesting and it is very exciting. So, that's why I do what I do and look forward to seeing what the future

**Publication Date: 20 November 2019**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 157. Fires, defects and short term lets: a building manager's perspective**

holds for you.

**Chris Sargeant:** Yes. Okay. Well, come back into 12 months.

**Amanda Farmer:** Sounds good. Thanks Chris.

**Chris Sargeant:** Good night Amanda. Bye.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast which consistently delivers to property owners, reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes at [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au). You can also ask questions in the comments section, which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?

