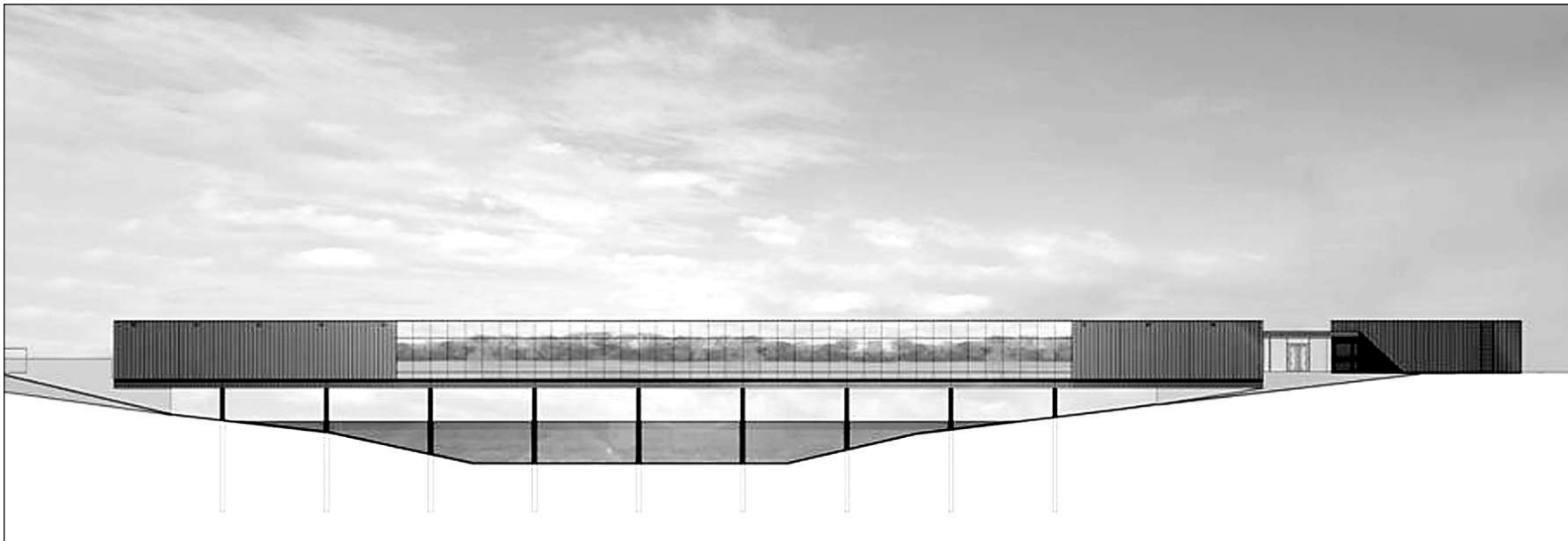


BUSINESS

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Winnipeg has seen nothing like this



CIBINEL ARCHITECTS LTD.

The RTDS Technologies Inc./TransGrid Solutions Inc. offices at Smartpark will be built over a retention pond using steel stilts that will look like a pier.

Smartpark office building on stilts a first for city, architectural firm

IT will be a first for Winnipeg and a first for the architectural firm that designed it — an office building on stilts.

The University of Manitoba's Smartpark Development Corp. is building a new 25,000-square-foot office building on its 100-acre property in Fort Garry.

What sets this one apart from any other office building in the city is that it's being built over water — a 5.5-metre-deep retention pond.

"The building will look more like a pier than a bridge," architect George Cibinel of Cibinel Architects Ltd., said in an interview.

Cibinel said it'll be the first office building of its kind in the city. The only thing that's even close to it is the Salisbury House restaurant on the Esplanade Riel footbridge linking St. Boniface with downtown Winnipeg.

And Cibinel said he wouldn't be surprised if it turns out to be the only office building on stilts in Winnipeg. "I think it will always be pretty unique."

It was Smartpark officials who came up with the idea.

"We were originally looking at building a facility on the west side of

the pond," Smartpark president Alan Simms said. They'd even lined up an anchor tenant — RTDS Technologies Inc., which leases space in another building in the park but needs to move to larger quarters.

"And then one day we thought, 'Why couldn't we build it over the pond?'" Simms said.

"When we got over our initial shock, we thought it was a great idea," said RTDS director Rudi Wierckx. "It's innovative and new and different."

He said that fits well with the kind of products RTDS designs and builds — high-tech simulators, or super computers, that are used to study how new equipment will perform when connected to an existing power system.

Simms said work is well underway on the new \$8-million building, and should be completed by December.

Wierckx said RTDS is taking about 20,000 square feet, which is double the space it has now. Another Smartpark tenant — TransGrid Solutions Inc. — is taking the other 5,000 square feet.

The office building will be the eighth commercial building to be built on the Smartpark site since it opened in October 1999. Six of the buildings are owned by Smartpark Development Corp., and rented out to 18 different firms. One is owned and occupied by Cangene Corp., and the other is owned and occupied by the U of M's Richardson Centre for Functional Foods and Nutraceuticals.

Simms said 19 of the 20 commercial tenants in the park are involved in



JOE BRYKSA / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Rudi Wierckx of RTDS Technologies Inc. (left) and Smartpark Development Corp. president Alan Simms at construction site for the office on stilts.

research and product development. The exception is edna fedya, a 45-seat restaurant that opened last December.

The restaurant is managed by the owners of Stella's Bakery & Cafe on Osborne Street. Simms said there's a good chance that other non-research-related businesses — a law firm, a chartered accounting firm, even a hotel — eventually will be added.

He said Phase I of the park's development, which covers about 20 hectares, is nearly complete. Once the new office on stilts opens, there will be only 2.8 hectares left to be developed.

The first building for Phase II — a 42,000-square-foot, multi-tenant facility at One Research Rd., was completed in late 2005.

"But we've got a number of other projects we're on the brink of announcing... that could lead to two or three

more facilities being built over the next 18 months," Simms said.

He wouldn't say who's involved in those projects, but Monsanto Canada, which already leases space in the park, has said it would like to move its local research facility there.

Simms said if development continues at the same pace as in the past, the park may be fully developed by 2015.

"The economy will have a lot to do with that, and also the high-tech sector and how it's faring."

Know of any newsworthy or interesting trends or developments in the local office, retail, or industrial real estate sectors? Let real estate reporter Murray McNeill know at the email address below, or at 697-7254.

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'It's almost like an invisible building'

WORK is underway on Winnipeg's first office building to be built on stilts above a body of water. The one-storey, 25,000-square-foot structure is being built above a retention pond in the 100-acre Smartpark Research and Technology Park at the University of Manitoba, and is to be completed by December of this year. Here is how it's being built:

■ The first thing construction crews had to do was drain all of the water out of the pond, which is about 5.5 metres deep at its deepest point.

■ Next, they had to build a roadway down to the bottom of the pond, and haul in 60 to 80 truckloads of crushed stone to create a base that was solid enough to hold the weight of the pile-driving machines that would be used to drive about 80 steel piles into the pond bed.

■ Each of the piles, which are coated in a material to protect them from the water, are about 20 metres long and will protrude above the surface of the water when the pond is refilled.

■ A platform, measuring roughly 36.5 metres wide and 100 metres long, will then be built on top of the piles and will stretch from one side of the pond to the other. The office building will be built on top of the platform.

"The building will look more like a pier than a bridge," according to George Cibinel, of Cibinel Architects Ltd., the firm that designed the building.

■ Most of the building's exterior will be clad in mirrored glass so that the structure blends in with its surroundings.

"It tends to disappear because the walls reflect the landscape around it," Cibinel said. "So it's almost like an invisible building."

■ To reduce the chances of geese and other birds unwittingly flying into the sides of the building, Cibinel said the firm plans to install a bunch of dots on the outside of the glass, which the birds will be able to see.

"That might even create an added level of interest because they (the dots) will be in a pattern you can easily see," he said.

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