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Quinn vows to block future work on Capitol

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SPRINGFIELD - Gov. Pat Quinn Tuesday compared the nearly finished west wing of the State Capitol to the "Palace of Versailles" and vowed to block future statehouse renovations after being angered by "excessive flourishes" such as newly installed copper-clad doors, sculptures and expensive chandeliers.

In an exclusive interview, the governor came out swinging at Capitol Architect J. Richard Alsop III for signing off on $670,000 copper-plated doors, $80,000 statues of maidens and 300-pound chandeliers that are part of the soon-to-open west wing of the Capitol - expenditures that have been the subjects of recent reporting by the Chicago Sun-Times.

With Illinois' $100 billion pension crisis unresolved, Quinn said those items don't represent the state's biggest financial priority and that any future historically aesthetic upgrades at the Capitol should be put on hold until "we get this architect under control."

"I thought the architect was excessive in what he was doing. We're not designing the Palace of Versailles," the governor said. "The architect, J. Richard Alsop III, has to understand we believe in doing things in a frugal, cost-efficient manner."

Quinn's comments came as he was getting hit by his 2014 primary rival, Bill Daley, for not blocking the historically accurate niceties - purchases Daley called "wasteful spending" - before they went in rather than reacting to them after they'd been purchased and installed.

The issue also percolated on the Republican side of the gubernatorial campaign with state Sen. Kirk Dillard (R-Hinsdale) and state Rep. Jil Tracy (R-Quincy), his running mate, filing resolutions in the Senate and House seeking a probe by Auditor General William Holland of the renovation work.

Work on the renovation is nearly complete as occupants forced out of the Capitol's west wing by nearly two years of construction are scheduled to begin returning to their offices this month. The focus then will shift toward renovating the historic building's north wing - a project one source said could cost up to $140 million.

Funds for that exist within a $250 million allotment that is part of a $31 billion capital program state lawmakers and Quinn approved in 2009.

However, design work and engineering for the Capitol's north wing hasn't begun, and no timetable for it yet exists.

Quinn Tuesday dispatched his budget director, Jerry Stermer, to inform Alsop's office that the governor intends to hold up funding for the north-wing renovation at the Statehouse "until there's a complete review and reform of how the architect is operating."

Alsop, who reports to a board controlled by the four legislative leaders, did not respond Tuesday to a Sun-Times email and phone message left at his Capitol office seeking comment on the governor's remarks.