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Croydon's tower: Reconciling old traumas and new hopes

Robert Schmidt III¹, Dan Sage², James Pinder¹, Charles Holland³ and Simon Austin¹

I. Introduction

The suburban town of Croydon exists as one of London's thirty-three boroughs (Figure 1). Located to the south, it has historically been an important gateway bridging central London with South East England. Croydon has the largest population of all the boroughs, boasts the third largest office stock in London and the largest shopping centre in south London.¹ This article examines how Croydon's changing architectural landscapes remember, and rework, urban traumas. It focuses on the adaptive reuse of Croydon's 1960's podium and tower office stock; the iconic Nestle Tower is discussed as an exemplar.



Figure 1 Aerial view of the centre of Croydon

Croydon's traumatic history is well-known: manufacturing industries, transport infrastructure and housing were extensively bombed throughout the Second World War. Bomb damage, slum clearance, London development plans and Croydon's leaders' speculative ambitions then paved the way for modernist, often high-rise, commercial developments in Croydon's centre. A once small market town, Croydon became home to several significant public and private sector organisations, developing new office space roughly equivocal to Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham in the 1960s. However, over the last 30 years the centre's modernist legacy has gradually appeared traumatic itself: Croydon will soon lose its largest employer when at the end of 2012 Nestle moves its UK headquarters out of the borough, taking nearly 1,000 jobs with it. St. George's House (or Nestle Tower) has a 47 year history in Croydon – how will the loss of jobs, and potentially residents, affect Croydon?

The 2011 riots in Croydon's modernist centre offer a troubling portent in this regard. This vacant landmark building, and others nearby, invite questions about how we define, experience and shape the layers of interwoven architectural memories that record urban traumas, from the exceptional (war, riots) to the quotidian (shifting late capitalist economies). Moreover, as Croydon's history suggests, traumas may predicate hope – what opportunities exist to reconcile old traumas alongside new hopes, through novel building uses, materials and users? This article sets the stage for understanding how tactical interventions that address trauma can begin to redefine Croydon's built environment.

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II. Defining trauma

In everyday use trauma usually denotes an immediate experience, a rupture, a moment, an event, in our lives; however trauma theorists have long acknowledged that trauma is far from an immediate and bounded event, rather it is a recurring experience bound up with on-going and reshaping memories, and histories. The pioneering trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth, makes this point by defining trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”² The psychoanalytical emphasis on individual experience, as apparent in early theorizations of trauma³, has discernibly widened over the last couple of decades: trauma has been addressed as a collective experience, at the scale of neighbourhoods, towns, cities and nations.⁴ While much work along this vein has considered how human collectives experience trauma⁵, we must also bear in mind that at the scale of any community, trauma is always materially mediated, not least by the built environment.⁶

Architecture works through trauma: it invites us to bear witness to trauma; to reconsider collective trauma and our relation to it; or simply to forget. All too often the latter is the *modus operandi* of contemporary urbanisms: our built environments continually rise again phoenix-like out of the ashes of past traumas. Modernist architecture’s insistence on discovering and celebrating ‘the new’, architectures whose pure geometrical forms and novel materials and construction, intentionally eviscerate their historical contexts and traumas, are exemplary in this regard. Notable examples include: the Soviet modernisation of Dresden (and other Eastern bloc cities) after Allied bombing during World War Two; the rapid rebuilding of Kobe after the destructive 1995 earthquake; the on-going re-development of ‘slums’ in Shanghai; and the shining ascent of Manhattan’s One World Trade Centre on the site of the Twin Towers. However, across such revitalizing urban sites this modern search for the new, this distancing of past traumas, is increasingly often itself viewed as traumatic. Our built environments are replete with examples of the ‘death of the modern’, from ‘post-modern’ office blocks, whose facades self-consciously parody the absence of industrial pasts, such as Make Architects’ Cube in the English City of Birmingham, to the proliferation of sustainable eco-homes within the world’s cities that embody rather than deny *the* trauma of contemporary existence – anthropocentric climate change. Even across the above-cited modern renewals, trauma persisted, or persists, as an excessive reminder of the futility (and perhaps fate) of the modernist project: Dresden’s c18th Frauenkirche baroque church stood in a state of war time ruin in the city centre for over 50 years; Kobe’s city government have intentionally preserved a section of earthquake damaged waterfront; Shanghai’s slums continue and grow; and memorial pools in Manhattan bear witness to the lost presence of the Twin Towers.

The recent experience of modernist architecture suggests that efforts to erase trauma through the built environment may be considered even more traumatic. Such effacing projects must also be understood alongside Marx’s famous slogan for capitalism: “all that is solid melts into air”.⁷ The Marxist view that capitalism is hardwired for creative destruction is hard to ignore when considering trauma and the built environment. Marx famously suggested that capitalism demands new sources of surplus value, more efficient means of production, and greater innovation. If an office building cannot accommodate the latest highly efficient working practices or technologies, capitalism may require that it is destroyed and rebuilt anew. The only defence against capital appears to be capital: a traumatized building can be protected if new sources of capital can be extracted from it, if not then it is redundant and ripe for destruction. This zero-sum game of creative destruction of course only partially resembles the world beyond Marxist dystopian thought, not least because the State, as well as charities and other similar-minded organizations, can ensure that some traumatized and essentially economically obsolete buildings remain protected. Nevertheless, Marx suggests the possibility that the simultaneous aggrandizement and effacement of trauma – the phoenix mentality – is to some extent beneficial to particular groups and their largely commercial interests, from speculative property investors or even public bodies looking to promote urban competitiveness. Viewed in this way, trauma is not simply an individual or collective experience; it can also be viewed as a social construction replete with political and economic significance.

If, as appears to be the case, the mediation of memories of trauma through the built environment is common to human experience, then we can still argue that our responses to trauma are far from universal. For some, any diagnosis of trauma in the built environment appears to invite opportunities for creative destruction, yet

for others past traumas can never be aggrandized then erased because they are actively involved in the reproduction of communities:

“traumatized communities as something distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons [whereby] traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a group culture.”⁸

LaCapra suggests that for communities, and individuals alike, trauma demands ‘working through’ which can be a positive act:

“Working through does not mean avoidance, harmonization, simply forgetting the past, or submerging oneself in the present. It means coming to terms with trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling”.⁹

As hopefully is now apparent the palimpsest of past traumas recorded in our built environments is at least as compelling a platform to ‘work through’ the complexities of trauma as is a novel or historical testimony. In accepting this layered understanding of trauma, memory and architecture, we might then ask how might ‘accommodation’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘negotiation’ rather than ‘renewal’, ‘regeneration’, ‘renaissance’ become the development mantra for future urbanisms? These issues will now be considered in the context of Croydon, a town with interwoven layers of trauma.

III. Croydon

Croydon exists outside of the traditional urban growth model, seemingly akin to an American ‘Edge City’, perhaps ‘popping up’ overnight as a result of post-war growth.¹⁰ Yet such a view neglects its long history (Figure 2). The earliest records of Croydon date back to the Anglo Saxon period, a time of Germanic invasions, with the Archbishops of Canterbury settling a large estate (Croydon Palace) in 960 in what is now considered the old town. While the old palace was abandoned by the Archbishops in 1780, it later became a bleaching factory and remains today as a collection of buildings ‘rewritten’ as a school for girls (Old Palace School of John Whitgift).

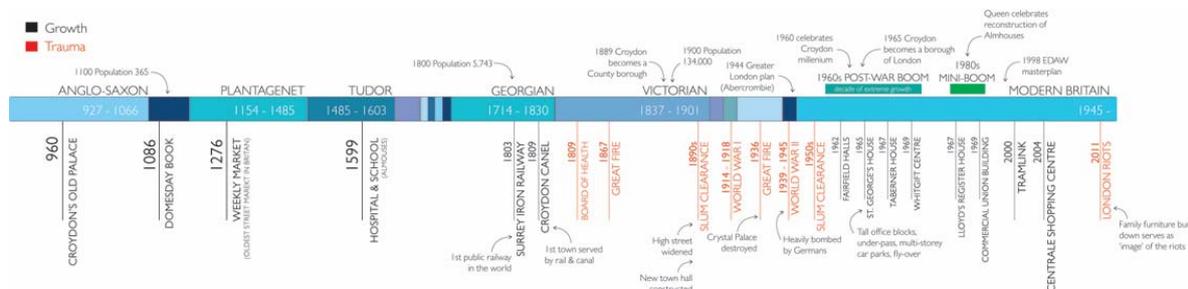


Figure 2 Croydon timeline of events

Prior to the 20th century Croydon existed as a thriving market town (it has the oldest street market in Britain) and became the first town serviced by rail and canal (Surrey Iron Railway and Croydon Canal). It was at the end of the 19th century when Croydon changed to a County borough in 1889 that marks its earliest transformation into a suburban town with an initial round of slum clearance and widening of its high street. The early part of the 20th century development in Croydon came with industrial growth in metal working, car manufacture and aerospace technologies (Figure 3). As a result of the First World War, the Beddington Aerodrome was constructed in 1915 to counter the Zeppelin raids and was expanded and served as London’s passenger and parcel airport between world wars when it was again enlisted by the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. German air raids in the Second World War damaged thousands of homes and killed more than 750 civilians. In the summer of 1944, Croydon was bombed more than any other London borough. After the war, the airport was deemed a less attractive location to Heathrow due to its limited scale and it eventually closed in 1959. Most of the area has been erased providing parkland and a residential estate, but the control tower and terminal building remain embracing the memories of Croydon’s role and are used as a business center today.



Figure 3 Croydon circa 1930

After the Second World War, the combination of London planners wanting to move office development outside the congested centre (*A Plan to Combat Congestion in Central London*) and Croydon council putting forth the Croydon Corporation Act allowed the town centre to transform faster than any other location in England at the time. While the former policy recommended areas for development outside the centre, the latter allowed the council to acquire a large amount of land necessary to upgrade infrastructure and release the remaining parcels to private developers to construct office blocks. Croydon quickly became known as a 'mini-Manhattan' with 45 buildings towering over 25 metres in height (Figure 4).¹¹ A prime example is Taberner House, a 19 storey tower sitting on a 3 storey podium. Opened in 1967, the top deck functioned as a viewing platform until it was closed due to the rising number of suicides occurring from it. After 45 years, it appears the life of the Taberner House has run its course with the council constructing a new building across the street. Taberner House is scheduled for demolition, with the site to be redeveloped as a mixed use residential-led scheme.



Figure 4 Croydon circa 1960s

In addition to the bundle of modernist office blocks, shopping and civic buildings were constructed during the 1960s. Fairfield Halls, an arts centre with a large auditorium, theatre, cinema and gallery, opened in 1962 on top of a portion of the disused railway. Refurbishment plans by the council for the building have continually fallen through; while at the same time the council has sought new hope in the construction of an arena (albeit failing multiple times) which would compete as a venue. Whitgift shopping centre opened in 1968 on the site

previously occupied by Whitgift Middle School for four centuries, until it was forced to move three miles outside the town centre. Today, the shopping centre is in severe need of redevelopment and has drawn interest from two developers - one proposing comprehensive redevelopment, erasing all recollection of the previous shopping centre, and the other suggesting incremental renewal and a return to the open streets and squares atmosphere that existed when the centre thrived - offering the council an interesting choice of regeneration or adaptation.

While Croydon has continually attempted to promote its image, it has been turned down for city status on numerous occasions from the 1950s onward – a reminder perhaps of a negative view towards its mono-functional architectural landscape. It has struggled to attract major development since the mid-1980s, when attempts to create a ‘visual coherence’ through new development were implemented through reflective glass, cladding materials and increased landscaping. These developments, however, are generally viewed no better (if not worse) than those of the 1960s and can be understood as failed attempts to reconcile meaning through renewal. Thus, Croydon is left primarily with a legacy of 1960’s modernist office buildings - a negative image which was exacerbated during the London Riots in 2011, given the prominent coverage by the media of the 144 year old, five-generational family owned furniture store, House of Reeves, burning to the ground. The building has since been removed and the family currently trades out of a nearby refurbished building. As Croydon continues to struggle with its traumatic past and its modern legacy of post-war towers and buildings, the council looks to again promote change, but how will meaning be reconciled for this cycle – through adaptation or redevelopment? How will Croydon’s architectural landscape remember and rework these urban traumas? It is this theme which is the focus of the next section.

IV. Redefining Croydon Today

“There is nothing here that has been built after 1950 of any aesthetic or architectural merit. The urban environment isn’t even interestingly bad”
Deyan Sudjic, The Guardian, September 1993

Croydon boasts 550,000m² of office space, 30% of which is currently vacant (the national average is 18%). This equates to 165,000m² of floor space, a conservative number according to some estimates. The large public and private sector organisations that once filled the towering office buildings either no longer exist, have shrunk dramatically or have moved to another area with more modern facilities. In addition, one-third of the remaining occupied office space consists of shrinking government agencies.¹² While new tenants tend to be smaller and look for more flexible leasing arrangements to reflect the dynamic nature of today’s office market; for instance, 80% of companies relocating to Croydon between 2009 and 2010 were small, consisting of between 1 and 10 people.¹³ Croydon’s poor economic situation is mirrored by the quality of its physical environment, which suffers from poorly defined and unpleasant places (with decreasing land values), insufficient open spaces, poor maintenance (dated buildings) and a decline in social and cultural assets¹⁴ – all of which contribute to 22% of its streets having dead building frontages.¹⁵

Today’s localism and private development context¹⁶ do not allow for the same clean sweeping and top-down approach to public planning that existed in the post-war era. The current planning context can be described as a ‘carrot and stick’ game, with local authorities attempting to provide enough of an incentive to nudge developers in the ‘right’ direction to satisfy their immediate goals in a way that is conducive to long-term development goals. An example of this is Croydon’s Opportunity Area Planning Framework (OAPF), a planning document that informs and influences development decisions. The OAPF promotes the conversion of abandoned and under-utilised buildings - 16 of the 19 buildings identified in the OAPF fit the 1960s office block typology (Figure 5). The rationale behind converting the buildings is to increase rental values by decreasing vacancy rates. Conversion of the buildings is the preferred option and the council is providing incentives to encourage this, for instance by offering the possibility of adding additional floors to the existing buildings, additional blocks or extensions at lower levels to infill unused space, 100% residential conversions, lower affordable housing requirements (5% on or offsite), looser design standards (single aspect units are permissible) and relaxation on renewable energy requirements.¹⁷



- | | |
|---|--|
| ■ Commercial Core area
(New Town & East Croydon Station) | ■ Possible conversions |
| 1. Prospect First | 6. Whitgift blocks a,b,c |
| 2. Delta Point | 7. Emerable House |
| 3. Lunar House | 8. Carolyn House |
| 4. Sunley House | 9. Southern House |
| 5. Apollo House | 10. Centre Tower |
| | 11. Amp House |
| | 12. Nestle Tower |
| | 13. Ryland House |
| | 14. Davis House |
| | 15. Taberner House |
| | 16. Impact House |
| | 17. Direct Line building |
| | 18. Grosvenor House |
| | 19. Leon House |

Figure 5 Identified Buildings w/ conversion potential

As well as encouraging the conversion of existing buildings, one of the major aims of the OAPF is to provide 7,300 new homes for 17,000 residents. Hence, converting vacant office buildings to residential use offers the potential for a 'win win' situation. Figure 6 compares the cost of converting existing office buildings to residential use with cost of new construction. Although the cost advantages are somewhat marginal, the potential returns are not - the value of residential space per hectare is currently more than double that of commercial space in the UK.¹⁸ However, while converting office space to apartments is appealing, previous studies¹⁹ have highlighted the technical challenges involved in such conversions. Most buildings will need facade upgrades (recladding, window replacement) to satisfy new energy performance standards and services will

need to be upgraded and laid out according to the new use. An exterior space will be needed for units along with communal amenity spaces. What is more, the technical challenges are only part of the problem: such conversions need to overcome social barriers, not least the stigma that is often attached to 1960's office buildings.

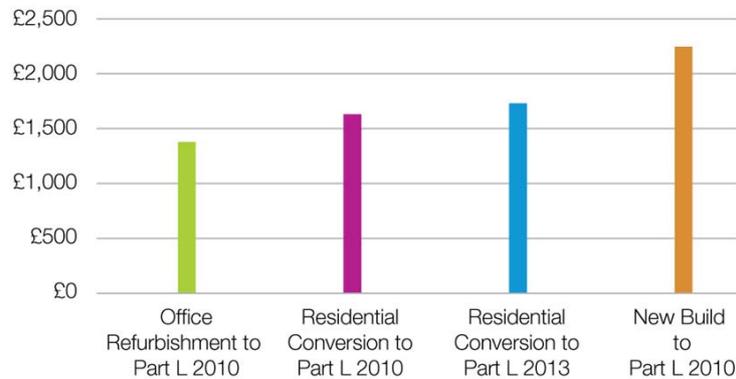


Figure 6 Cost comparison between Refurbishment, Conversion and New Build

The tower and podium typology from the 1960s which makes up a large portion of Croydon's building stock offers a particular set of conditions – generally a concrete framed structure, shallow plan depth (10-14m), tall floor heights (3m), poor energy efficiency and floor loading standards for modern offices.²⁰ The typology offers two spatial configurations with the larger generally more public podium base typically ranging between 2 and 3 storeys and the more narrow towers between 10 and 20 storeys of ubiquitous floor plates. The two spatial compositions suggest a mixed use approach allowing the towers to be used for more cellular functions (e.g. residential, hotel, incubator offices) and the podium for social infrastructure (e.g. school, library, leisure centre). The Nestle Tower in Croydon is an exemplar of this typology, but how do the contextual contingencies define the transformation process?

The Nestle Tower

While most of the surrounding office blocks were developed speculatively, St. George's House was always intended to be the headquarters of Nestle UK (Figure 7). It was slated to be a landmark in the new Croydon skyline not only because of its large scale (nearly 80m tall), but due to its use of higher quality materials, high-tech features and design considerations that many of its neighbors lacked. The building opened in 1965 with cavity floors to handle computer cabling, a mechanical mail distribution system and the latest IBM computer occupying most of the second floor.²¹ The tower and podium building was accompanied with a linear shopping promenade (St. George's walk) which has had trouble succeeding as an uncomfortable and disintegrated part of Croydon's shopping experience (Figure 8).



Figure 7 Nestle Tower



Figure 8 St. George's walk

After 47 years, Nestle has decided to leave Croydon, stating the difficulty of redeveloping its current building to meet its modern demands and the lack of redevelopment in the surrounding area, particularly that of St. George's walk. Nestle, with its approximately 1,000 jobs, is (was) the town's largest private sector employer. How will this dramatic event reshape Croydon's architectural landscape? Financial services company Legal & General have purchased the building and have discussed three possible options: upgrading the office building to meet contemporary requirements; converting the building to residential units; or knocking it down and redeveloping the site. With the council clearly in favor of using the opportunity to promote its conversion and residential agenda, Legal & General have recently proposed a scheme of 9 studio flats, 110 one bedroom, 120 two bedroom and 32 three bedroom flats (43 of which will be 'affordable' housing). The 3m floor to floor height would be difficult to accommodate modern office needs, but works well for a residential 2.5m floor to ceiling height. The 15m narrow plan depth with a 6m structural grid (2m central zone) lends itself well to a double stacked residential corridor plan. Reducing the loading criteria from office to residential along with being able to remove the screed means additional floors can be added without expensive foundation reinforcement. The number of lifts in the building is redundant for residential use and can be used as risers for services. On the other hand, trying to fit the plant into the basement and achieve the required air is a challenge.

The proposal in its early stages would add six storeys to the building and would use the ground and first floors for commercial purposes (e.g. retail, medical, gym and cinema). The proposal clearly looks to maximize the incentives offered by the OAPF as a mechanism to support the economic viability of adaptation over renewal. Physically, the transformation is certainly viable, but how will the new use and desired perception be considered as part of Croydon's architectural landscape - will the re-invention of the building and the injection of residential units be the catalyst to revitalize the surrounding area or will it fall victim to its traumatic surroundings? In the next section we consider how these obstacles might be overcome.

V. Creative Construction

The Adaptable Futures (AF) research unit at Loughborough University and FAT architects, based in London, have developed proposals that suggest a pragmatic overlaying of programme, symbolism and use, rather than yet another erasure of Croydon's history. In line with the OAPF's objectives, they accept the legacy of Croydon's 1960's boom as both an opportunity and a (productive) constraint. In this sense, such projects can be seen as a (partial) critique of the tabula-rasa approach of modernist spatial planning, which, ironically, arose at least partially from the trauma of second world war destruction.

Instead of disavowal or demolition, it suggests a readjustment of the existing condition. This approach occurs on the level of both symbol and use. Not simply in the physical transformation of the office blocks (complete with bolt-on balconies, additional signage and new facades) but at the level of the city (Figure 9). The tactical interventions suggest a more gradual and organic transformation of urban form promoting a community role. Their appropriation as housing rejects the purely commercial vision of Croydon's town centre and the notion of a central business district without residential use.

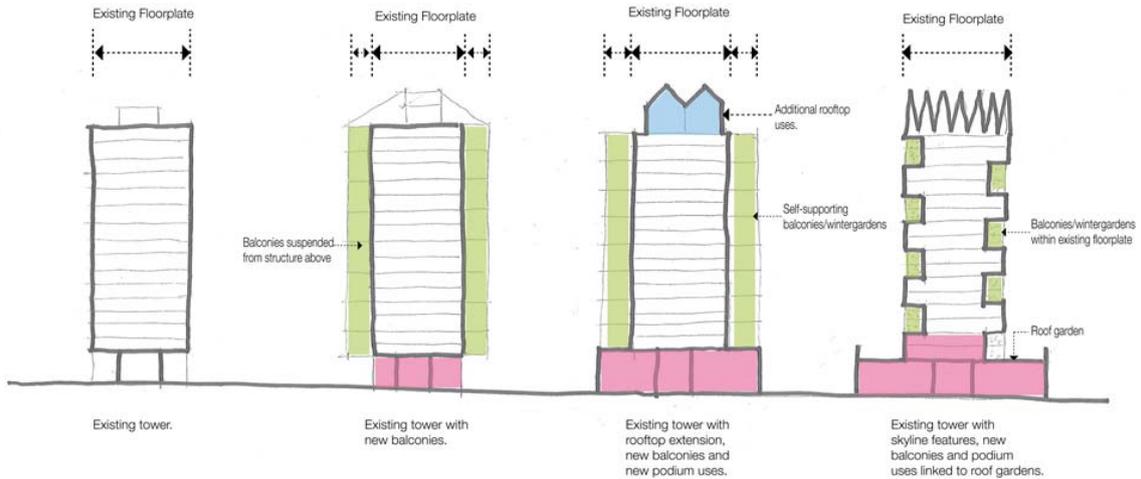


Figure 9 Proposed interventions

The tactics of appropriation involved, as well as a concern for social use and personal territory, draw on an alternative history of modernism, one that includes the surrealist and dada movements of the pre-war era, as well as art povera, pop art and conceptualism from after it. These gentler, subversive tactics are part of modernism too, and by utilizing them we might avoid the further trauma of rejecting modernism wholesale. Forms of regeneration and renewal that deliberately retain problematic and even unloved structures may offer a way for us to avoid the sublimated trauma of demolition (Figure 10). We might need to live (happily) with our mistakes, making the best of what we already have rather than attempting wholesale reconstruction.

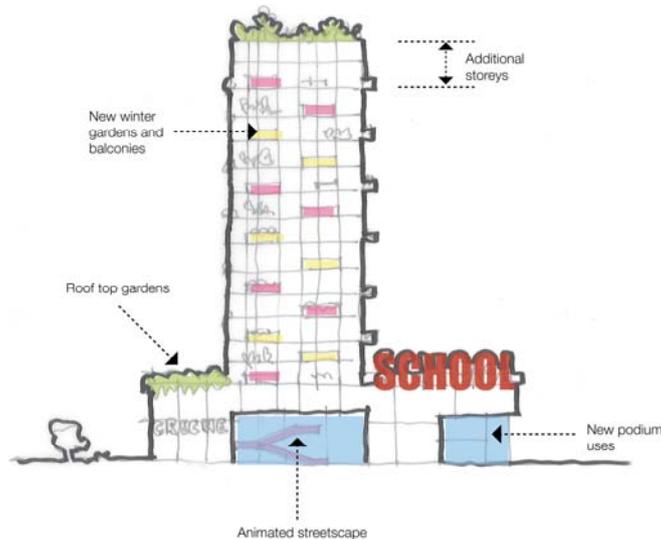


Figure 10 New Facade and elements

VI. Reflections and conclusions

Whereas in the past Croydon (like many other towns and cities in the UK) would have looked to rewrite its architectural palimpsest by demolishing what was already there, economic and political constraints mean that the Council is looking for more creative solutions involving the adaptive reuse of buildings, particularly for residential use. The Council's approach is somewhat novel and refreshing because as While and Short point out, "... urban leaders in most cities have been eager to remove or remodel what remains of 1950s/1960s planning."²² While its approach of reconciling meaning with what is already there might be one of economic pragmatism, it might also be a reflection that wholesale redevelopment of urban areas has often not worked

in the past and is not the answer now. Moreover, there is growing recognition that such examples of creative destruction are not particularly sustainable, in social, environmental or economic terms, and are often merely 'sticking plasters' for short-term problems. Indeed, one of the ironies of the current situation is that the social infrastructure (e.g. schools) that existed prior to the modernist regeneration of the town centre and was forced to move outward is now in high demand as the Council aims to bring families back to the town centre.

Whilst the OAPF explicitly promotes the commercial viability of adaptive reuse, via a series of concessions from current sustainability and planning constraints, the re-use of office space for community and civic uses offers a wider level of potential public benefit. Although such re-use must clearly be guided by opportunities for commercial development, its potential complicates what Marx defined as capitalism's traumatic requirement for obsolescence through creative destruction. Adapting and reusing the existing stock of modernist office buildings might therefore help local communities and identities to be sustained through bearing witness to trauma²³, while at the same time recognizing openness and hope towards the future.

VII. End notes

¹OAPF, 2012.

²Caruth, 1991.

³e.g. Caruth, 1991.

⁴e.g. Edkins, 2003 & Erikson, 1995.

⁵Erikson, 1995.

⁶e.g. Edkins, 2003 & Lahoud, et al, 2010

⁷Marx, 2002

⁸Erikson, 1995.

⁹La Capra, 2001.

¹⁰Phelps and Parsons, 2003.

¹¹OAPF, 2012.

¹²URS, 2010

¹³URS, 2010

¹⁴Mid Croydon Masterplan, 2011.

¹⁵Space Syntax, 2007

¹⁶OAPF, 2012.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸CGL Architects, 2011.

¹⁹eg. Gann and Barlow, 1996 & Health, 2001.

²⁰CGL Architects, 2011.

²¹Lacovara, 1999.

²²While and Short, 2011.

²³cf. Erikson, 1995 & La Capra, 2001.

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