POISED FOR TAKE-OFF

With £3.5bn of investment from developers, Croydon looks set to finally shake off its 60s image. IAN AUSTEN looks at how the town's skyline is rising in the 21st century.

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Selling Croydon is taking off again in a big way, led by the publication of two new glossy magazines backed by a 'big-fish' at the showcase MBFM exhibition in Canning in March. The first issue of City3, described as Croydon's official regeneration magazine, is being widely distributed among potential developers and investors at home in addition to those who picked it up at MBFM.

In his foreword to the magazine, Tim Pollard, the council's cabinet member for finance and regeneration, admits Croydon has lost the development impetus it had in the 50s and 60s.

It now needs, he says, "an injection of inspiration to make it fit for the 21st century" and believes the developments in the pipeline will do just that.

In simplest terms City3 is an overview of a town poised for a resurgence which will re-establish it as one of the south's and probably the UK's, top commercial and retail centres.

The fact is that now, more than anytime in the past 20 years or so, developers are rushing to be part of this resurgence.

While much of the earmarked £3.5bn investment proposals remain on the drawing board or at advanced planning stage, the fact that so many people are talking Croydon up, rather than dismissing it as a relic of the 60s, is bringing a new confidence to the town which should see some, but perhaps not all, of the schemes transformed into reality.

Croydon has been on good ideas before and has benefited in recent years from the arrival of new developments such as the Caneale shopping centre and expansions to the Whigfield Centre.

But the signs are now that real innovation will be leading the latest revival and more importantly that innovation is beginning to show as the first concepts come on the skyline.

Leading the way upwards and onwards is Howard Holdings' Altitude 25.

Work has started on the building of the 26-storey tower which, when completed next year, will offer almost 200 homes on the Fairfield Road site.

A start has also been made on the company's Bridge House development off Sandycombe Road which will provide 75 homes plus bars and restaurants opening on to a new piazza and kick-starting Croydon's cultural quarter.

The company is also involved in the conversion of the old Seabrook Road telephone exchange, providing homes and adding to the regeneration of the Surrey Street area.

Greg Coughlan, chief executive of Howard Holdings, said: "As a committed local company we have great confidence in the borough of Croydon. The planners and councillors have all visions for Croydon which we and other developers and investors find very exciting.

"We have a sign of our commitment in the recent purchase of the Whigfield Shopping Centre, which represents Howard Holdings' biggest investment and development to date. "We are also currently developing three distinctive high-quality residential developments which are in keeping with the long-term aspirations of the town centre."

Other high rise housing developments poised to take to the skyline include Phoenix Developments' 35-storey 26-storey residential block at the corner of Wellesley Road and St James's Road on which work is due to start this month and Berkeley Homes' planned 44-storey tower containing 800 homes, also in Wellesley Road.

Housing also forms a large part of the planned redevelopment of the Gateway site which will see the council's preferred developer, Arrocowd, and its area-based scheme or its rival, Stanhope/Schroders.

Either way beds will also bring a much-needed injection of prestige office space, something vital to help Croydon compete with central London, attract inward investment and play a crucial role in the commercial regeneration of the town.

Endorsement of Croydon's potential as a major business attraction has come from Richard Myers of Terence Hill, a company which is preparing to build a 15-storey office block on the old Essex House site at George Street, close to East Croydon station.

Mr Myers said: "This prime site benefits from the excellent transport links that Croydon provides and the headquarters scheme has been designed to attract corporate buyers."

The developers do not stop at offices and homes. Arrocowd's 12,500-seat arena will, the council believes, bring not only a major leisure asset to Croydon but a landmark development which will play a key role in attracting more investment. And with the compulsory purchase order for the land approved, the Minerva/Lea Land partnership is now preparing to shift into high gear to get work started on its 600m Park Place shopping centre, bringing another 130 shops, cafes and restaurants into the centre to cement Croydon's reputation as a destination which can compete on equal terms with the likes of Bluewater - also owned by Land Lease - and Lakeside.

Mark Boyes of Land Lease said: "We want to come to Croydon because we see the town returning to its bygone days. "It is going to be a top shopping venue in the UK again."

In all of this there is still room for really speculative development like that seen in Memco, which working with architect, Ken Shutte, and the man behind the Gherkin in the City of London, have come up with homes, offices and shops development for Cherry Orchard Road, all housed in four crystalline towers, one of which will soar 46 storeys high.

The scheme, Admiralty House will still very much in its formative stages, also involves a new conference for East Croydon station and a new transport interchange.

WHILE in opposition on Croydon Council the Conservatives made some sceptical noises about what many of them thought was the annual rent paid by officers and Labour councillors to the south of France with the aim of keeping the town.

The MBFM exhibition in Canning is branded as the world's biggest development and property showcase and after returning from this year's exhibition any suspicions felt by Cllr Chris Wright, Croydon's cabinet member for planning, environment and urban development has been swept away by the positive vibes which come Croydon's way.

The Croydon stand had simple aims - to dust off Croydon's image and sell the town instead as a 'must' venue for investors and developers.

By highlighting the many new developments in the offing, ranging from the Gateway site at East Croydon to the regeneration of the Surrey Street area, it did just that, said Cllr Wright.

He said: "There was no question of this being a panto, it was very hard work. "During the exhibition we had hundreds of people walking around there. These were investors, developers and architects who had lost interest in what was planned for Croydon."

Cllr Wright said the Croydon team was able to re-energise by briefing visitors about planned developments and laying down the prospects for future investment in the town.

He said: "When we asked some of them about their impressions of Croydon they referred to it as a bit 60s but I think after
On the basis that no matter how good the immediate future may look, there is a longer term potential to be met, renowned architect Will Alsop has been drafted in by the council to work on producing, in co-operation with residents and businesses, a new overall vision for the town centre, working around the existing projects.

Mr Alsop has said it is time Croydon lost its image as a joke and a by-word for suburban living. He says: “The potential for Croydon is enormous because of its good infrastructure, good transport and proximity to the centre of London and the south coast.”

But he believes the best way forward is to take the people of Croydon along with the new vision. And he adds: “It is incredibly important that having asked the people of Croydon to contribute to this, something happens which changes their and other people’s perception of the town.

“If we can make people feel happy and comfortable with Croydon we will have succeeded.”

All the signs are that the seeds for that success are already well and truly sown.

NOTABLE by its absence from the glossy magazine round up of Croydon’s future is Stanhope/Schroders plans for the Gateway site.

It is perhaps not unexpected as the council remains fully committed to Arrowcroft’s arena-based scheme but the fact remains that Stanhope/Schroders do have planning permission and own or have options to buy most of the land.

The whole issue will come to a head later this year when a public inquiry will jointly deal with the council’s move to seek compulsory purchase orders for the land and the decision by the Government Office for London to call in Arrowcroft’s planning application.

In the meantime, Stanhope/Schroders are continuing to say that work on the redevelopment will start in the summer. They maintain their scheme, which includes 1.1m sq ft of offices, around 600 homes, a 4.5 acre park and a new home for the Warehouse Theatre, will play a major role in regenerating the town centre and demonstrates their commitment to Croydon.

A spokesman said: “Croydon is an attractive location for business with excellent communications and quick access to central London and airports.

“This is confirmed by the strong interest among companies who have indicated that they wish to take space in the Gateway development.”