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## **Ahoy, busy producers!**

Navy Yard upstages Gotham studio competition

By JILL GOLDSMITH

Gotham production is surging thanks in part to feisty outreach by the Bloomberg administration, a more robust economy and a weak dollar that makes it costlier to film outside the U.S. Come summer, film and TV folk will have another big draw: Steiner Studios, the city's first gated studio, will open at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

The complex boasts five massive, interconnected soundstages ideal for the big motion picture projects the city has rarely been able to accommodate.

Giant real estate developer Steiner Equities will be wrapping up construction on the 15-acre site over the next six months. Father and son David and Douglas Steiner and Jay Fine, CEO of the complex, are courting clients to fill the stages -- the biggest is 27,000 square feet -- plus 180,000 square feet of offices, dressing and makeup rooms, parking for over 900 cars, a screening room and a commissary.

New York studio Kaufman Astoria's web site boasts "the biggest soundstage in the U.S. outside of Los Angeles" at over 26,000 square feet -- a claim it will have to surrender when Steiner completes its biggest one.

Steiner "is a different type of facility -- very, very high ceilings, flexible space ... a gated studio with a potential for back lot," says film, theater and broadcasting commissioner Katherine Oliver.

The 265-acre Navy Yard, which dates from 1801, offers "Gangs of New York"-like exteriors and a large park. It's on the water between the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridges -- about a 15-minute drive from Manhattan.

"It's exciting. Just walking around that site you get that charge you only get walking around a studio lot, just imagining the industry having this place to work, on this scale," says Radical Media topper Jack Lechner, a former Miramax and HBO exec. "And the convenience. It's just over the bridge. You can walk to (steakhouse) Peter Luger."

In New York, producers often "have had to cut and paste and cobble (projects) together with spit and rubber bands," adds Jim Peterson, former topper of David Letterman's Worldwide Pants and

"The Late Show" producer. At the Navy Yard, "It's intangible, part of being a community rather than carving up some warehouse."

Fine, a longtime exec at CBS and NBC, says he's been taking at least one person a day around the site. He says the basic pleas he's heard were for contiguous soundstages -- Steiner's are separated by giant "elephant" doors unobstructed by columns -- plus adjacent office space and parking.

On a recent tour, he hopped over ditches, puddles and cords, and walked along the rim of cavernous soundstages, three of which were under a foot of water, which Fine says helps settle the concrete. Steiner Studio will hold an open house in the spring when the weather and the site are prettier and launch the studio this summer, although Doug Steiner says he could deliver some of the facility earlier if needed.

The younger Steiner likes showbiz and was key in pushing the project -- a first film foray for the Roseland, N.J.-based developer of office parks and shopping malls. Over time, "I would like us to become part of a full-service media company," he says, and maybe invest directly in film projects.

The project cost Steiner \$90 million. The city pitched in \$27 million to repair the Navy Yard's antiquated infrastructure.

"It was well thought out, instead of just 'build it and they'll come,' " says Gary Martin, head of physical production for Sony Pictures. "They sent over plans, asked what our needs would be if we went to New York."

Sony has shot just about everywhere in the city, at mainstays Kaufman Astoria in Queens and Silvercup in Long Island City, armories and a facility near Yonkers. But "there's not as much in one place" as Steiner promises, Martin says.

Steiner says it "will be priced comparably to Los Angeles and New York market rates. There will be no premium for coming to us."

Alan Suna, CEO of Silvercup, which houses "The Sopranos," "Sex and the City," "Hope and Faith" and other productions, says "We have been the largest and busiest facility in New York for quite some time, and even with the Navy Yard, that remains."

At present, there's enough work to go around. New York production jumped 36% in the first six months of 2003 -- the last period for which official stats are available. The second half was strong, and indications are upbeat for 2004 -- depending in part on the upcoming pilot season.

"It's a good time for this business. Katherine's ascendancy has been a breath of fresh air," Suna said.

In fact, Mayor Michael Bloomberg delivered his State of the City address earlier this month from Silvercup.

One question is whether Steiner Studios will have the support of Miramax, Gotham's heftiest film company, which is still nursing hurt feelings after former Mayor Rudy Giuliani awarded it the rights to build a studio at the Navy Yard in May of 1999, then yanked the offer several months later.

Tribeca Prods. and Vornado Realty had teamed up with Miramax on the deal. There were hard feelings. Steiner won the contract.

A Miramax spokesman declined to speak directly to the Navy Yard project but says, "The governor and the new mayor have shown their dedication to making New York more film-friendly, and we appreciate their efforts and hope to be supportive."

"I think we offer such a unique product and they are such active players in the industry that we're bound to find some common ground," Doug Steiner says. "I hope they will take advantage of something in their back yard."