

ARCHITECTURE

ALL IN FOR THE LYONS SHARE

The Lyons architectural practice takes an outward-looking approach to design and building. **Report: Kath Walters**

● Architecture is a highly structured profession, with long-standing conventions about how practices should operate. Melbourne firm Lyons defies those conventions. Its directors' determination to democratise the process of design underpins everything about its practice, from the layout of the office and the structure of its executive to discussing jobs with clients, developing a brief and putting up buildings.

"Architecture can be inward-looking," director Carey Lyons says. "We take the opposite approach and say we should be outward-looking. There are ways to make architecture far more connected with the community and local culture."

Lyons retains the trapping of conventional structure – it has five directors who own the company, including the three Lyons brothers, Carey, Corbett and Cameron, who founded it in 1996. They have appointed four principals and five associates and 75 or so architects work in its open-plan office in the heart of the CBD.

The conventions end there. In the office, design teams include staff from every level, not just directors and principals. In strategy, the executive team includes directors, principals and associates. There is no specialist team to deal with healthcare projects while another handles educational ones. "Every project is a design project," Lyons says. "The fact that it's a hospital is important, but we take the same approach and attitude to delivering high-quality design to [that] as to an office building."

The price of design democracy is high. Developing the brief and technical specifications for the Queensland Children's Hospital, led by principal Stefano Scalzo, took two years, more



A democratic workplace: Carey Lyons, left, and Stefano Scalzo foster a highly collaborative approach

than 600 meetings and as many as 20 Lyons staff at its peak. Initial meetings involved up to 70 people and included government representatives, clinical specialists and departmental heads, patient and family representatives and community organisations representing youth and children, among others.

Scalzo says the firm's intensely collaborative approach was a major reason he joined five years ago. "The thing that excites me is trying to make architecture that's not just about the client but a broader idea of Australian culture," he says.

The process proves itself in intelligent ideas. Scalzo says feedback from specialists in adolescent mental health lead to the QCH building's snoozaleums: places where children can rest between rounds of appointments that can take a whole day. Adolescent patients are also teamed up with a buddy because, in this cohort, company is as important to recovery as is infection control. The hospital's rooftops have gardens that patients and their families can visit.

Patients who cannot go outside, such as those with mental health problems, or who are receiving chemotherapy, can see the outside world.

Buildings for the health and education sector are a Lyons mainstay. The brothers founded the practice after a decade of working in other firms, driven by the idea of working more democratically. Corbett started first in 1994, working for clients in the health sector. Within a year of his brother joining, the firm had won a design award for RMIT University (which did not go past design stage) and a tender to redevelop Geelong Hospital and had engaged 20 staff.

Staff numbers rose during the global financial crisis with its rush of public money into university research facilities. In 2009-10, about 50 per cent of Lyons' \$13.5 million revenue came from education, 40 per cent from healthcare and 10 per cent from other work.

The rush is over, however. Revenue to June 2011 was stable. Uncertainty in the economy means commercial work is drying up, so the big practices are going after government-funded work, crunching margins for everyone.

However, last month Lyons won a tender to renovate Royal Hobart Hospital, a \$550 million project, giving it a foundation for the next two years.

Architects are fond of saying they are not interested in the business side of their profession and Carey Lyons is no exception. Five years of study and low wages for starters, then long hours, big construction risks and relatively low rewards (the average profit margin is 10 per cent, according to IBISWorld research) make it a tough game.

But the focus on design belies the business smarts that successful firms accrue. Lyons put a team of its best on the tender for the Royal Hobart Hospital, full time for six weeks. A firm that gets that kind of effort wrong too many times goes broke. Competitions, which usually attract an honorarium of about \$20,000 cost \$100,000 in real terms.

Lyons says the executive looks for clients that match the firm's culture. The leaders have learned to say no, not just to tenders and competitions but to contracts that don't match their goals. **BRW**



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Stefano Scalzo