

Wandle Road, Croydon

A scheme which shows what a forward thinking London Borough is capable of says Luke Tozer

The regeneration of Croydon, led by the borough, through its housing company Brick by Brick, continues to grow apace. Last month our scheme for them at Wandle Road was awarded planning permission for a 25-storey mixed-use development of 128 new homes above flexible office, retail and leisure space.

Wandle Road provides 50 per cent affordable homes on a challenging site adjacent to Croydon's Old Town. It is one of a number of schemes commissioned by Brick by Brick (BxB) which is currently working to deliver 2000 new homes on multiple sites throughout the borough.

As an outer London borough, Croydon's character varies widely from the very suburban, almost rural, outer edges, to the high density, increasingly tall urban centre. Wandle Road is currently a car park, adjacent to the flyover, which has lain undeveloped since the construction of the A232 in the early 1970s.

During the 20th Century, the city was increasingly shunned as options for cheap and easy mobility attracted populations to an illusion of rurality. Croydon has suffered from this flight and the A232 flyover was constructed to facilitate easy car access into and out of the city, to and from the rural idyll. The site at Wandle Road is a direct result of this exodus as the new road cut through the fabric of the edge of the old town.

As a studio much of our work is in urban areas, places where space carries a premium, where valuable land needs careful planning to provide buildings for shelter, for work, and leisure. The city is a focus for human activity where scarce resources are shared and optimised rather than wasted in the provision for humanity's needs - efficiencies of land use, power and transportation enable the provision of housing, workspace, healthcare, parks and gardens, arts and entertainment venues on a large scale, not possible in a suburban or rural situation.

Wandle Road supports the modern reversal of this trend, as a generation in an age of communication are increasingly attracted back to our urban centres and inner urban districts, with their enhanced opportunities for direct connections, work and culture. Former areas of heavy industry as well as struggling suburbs are displaying a capacity for reinvention. Fish Island Village at Hackney Wick, where we are currently working for Peabody and Hill, alongside Haworth Tompkins and Lyndon Goode, is another example of this.

Regenerated and newly invented urban quarters are attracting new citizens and loyal followings. High market value is now placed on formerly marginal land in these places if they can be optimised intelligently, with good design, with outcomes that consider the long term.

But the city is a more complex and difficult place to build than greenfield sites and inner city sites require specialist skills and technical, planning and design wherewithal. The design at Wandle Road delivers highly organised architecture that has to

overcome many, often competing technical challenges to create enjoyable places for people to live and work. The air quality is poor. It is noisy. It floods. The good aspect overlooks the flyover. It needed to allow for a bus interchange next door on one side and a potential new energy centre on the other.

Our experience working for Peabody, at Mint Street, adjacent of an elevated railway in Bethnal Green, where we faced many of these challenges, was a starting point. The use of wintergardens as an acoustic and visual buffer that provides useable amenity space was further developed at Wandle Road. Working closely with the same environmental engineers, Max Fordham, the design responds to the challenges from the flyover of poor air quality, noise and solar gain. The deeply articulated brick elevations are designed to mitigate solar gain and provide passive shading and noise attenuation within deep set reveals.

The site is also in close proximity to several key Conservation Areas and visible from local listed buildings. With increased height comes increased visibility and responsibility to enhance rather than harm the skyline and local heritage.

Designed as a composition of articulated volumes with elegant vertical proportions, the proposals provide a distinctive landmark which signifies a sense of arrival and departure to and from Croydon city centre. The massing of the scheme as part 25 and 23 storey conjoined tower, above a plinth of office space, helps to break its profile into a cluster of slim, tall and elegant elements. Each floor within the tower is a stacked floor plate of six flats, comprising three 2-bedroom flats and three 1-bedroom flats per floor, accessed via a single core with two lifts, creating an efficient, viable and repeatable layout.

The integration of a variety of uses as well as attractive places to work and socialise as well as live adds to the richness and complexity of the building. The elevations were composed to make a positive contribution to streetscape; they attempt to help complete, not disrupt, the urban block, by providing a strong street edge and by integrating multiple uses over different floors.

The new public space, on the corner of Wandle Road and Scarbrook Road is part of the commitment to enhancing and expanding the public realm, for the benefit not only residents and building users but the wider community. In the post Grenfell era as a studio we especially conscious of the deep responsibility we have as designers to make a positive contribution to create safe, enjoyable, enduring places for people to live and work.

Architecture is an important part of urban cohesion - the wrong solution can tear city fabric, the right one stitch it together. At Wandle road we have attempted to repair the urban fabric and tie it together in a number of ways - through urban continuity and the optimisation of a site and by promot-



ing the active and passive interaction of daily life that makes a city work.

That this redevelopment of a difficult site is being led by the local authority development company in helping to meet their housing targets, with 50 per cent affordable housing, along with

the wider regeneration benefits, shows what a forward thinking London Borough is capable of. Jo Negrini, Croydon's dynamic Chief Executive, was recently recognised for her public sector leadership in being awarded NLA New Londoner of the Year 2018. ■



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