Big development designed to lure Hollywood

BY TIM SHUFELT

A cluster of huge sound stages being built on a formerly contaminated site in the Port Lands will help revive the city's sluggish film industry, supporters say.

Mayor David Miller was at the site yesterday to unveil designs of the project's cornerstone - a dramatic $50-million office building designed by avant-garde architect Will Alsop, best known in these parts for his shoebox-on-stilts building at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

Construction of the new building, which will mainly comprise offices for production companies, will begin next spring and is scheduled to be completed the following year. The company spearheading the project, Filmcorp, is already building production stages, including a 45,000-square-foot megastage, the largest of its kind in Canada.

Mr. Miller said as co-chair of the Toronto Film Board, he was aware of a significant gap in Toronto's media production infrastructure.

"That meant we were losing the opportunity to do what I call 'export production' - big Hollywood blockbusters," he said. "That gap is being closed by Filmport and couldn't be more important to the success of our film industry."

Filmport president Ken Ferguson said that gap has been the main culprit in dragging down the local film industry, despite all the blame heaped on the rising dollar.

The Port Lands project, which will eventually offer one-stop studio services, is just the type of facility Hollywood studio executives look for, he said.

Filmport says over the next seven to 10 years, it will continue to devise new development plans for the site, which will ultimately house three million square feet of production space for film, music and digital media at a total cost of $700-million. The project is being supported by high-profile backers Paul Bronfman and Sam Reisman, and this week Filmcorp received a $28.5-million construction loan from GE Real Estate for the first phase.

While there is no taxpayer money going into the project, the 30-acre site is owned by the Toronto Economic Development Corp., an arm's-length city agency. The land was acquired from Imperial Oil. Like many brownfield sites, it was so badly polluted the company actually paid TEDCO to assume ownership and clean the soil.