

Strata Community Awards for Excellence 2026

Essay Award

Tiffany Wylder

Strata Is Sixty-Five. We Are Twenty-Seven.

Strata title had a birthday last month. The Conveyancing (Strata Titles) Act came into force on 1 July 1961, the first legislation of its kind anywhere in the world, and weeks later eighteen units in Burwood became the first strata-titled building on earth. In this country sixty-five is pension age.

Here is the question I've been sitting with since I came into this industry. If strata management were a person, how old would it be?

Twenty-seven. Not a teenager, because the competence is real. This industry knows the Act, handles other people's money, carries real liability and gets the technical work right to a standard most outsiders would find surprising. But it cannot explain what it does. Ask a strata manager to describe the job and watch them reach for the tasks, because the tasks are the only vocabulary available. It defines itself by what it isn't. Not a real estate agent, not a property manager.

Identity by negation is what you do before you've built one. There is nothing more twenty-seven than being excellent at your job and unable to say what you're worth. Which would be a tidy metaphor, except the law has already decided what the role has matured into. The 2015 Act was the eighteenth birthday, symbolic adulthood. The real thing arrived over the last eighteen months.

Everyone reading this has lived through the staged program under the 2025 amendments, so I won't recite it back. What matters is the sum: an \$8.4 million Fair Trading taskforce already fining agents and removing operators from the industry, committee volunteers to be trained, and legal commentary describing strata as the beginning of fiduciary-style accountability. That is a legal system deciding what a profession is. It has stopped treating us as contracted administrators.

Being new has one advantage. You notice things before you learn the words that let you stop noticing them. What I noticed first is that the intensity in the room rarely matches what is being discussed. Nobody's week should be ruined by a planter box. Nobody lies awake over a lift that will be fixed on Thursday. Demographics turn over and the unspoken culture of a building shifts with them. A scheme runs for years with one or two owners overseeing things, everyone content with that, and then a more engaged wave moves in with no route into the committee space that doesn't feel like a rupture.

Nobody behaves badly on purpose. The new owner has no way in, so frustration becomes the only channel available, and once they have used it they are treated as the problem rather than the person describing one. The long-standing owner hears a reasonable question as an accusation, because for years nobody needed to ask. Then add register. The way people talk to

each other, sets off something that has nothing to do with the building. In some ways all of it is true at once, and none of it about the by-law.

A scheme has contrary ways of receiving conflict: it can name a person, and once you apply 'difficult owner' or 'personality clash' the thinking stops: an arrangement with no way in becomes a defect in somebody's character. You cannot put "I don't feel included in decisions about the place I live" on an agenda. There is no section of the Act it falls under. So it arrives as a vote against a levy, a forensic interest in three years of financials, an objection to a contractor who did nothing wrong except get recommended by the wrong person. The grievance turns up dressed as a financial decision because that is the only language available.

Two things work against this and they look like opposites. One is making room for more understanding than the meeting strictly requires. The other is the harder. That a committee member's duty runs to the owners corporation rather than to individual owners, and that this is enforceable; it is one of the healthiest boundaries in the legislation, because it moves a fight out of the interpersonal and into a structure. Curiosity and firm boundaries do the same work from different ends. This is urgent because everything the profession uses to describe itself is the layer that automates first: Levy notices, minutes, arrears, compliance calendars, routine correspondence, and the documentation the reforms have just created.

If you have been trying to work out what the job actually is, it is the most clarifying thing that could happen to you. What remains is what we have never learned to name. Judgment about money across time horizons longer than anyone's ownership. The capacity to hold a room, which includes taking an owner's anger as information about their situation rather than a verdict on your competence.

In its first year, alongside the fines and the disqualifications, that taskforce delivered 1,440 mediation sessions. That is work nobody bills for, absorbed by a regulator because the profession has not claimed it. The bind is that you cannot charge what you cannot describe. So we charge for the administration and give the rest away. That is a twenty-seven-year-old's pricing problem about to become an existential one.

The ageing strata building stock will prove those two capacities are one. Telling an owners corporation what its ten-year plan really means when a third of the owners cannot fund it is not bookkeeping. It is a hard judgment delivered to frightened people, and how it is delivered decides whether the work gets funded or deferred five more years at twice the price. Financial and relational in the same breath.

Eighteen months in, I don't get to tell this industry what its job is. But I can say is this: at twenty-seven you either stop being defined by the tasks you are handed and start being defined by the judgment you exercise, or you spend your thirties wondering why nobody takes you seriously. The work that decides whether a building functions efficiently is the work we have never named, never charged for and barely taught. It is the only part of strata a machine cannot take. And we are sixty-five years into a strata profession that half this state will inhabit within a generation, still describing ourselves by the paperwork.

References:

Conveyancing (Strata Titles) Act 1961 (NSW); Strata Schemes Management Act 2015 (NSW); Strata Schemes Legislation Amendment Act 2025 (NSW); NSW Government ministerial release, Strata and Property Taskforce first year outcomes, 2026.