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RCH design blunders to prove costly

Nick Miller
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POOR design in the new \$1 billion Royal Children's Hospital is causing enormous construction problems, the project's director has admitted.

Anthony Lubofsky told an interstate conference last week that the hospital's builder, Bovis Lend Lease, was "tearing its hair out" trying to cope with design blunders.

The biggest mistake was to keep two buildings from the old hospital, Mr Lubofsky said. In a remarkable oversight, the retained part of an eight-storey building did not have lifts.

"(It's) way more trouble than it's worth ... it skews the whole master plan by keeping it," Mr Lubofsky said in an audio recording obtained by *The Age*.

"If I was doing the project again I would never keep it ... If you could avoid retaining these buildings, Jesus, I'd fight very, very hard now to avoid it," he said.

"Poor Bovis are pulling their hair out trying to deal with all of the logistical challenges which they're still getting across even now."

The buildings were kept because they were relatively new. But Mr Lubofsky said the decision to keep parts of the old hospital had not saved any money.

"It's not just me, all of the builders will tell you it costs as much to refurbish as it does to build; you're better off just building."

Mr Lubofsky said the finished hospital's floor area would be "probably about 15 per cent above what was in our reference project, which makes you wonder about whether our reference project was right".

Compared with original estimates, there would be about \$150 million in extra design and construction costs.

Mr Lubofsky also praised the project, saying it contained "exceptional architecture", and many "really brilliant" design elements, including the layout of wards.

The streamlined governance was commended. Mr Lubofsky said that big decisions had gone to a small cabinet subcommittee of the Premier, Treasurer and Health Minister, rather than needing full cabinet approval.

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He boasted of setting up a project board of government representatives, which had superior powers to the steering committee of stakeholders such as doctors, research groups and the hospital executive.

Mr Lubofsky said this was designed so the Government got its way on critical decisions.

"The reason ... is if we have to make the hard call on something, or something can't be agreed at steering committee level, and Government has a particular view on it, then we can get that decision made quickly within the project board."

About 90 per cent of decisions were made by the steering committee, he said.

Opposition health spokeswoman Helen Shardey said the news of design flaws was disappointing in a project of such cost and importance to Victoria. It came on top of claims last year that the new hospital would be too small to cater for Victoria's future needs.

"To now learn there have been serious mistakes adds to our concern about the Brumby Government's ability to manage major projects," she said.

"This is too important a project to be stuffed up."

A Government spokesman said: "The Brumby Government is committed to the \$1 billion Royal Children's Hospital development, which will provide state-of-the-art healthcare to Victorian children in what will be one of the world's best facilities."

The new RCH will open in 2011.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/rch-design-blunders-to-prove-costly-20090322-95oj.html>