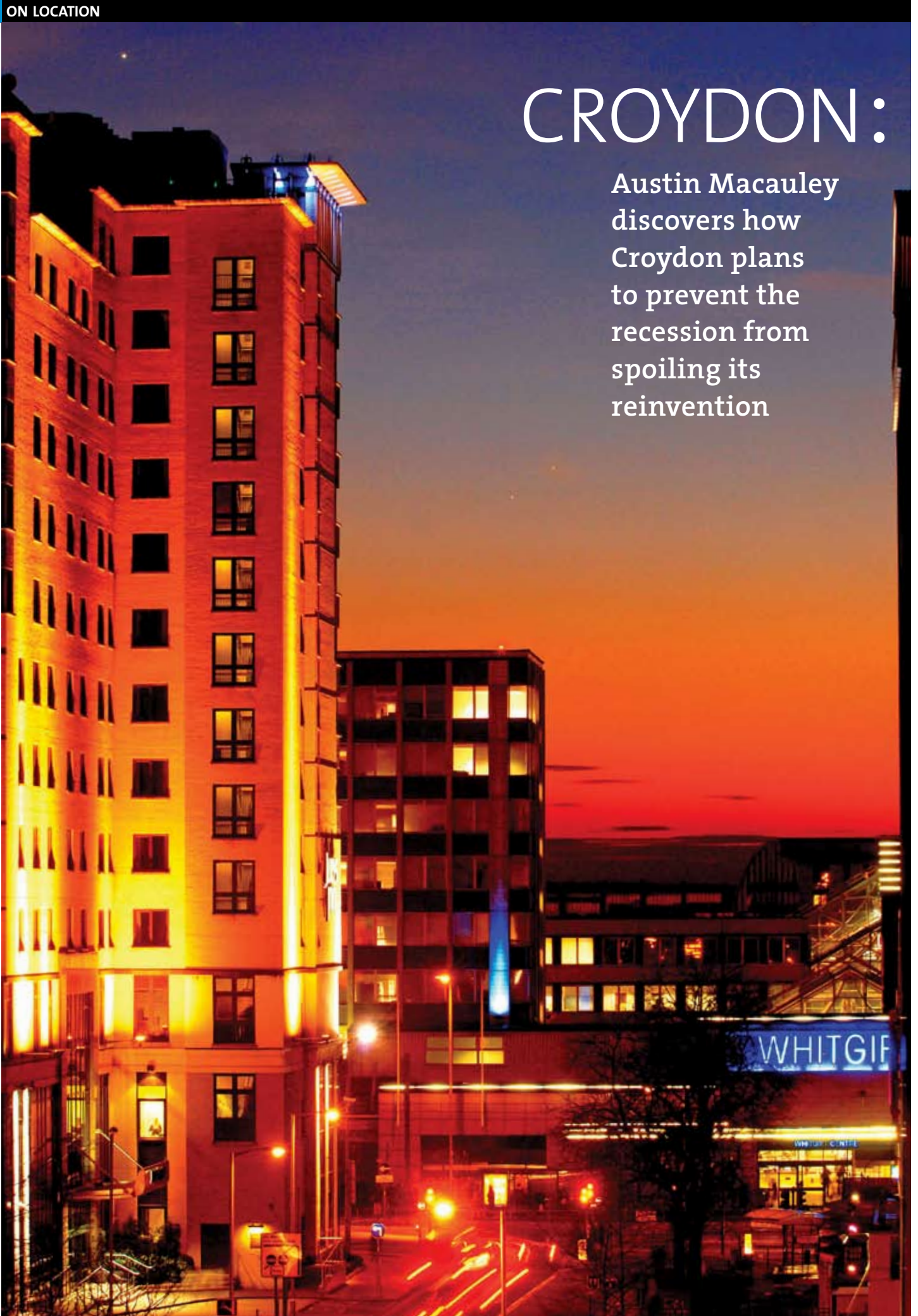


CROYDON:

Austin Macauley
discovers how
Croydon plans
to prevent the
recession from
spoiling its
reinvention



THE HEIGHT OF AMBITION

As associations go, there are probably prouder things to boast about. But the sign that greets you at East Croydon railway station – ‘Welcome to Croydon: Home of Nestlé’ – says more about the town than any marketing campaign is ever likely to manage.

London’s most populous borough wants to be known as a place to do business, and it’s not particularly bothered whether you’re as big as the multinational name that adorns its station signs and has its UK headquarters in the town.

Along with Nestlé, Croydon is already home to the likes of Direct Line, BT and Bank of America, as well as other major employers such as the UK Border Agency. Now this ambitious borough wants to be seen as the place to set up a business and live. Or to borrow another famous confectioner’s slogan, a place to work, rest and play.

The scale of physical change planned is mind-boggling (see the box below for a flavour of what’s in the pipeline). Now the machinery to make that happen is quickly taking shape. The town centre already has a business improvement district, Croydon Bid, while Croydon Enterprise, a local enterprise growth initiative (Legi) programme, is well-established across the borough. Last October plans were unveiled for what will be London’s first economic development company (EDC), which brings together these bodies with Croydon Business, an organisation representing the private sector. It’s intended to be a business-led vehicle tasked with creating ‘an appealing environment for businesses to establish themselves and thrive and ensure Croydon has a much bigger voice in London, nationally and internationally, in promoting the borough as a prime business location’.

With Legi funds at their disposal and a deepening credit crunch, partners felt the time was right for such a company. One of its first jobs is to persuade government that it should extend funding for another five years to 2016.

Alongside the EDC is a new urban regeneration vehicle (Urv) – a £450m partnership between the council and infrastructure investment group John Laing that will develop 7.88m ft² of the borough’s land. It’s a 25-year deal that could prove extremely fruitful for both partners: the council will receive a 50-50 share of the profits. Four key strategic sites in the town centre have been earmarked for

development via the Urv including a new council HQ and two 40-storey skyscrapers housing 1,250 apartments. It should inject greater certainty into development across the borough – and result in a better deal for the local authority. ‘We are able to be more masters of our own destiny,’ says Steve O’Connell, cabinet member for regeneration. ‘What we have got to move away from is too much dependency on developers. Now the council keeps half of the development profits.’

With two vehicles lined up and a multitude of schemes planned, all in all things were looking pretty rosy for Croydon towards the back end of 2008. And then the recession happened.

Like almost everywhere else in the country, its sprawling shopping centre, the south of England’s busiest outside central London, has lost retailers. On top of that, the haemorrhaging of banking jobs has hit more affluent parts of the borough such as Purley, where unemployment rose in 2008. But rather than batten down the hatches and prepare for the worst, the powers that be have come out fighting. February saw the launch of an economic recovery action plan drawn up by the LSP’s economic delivery partnership. It contains no fewer than 32 ‘actions’, covering everything from enhanced support for small businesses to a ‘shop local’ campaign taking in central Croydon and the borough’s many district centres.

Much like the EDC, the recovery plan is a collaborative effort involving a wide range of organisations such as the primary care trust, Voluntary Action Croydon, Jobcentre Plus and Croydon College, which plans to open a retail academy this year and a construction academy in the near future.

It’s all designed to ensure the grand plan doesn’t drift too far off course during the recession – and that the borough is ready when things pick up. Like many major conurbations, Croydon believes it has the potential to perform a much bigger role than it currently plays.

‘We think we are unique in the UK in being a conurbation of this size so close to a big city,’ says Brian Stapleton, chief executive of Croydon Business. ‘Croydon is pretty unique even within London because we have more people who live and work in the borough than any other ▶

Left: Croydon by night, and right: an aerial shot of the central area

Rebuilding Croydon

- ◆ Park Place – a new shopping and leisure district on the southern edge of the town centre designed to put Croydon among the UK’s top ten places to shop
- ◆ Ruskin Square – a scheme on a 2ha site in central Croydon to include cafes, restaurants, offices, homes, a new theatre and an urban park
- ◆ Altitude 25 – a 25-storey tower in the town centre with 196 apartments
- ◆ Cane Hill – owner English Partnerships is looking for a partner to develop this former hospital site in the south of the borough. It has the potential for one million ft² of office space
- ◆ Centrium Place – a mixed use redevelopment in the town centre providing up to 3.3 million ft² of offices
- ◆ Taberner House – an Urv scheme that will see council offices replaced with a new HQ





Croydon businesses were happy to sponsor the borough's entry in the 2008 Britain in Bloom competition to help balance the town's concrete jungle image. It paid off – Croydon scooped a silver medal and also secured a medal in the 'large city' category (over 200,000 residents) for the second year running

borough. Central London imports people every day but in Croydon the import and export are almost the same.'

The borough is keen to add to its 340,000 inhabitants and attracting more people into the centre will be key. Urban living has been slow to take off in Croydon. At the moment around 4,000 people live in the town centre, 'ridiculously low density', says Mr Stapleton. It is hoped that more people will be lured via the new residential development that's planned.

'We have this fantastic asset of numbers,' says Cllr O'Connell. 'We want Croydon to be seen as an economic hub in its own right for London with its own character – its own USP, but while also being embedded within London.'

Are the two compatible? Certainly, the town's cultural offer suffers from Croydon's closeness to the capital. When London Victoria is a mere 15-minute train ride away, how can you hope to compete? Investment has gone into creating an 'entertainment hub' at the south end of town and a number of restaurants have won rave reviews. But it's an uphill battle.

The ambition to be both a part of London and a place with its own identity offering something different starts to make more sense when it comes to the 'work' and 'rest' bits of that Mars slogan. 'We're looking at how we can get major firms into Croydon,' explains Mr Stapleton. 'Croydon is cheaper. There's also a lifestyle choice – lots of people want to live near to where they work. We're getting more and more inquiries from businesses of say five to eight people who live in Croydon or the surrounding areas and are now thinking they could work from home.'

However successful Croydon's reinvention turns out to be, it will be a hollow feat if it fails to reach out to existing residents. The borough is London in a microcosm, mirroring the capital's inequalities with wards at either end of the deprivation scale. The fact that Croydon Enterprise will play a leading role in the EDC and the

economic recovery plan ought to give the borough a fighting chance of spreading any future prosperity.

Its Legi programme, the largest in the country when it was announced in 2005, was established in part because of the rate of self-employment (the second lowest in London) and low numbers of business start-ups. Through outreach work, business support and initiatives such as training for teachers on enterprise skills, it has begun to make inroads. Of the 227 new businesses launched last year, 146 were in neighbourhood renewal areas, and the Legi played a part in Croydon being named the most enterprising place in London in the Enterprising Britain awards.

Stella Okeahialam, director of Croydon Enterprise, believes one of the key tasks is to connect people in deprived areas to the opportunities that are created in central Croydon. 'It's about shifting culture and getting people to think about things differently,' she says. 'It's about changing the mindset and breaking down barriers. We're looking at different ways of challenging those barriers. For a lot of people unemployment is the only option.'

She admits the ever-changing economic situation has brought new challenges, and a wider range of clients. Those who have lost their jobs in the banking sector have very different needs, such as the recent case of two who decided they wanted help to open a bakery. From bankers to bakers – hardly the typical Legi client.

'We're talking about people who are obviously skilled and have money to invest,' she says. 'There are also lots of businesses which we haven't interacted with before as life was good. They probably weren't aware of us. But if they don't get support soon it will be too late. We need to reach them.'

Almost all towns and cities lay claim to some element of uniqueness in their approach. What appears to set Croydon apart is a strong working relationship between public agencies and businesses.

Brian Stapleton says it goes back well over a decade. 'Because it's a strong central business district you have got businesses that interact. Croydon is fortunate in that it has a distinct identity – that's helped the business community and the council come together. I'm always surprised about how much the business community want to do it. But then a large proportion of them work and live in Croydon.'

FIND OUT MORE

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No1 Croydon – eyesore to some, iconic landmark to others

Croydon's concrete image

Croydon apparently suffered more V1 'doodlebug' attacks by the Luftwaffe during the Second World War than anywhere else. One way or the other, the town is still living with the legacy of that bombing campaign today.

The rebuilding process in the 1960s saw it suffer a fate seen in numerous towns and cities up and down the country – 1960s architecture. The town centre is now a hotchpotch of the relatively old and new, a place with a skyline of sorts. The 400-odd year old Whitgift almshouses, sections of George Street (which connects East Croydon station to the shopping centre), and a bustling marketplace offer some relief but all in all it's not hard to see why the phrase concrete jungle is so often applied.

Croydon's next phase of physical transformation is going to take time, but the powers that be are keen to start changing perceptions now. No surprise then that measures such as a marketing campaign and other strategies feature in the economic recovery action plan.

Still, a search on Google throws up some interesting web pages that suggest opinion is already divided: www.croydoniscrap.com

and 'five reasons why Croydon isn't crap' among them. The latter appears to have stalled at two, one of them being the office block No1 Croydon, also known locally as the '50p building' because of its shape. It was once voted one of the buildings people would most like to see razed to ground.

It's fair to say Croydon is no stranger to negative press. When in 2007 architect Will Alsop's Barcelona-inspired vision for Croydon as London's 'Third City' was unveiled, it was met with incredulity by sections of the media. But one thing's for sure, Croydon has an identity. And Steve O'Connell, the council's lead member for regeneration, believes that's a distinct advantage. 'It emphasises our separateness, although it might not be the separation we want. Croydon is recognised as being different. People have an opinion about Croydon.'

The constant criticism appears to have made locals all the more bullish. An ambassadors programme is recruiting people to represent the borough and has attracted more than 250 applicants so far. Brian Stapleton, chief executive of Croydon Business, thinks he knows why it's struck a chord. 'Local people are fed up with others knocking Croydon.'