Comparisons with Barcelona may be a media fancy but architect Will Alsop's vision for the regeneration of Croydon has captured the enthusiasm of developers, investors and residents alike, says Cllr Tim Pollard

The Evening Standard picture explained it all really. Under the fanciful but not entirely unappreciated headline “Croydon is the new Barcelona”, sat a photo showing why the Catalan city still has the edge, for the time being. Sadly, our grand canyon is a man-made edifice, a concrete corridor with a six lane motorway at its base. That one bleak illustration, provocatively published across London, shows why Croydon council believes the town needs a grand re-design rather than a cosmetic makeover.

To address Croydon’s image problem we turned to Will Alsop, an architect not exactly renowned for a timid approach to building modern features. But it was for his wider vision on how we might unleash Croydon's potential that we gave Mr Alsop a brief to dream of what could happen if he looked on the town as a blank canvas.

Accurately, he describes Croydon as being pregnant with opportunity. There's already £3.5 billion investment in the pipeline - not bad for a place with an image problem. This includes Arrowcroft's arena-led revitalisation of the long vacant Gateway site alongside East Croydon station; the new Park Place shopping centre, which will consume a tranche of tired 60s-style buildings; as well as some dramatic residential towers, including Berkeley Homes' 44 storey needle just to the north of the town centre.

Consider also that the council is in the process of choosing between John Laing and Land Securities Trillium as our partner to drive our own urban regeneration vehicle - an enterprising device aimed at ensuring residents and taxpayers derive value from redeveloping much of the town hall-owned real estate in the town centre. The council's land value will be matched on a 50:50 basis by private sector capital, providing enormous development potential which we will be able to direct. Croydon is the first council to adopt this approach.

So, a great deal was happening even before we invited Will Alsop to return to the place where he once lived to take an overview. He was quick to recognise that within the town - which with 340,000 residents is the largest in western Europe not yet recognised as a city - there is a deep-rooted sense of pride and purpose. While local people may recognise and bemoan our limitations, they do resent the sneers of outsiders who know little about what makes Croydon tick. They’re also a bit tired of the media notion that the only person of substance to have ever emerged from this part of south London is Kate Moss.

As a recent source of that pride, the arrival of Croydon Tramlink in 2000, was not just timely for the new millennium but was also a vital injection of confidence and a catalyst for further regeneration. The approach of East London Line metro services to west Croydon will further enhance public transport. Yet still the town is besieged by the motorcar, with busy routes bisecting the centre along rigid grid lines, forcing pedestrians into threatening underpasses.
The workshops that Will Alsop ran with residents, investors, stakeholders and others were universal in recognising the problems they felt were holding Croydon back. What people want is a sense of place, something that will make Croydon more desirable for new industries, new retail and for people to make their homes.

We chose Will Alsop because we believed he would stretch us and dare us to be different. He has not disappointed. His vision addresses the twin issues of the built environment and public realm. His proposals, like so much from his drawing board, are bold, colourful and imaginative. There’s a lot that can be realised.

Central to the ambition we share for a safer, more accessible and pleasant town are his proposals to break down the barriers to pedestrian movement currently created by the busy road and rail systems that dominate the town centre. Without much of the traffic that has no need to be in Croydon the six lane Wellesley Road ‘motorway’ can become a people-friendly, tree-lined boulevard that fits in with his schemes for public squares, parks and landscaping.

He has produced ideas to bring more homes into the town centre, perhaps sandwiched between new phases of shopping centres at ground level and more greenery on rooftops. Indeed, the Whitgift shopping centre, at present a single block and impenetrable when closed at night, could become a series of smaller scale retail blocks, criss-crossed by open links giving priority to pedestrians and providing a more varied mix of cafes, shops and bars.

As the town centre environment improves, so Mr Alsop wants to soften the surroundings, bringing the culverted River Wandle to the surface as a watery trigger for a series of lakes and lagoons, lapping historic features such as the parish church and the pumping station close to Surrey Street market.

His proposals show how three parks just on the edge of the central area can be linked and made accessible through tree-lined walks. Extra bridging space created for one of Croydon’s most attractive but, through its car-bound isolation, least known parks could see it as a location for an iconic visitor attraction. In Mr Alsop’s eyes the town needs something like Cornwall’s Eden Project to pull in people and contribute to its vitality.

And so, with the transport barriers addressed and the town’s environment enlivened by green space and water, Mr Alsop argues Croydon would be well-placed to support the new development that would transform it into a truly thriving city – London’s third city in fact.

What matters now is how we build on the momentum that Mr Alsop’s ideas have accelerated. Our intention is that his vision should feed into the new Metropolitan Area Action Plan. This will be widely consulted on before being adopted as part of the borough’s statutory planning framework in 2010.

You may wonder where Barcelona fits into this? Well, it doesn’t. A flip line by a national journalist caught headline writers’ attention and spread like a wildfire among the story-chasing media pack. There’s plenty in Barcelona to admire and, while Croydon is unlikely to benefit from a Mediterranean climate and Ronaldhino is an improbable signing for Crystal Palace, there are plenty of worse places with which to be compared if you are serious about overturning an image problem.

Cllr Tim Pollard is Croydon’s cabinet member for regeneration and economic development