Setting the stage for drama

Renowned architect unveils startling red design for Toronto's new lakeside Filmport

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Internationally renowned architect Will Alsop has designed what is being touted as an "iconic" landmark for Toronto's waterfront.

Mayor David Miller yesterday unveiled plans for phase two of Filmport, a state-of-the-art film studio complex at the Don Roadway and Commissioners St., just east of Cherry Beach.

It includes a curvy office building of glass and rusty-red steel that invokes a sense of the area's history as a port, created by Alsop in association with Quadrangle Architects Ltd.

Alsop is best known in Toronto as the creator of the flamboyant table-on-stilts addition to the Ontario College of Art and Design.

"I think maybe it says Toronto has grown up a little bit. We don't have to look elsewhere for excellence. We have excellence right here in our city," Miller told reporters yesterday.

"It's a little bit whimsical. It's excellent," he added. "I understand the steel is the same steel used in ships, so it relates to this environment here.

"We're on a shipping channel. It makes a real visual statement."

The 280,000-square-foot building -- which is expected to be ready by 2010 -- will house amenities such as commercial offices, post-production companies, union and guild offices, film schools, restaurants and shops.

"It's like the front wall to the film studios, the introduction to Filmport," Alsop explained, when reached by phone at his home in England.

"It will look beautiful."

The structure's curved form will envelop a public square and give "a sense of enclosure," Alsop said.

The Cor-Ten steel used in its construction will give it a rusty red colour.

"I wanted it to be made of that material because film studios are basically industrial sheds," Alsop explained.

"It's a very warm colour. That red against the skies will be phenomenal."

As for the irregular-shaped windows on the side of the building, Alsop joked that he has no explanation other than artistic liberty.

"It's just pure fun. There's nothing wrong with that. It's called architecture. It's not always very functional," he said.

Sam Reisman, the major financial backer behind Filmport, said he was thrilled to get Alsop on board.

"I just love him. This is an iconic building and we're making a statement."

Speculation that Alsop would design a floating cloud-like structure at Filmport was erroneous, Reisman said.

With seven large sound stages, including a 45,500-square-foot mega stage, Filmport will be the largest U.S. or Canadian studio complex outside Los Angeles.

Those sound stages are already under construction as phase 1 of Filmport and will be open for business at the end of next March.

Jeff Steiner, president of the Toronto Economic Development Corp., said blockbusters of the calibre of Titanic, Terminator 3, Spiderman and Superman could be produced here.

"They would love to come to Toronto to do those films but there haven't been enough purpose-built, large sound stages before," Steiner said.

TEDCO owns the site and is leasing it to Filmport.

FILMPORT FACTS

Phase one, which is now under construction, includes seven sound stages. One is a massive 45,000-sq.-ft. mega stage.

The first phase also includes more than 100,000-sq.-ft. of production offices and support facilities.

Filmport will be located on the site of an old Imperial Oil tank farm. The contaminated site had to be cleaned before construction could begin.

Filmport is expected to generate 6,000 person years of employment. When completed, it is expected to employ more than 2,000 production workers and 13,000 workers in media-related and other sectors.

The project is also expected to generate $170 million in taxes.

City plans to reduce services

plunged backward to where we were four years ago," Carroll said.

The cuts, following Mayor David Miller's direction, are expected to touch all city divisions. City hall officials, including Miller, have been mum about details.

"All I can tell you is that we're doing our best to deal with Toronto's fiscal situation in the way that causes the least amount of damage and that's within the city manager's authority to manage," Miller said.

The TTC has been directed to make $30 million in cuts, and has considered such drastic measures as mothballing the Sheppard subway line and eliminating more than 20 bus routes.

Toronto police, fire and ambulance have also been told to trim $10 million each. The police are still looking for savings, and the police services board is meeting today.

The library system has already announced it will cut $1.2 million by, among other things, eliminating Sunday hours at 16 branches and not purchasing 14,000 items.

Hoy's report, aimed at trimming the anticipated shortfall in the city's budget next year, isn't expected to call for eliminating entire services, but rather service reductions. For that reason, the changes won't require city council approval.

Miller said anything the city is not required by law to provide could come under the knife. Toronto is legally required to maintain certain staffing ratios in places like homes for the aged, shelters, child-care centres and welfare offices.

"I'm treating this really seriously," Miller said. "We've got to do what's right, and it's an impossible situation. (Hoy) knows that a third of our budget is provincially mandated programs and we have to deliver the way that the province tell us."