Film centre plans buoy hopes for Port Lands

ALSOPE-DESIGNED BUILDING

BY KELLY PATRICK

In Toronto's Port Lands yesterday, Mayor David Miller and the deep-pocketed brothers of Filmport stood on an old industrial site, where plans for a building they hope will bring life back to the north end of the waterfront.

The building is a 12-storey office tower, film studios and event space designed by Will Alsop, the renowned British architect who created Toronto's elevated, polka-dotted Ontario College of Art & Design.

Although Mr. Alsop's new building — which will be cherry red, with a façade of curved, cool steel and glass and an entrance that resembles a stalk — is not scheduled to open until 2010, it is another sign that things are finally happening in the Port Lands.

Besides the unveiling of Mr. Alsop's design, yesterday's event was another boost this month: Tonight, Cirque du Soleil begins its first run at the Port Lands, and on Aug. 3, a massive new Asian grocery store opens its doors right across Cherry Street from the Cirque du Soleil big top.

"There's a whole bunch of great things going on in the Port Lands and we're pretty happy about it," said Jeff Boeing, the president and chief executive of the Toronto Economic Development Corporation (TEDCO), which owns much of the land in the area.

Right now, the Port Lands are largely an industrial wasteland. Located east of the city's core and bounded roughly by Lake Shore Boulevard to the north, the Toronto Inner Harbour to the west, Ashbridges Bay to the east and Lake Ontario to the south, the 400-hectare site has been the subject of revitalization schemes for years.

Most recently, the area was touted as a possible home for the 2015 World Expo, but Toronto's bid fell apart before it could be submitted last year.

In preparing for the Expo bid, however, the city and TEDCO acquired the bulk of the land.

Owning the land has helped pave the way for Filmport, the project of which Mr. Alsop's new building will be a part.

When it is complete, Filmport, which is financed by powerful key stakeholders including Convent Corporation and the Rose Corporation, will be the largest complex of film studios, sound stages and post-production facilities in North America outside of Los Angeles.

Construction is already underway on the $380-million project. The first sound stages are expected to open next spring.

The Filmport plan was drawn up before the Canadian dollar began its dramatic climb toward parity with the U.S. greenback. The city has since had trouble attracting as many movie shoots as it did in the past.

That does not worry Filmport President Ken Ferguson, who said the quality and convenience of Filmport's planned facilities will attract blockbuster movie projects anyway.

"This studio is all about raising the bar, giving a much higher quality of product so that productions can come up here and do things more efficiently," he said.

Cirque du Soleil's decision to shift its Toronto run from its traditional home at Ontario Place to the Port Lands was largely pragmatic, said André Côté, Cirque's director of marketing for North America.

With the CN Tower taking place nearby, the old site left spectators trapped in traffic trying to get to the show.

The Port Lands had the space and the proximity to downtown for the new show, El Lago, which is scheduled to run until Oct. 2, but will likely be extended.

"I think we're bringing visibility to their location," Mr. Côté said of the move.

Later this month a massive Asian grocery store will open in the former Knob Hill Farms building.

Located at 223 Cherry Street, the new 44,000-square-foot T&T Supermarket will be the first downtown Toronto outlet for the British Columbia-based chain, which is known as the "Asian Loblaw's."

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL

A new Cirque du Soleil production is debuting in the Port Lands tonight, moved from its usual location at Ontario Place so as to avoid traffic problems.

DEVELOPMENT IN THE PORT LANDS

Designs for a new FILMPORT building by star British architect Will Alsop were unveiled yesterday. Tonight a new Cirque du Soleil show opens at the site and, across the street, the finishing touches are being put on a new Asian supermarket.