

DIGITAL ART

Watch this space

PETER GODDARD

You can find public art — or ‘advertainment’ — amid the razzle dazzle lighting up Toronto Life Square

Finding an A-list of Toronto’s new media artists involved with the Toronto Life Square project is a bit of welcome good news for the much-maligned development spearheaded by AMC, the theatre chain out of Kansas City.

Now the development on the north-east corner of Yonge and Dundas Sts. can point to all the award-winning artists it’s brought on board, including John Massey, Vera Frankel, Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak, John Oswald, Michael Snow, David Rokeby and Robert Fung.

But this is not unexpected news, exactly. Public art is a city-requirement for many real estate developments, although that usually means sculpture fixed in poured concrete.

(A minimum of one per cent of what’s called “gross construction costs” on the part of any developer is “recommended” by the city to go to the creation of public art.)

The real news is the degree to which digital art — such as Snow’s *Fridge*, a 60-second-long piece about the meaning of a minute — is integrated into the endless blitz of commercial messages lighting up the intersection of Yonge and Dundas Sts.

Computer programming mixes the art videos with the onslaught of familiar commercials on 30 major monitors inside the four-storey complex.

The same visual fusillade is found on the huge, 150 sq. m exterior screen looking southwest over Yonge St. high up on the site’s façade on the northeast corner. (There’s some additional 2,195 sq. m of plain old static commercial space affixed to the exterior of the building — as if this façade needed to look any funkier.)

“Our deal with the city is to run two minutes of art every hour,” says Tim Conway for developer PenEquity Management. “So we can use the art to bookend commercial messages. ‘Advertainment’ is the best way to describe the atmosphere here. We’re trying to make it amusing as well as commercial.”

So, even in these early days, we can see the fine line between artistic output and commercial content being further blurred here.

For instance, what will distinguish Toronto artist David Rokeby’s stylish renderings of video surveillance of the Yonge-Dundas intersection — his is the one art project not quite finished yet — with video caught by the building’s security’s surveillance cameras examining the very same heavily travelled area?

The \$500,000 PenEquity spent on digital art this year alone — out of the total \$1 million the developer must ante up to fulfill its public art commitment — underlines the overwhelming importance of the

site’s visual content beyond its architecture.

Arts consultant Jane Zeidler, art curator for the development says the remaining money promised to the city by the developer will be parcelled out at \$50,000 per annum for the next 10 years.

“But \$50,000 isn’t much in the art world,” she admits. “So I’m thinking of something other than digital (work).”

As it is now, about 50 per cent of the project’s *entire* revue comes from ads shown on its video monitors throughout the building. That’s why its 24 AMC movie screens, 10 to be used as lecture halls by Ryerson University students during the day, are located on the top, fourth floor of the some 46,500 sq. m development.

Going to a show? Video monitors

begin selling you stuff, with a bit of art as part of the mix, the second you step through the street-level doors. More message-ready monitors wait for you up the four floors worth of escalator banks. It takes 30 seconds to go from floor to floor, plenty of time to develop a mighty big hunger for a burger and Coke.

Don’t worry about those extra calories, though. The complex includes an Extreme Fitness gym. Call ahead. Forgot your cellphone? Don’t worry, Bell and Rogers both have shops there.

Feeling a bit peckish after the show? The developers know you’ll spend an average of 33 minutes in the food court surrounded by monitors on the third floor. Yet it’s this particular setting, a favourite with students, which may prove to be the complex’s real addition to the city’s artistic landscape.

Video by eight Ryerson students, each given \$1,000, is already part art series showing on heavy rotation in this area. With student video involvement guaranteed to continue the next 10 years, art may outlive all those Whopper ads.

pgoddard@thestar.ca



A sequence from Lisa Steele’s and Kim Tomczak’s *Love2* video installation, which will soon be showing up on a Toronto Life Square video screen.