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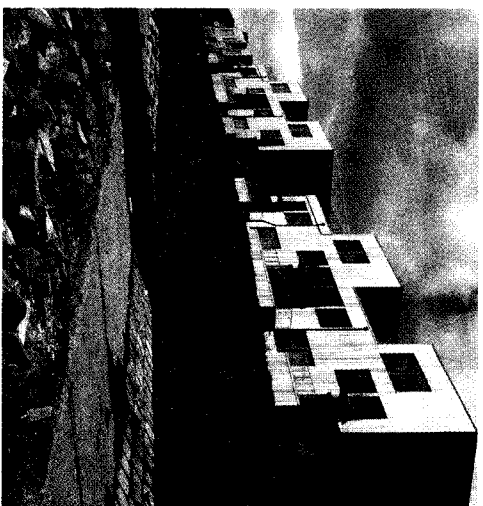
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The essential weekly for architects

Questions raised over eco-friendly material as Broadway Malyan apartment block burns for five hours

Fire hits timber-frame industry

Elaine Knutt & Ellen Bennett

A massive fire in north-west London, which ripped through a building in a matter of hours has raised grave questions about the use of timber-frame construction.

Building control officers said the timber-frame construction of Beaufort Park in Colindale, designed by Broadway Malyan for developer St George, would have contributed to the intensity of the blaze, and they were surprised to see it used in a building of this scale.

The burgeoning timber-frame industry has benefited from growing environmental aware-

ness and was gaining popularity as developers and architects realised the cost and time benefits it could bring. Just last week, supermarket giants Asda and Tesco announced they would be switching to timber frames for their mega stores (*News* July 14).

The fire raged through the block of flats last week on Wednesday afternoon and quickly spread to surrounding buildings. Up to 2,500 people were evacuated from the surrounding area and it took 100 firefighters five hours to put out the blaze. The Fire Brigade is investigating its cause, but refused to comment at this stage.



The blaze will reawaken safety fears.

The drama has echoes of a 1983 *World in Action* documentary, which decimated the industry with its allegations that timber-frame homes were more vulnerable to fire and wood rot.

The local building control department alleged that residents were due to move into the block that caught fire this week – even though it had not been completed and did not have a fire safety certificate or full building control approval. St George refused to comment on this.

London Borough of Barnet building control officer Andy James, who was dealing with the development, told *BD* he was shocked when the architects proposed timber-frame construction for a six-storey building. Under building regulations, timber frame can be used for buildings of up to eight storeys, but it is us-

ually associated with one or two storey dwellings because of the risk of progressive collapse.

"In the original meetings with the developer and the architect, we just could not believe they would be going for timber frame for such a big building," he said. "If you have concrete floor design and there's a fire, it's going to compartmentalise. If you have timber, it's going to burn right through."

"Something like this could be a huge setback," said Megan Yates, a director of structural engineer Techniker. "But on the positive side, it should be a wake-up call that there are ways of doing

things. If you are going to design with timber frame, you have got to understand the material you are using and detail properly."

Timber manufacturers defended the industry. "Every building material has its advantages and disadvantages," said Jonathan Stone, project sales director at Finnforest Merik. "Environmentally, using timber is absolutely the right thing."

A spokeswoman for St George said: "Until there has been a forensic review, no comment can be given on the cause of the fire. Before the fire report comes out we cannot speculate on what contributed to the fire."