The Croydon Urban Room
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1.0 Why & What

The Croydon Urban Room, is a physical home for public participation in the shaping of Croydon; fostering meaningful connection between people and place; past, present and future.
Why

Planning is top-down, political and inaccessible to many. At Croydon we are seeking to disrupt this norm and make planning populist, through a physical and online space for exhibition, events and active participation that is accessible and part of everyday life.

Our overarching aim is to democratise access and understanding of the planning process specifically through education and open dialogue, focusing particularly on underrepresented communities. We see this as the fundamental step in ensuring that the built environment of Croydon is for all that live, work and visit here.

The Urban Room seeks to:

**INFORM:**
make visible and democratise access to planning

**EDUCATE:**
foster reciprocal exchange of local expertise and knowledge

**COLLABORATE & CREATE:**
connect community, industry and government

**INSPIRE:**
empower individual public participation in changes and decisions that relate to the built environment
What

The Croydon Urban Room will become part of the everyday life of the Croydon centre; a known and familiar space for transparent exchange and two-way education. It will become a resilient and sustainable platform in a challenging financial landscape. The project will have an established and collaborative exhibition and events programme, featuring:

A) PLANNING SHOPFRONT (TO INFORM)
The physical shopfront space will provide a de-institutionalised public project space for civil servants to do their work, where the public can observe, enquire and participate in council projects live ‘in action’, and where the two can collaborate and exchange.

B) RECIPROCAL LEARNING PROGRAMME (TO EDUCATE)
An education programme open to members of the public, all community groups, industry and council staff, and designed for reciprocal exchange, for individuals to share perspectives and expertise.

C) LIVE EXHIBITION/ARCHIVE (TO COLLABORATE & CREATE)
A live archive and exhibition space for the public, industry and government to research and explore the past, present and future of Croydon.

D) CREATIVE MEMBERSHIP (TO INSPIRE)
Membership initiatives will be the foundation of empowering civic agency in practice; providing formalised forums for influence and feedback, via physical and digital networks.
2.0 How
The project is pioneering a new form of transparent and meaningful civic engagement in an edge condition of a growing city; it aims to de-institutionalise and deconstruct socio-economic and cultural barriers, making planning and placemaking popular.

**LIVE FEEDBACK LOOP**
The proposed physical and digital space provides a platform for transparent decision-making and clear terms of collaboration and engagement, so people can keep up to date with council plans and projects.

**PARENT & ATELIER**
Consisting of a ‘parent’ venue, a roving atelier and website; the project has far-reaching impact across the borough, and is able to be both place-specific and borough-wide in focus.

**ACCESSIBLE & AGILE FRAMEWORK**
Featuring a flexible Kee Klamp kit-of-parts that can be moved and adapted easily; the project to be responsive and to grow and build iteratively, as and when there is demand and available funding.

**DOMESTIC & DEINSTITUTIONAL MODEL**
The kit-of-parts is purposefully domestic in scale and design; facilitating intimate ‘living room’ events and exchange akin to a dining table. This plays out in its physical siting; the space is made visible in everyday life in familiar locations of exchange, such as neighbourhood high streets and shopping centres.

**PLAY ORIENTED!**
Play and role play is central to our focus on expanding engagement and agency in the planning process.
Domestic & Deinstitutional Model
Historical Precedent:
Croydon The Future
Phase 2:
Structure 'Room'
In progress

Phase 1:
Kit-of-Parts 'Furniture'
Delivered 2019

Spatial Framework:
A 0.5m² scaled grid
provides an adaptable
spatial and design
framework. At this scale,
Croydon = 86 squares of the grid
Accessible & Agile Framework
3.0 Pilot: Lessons Learnt
PILOT - PARENT

Building off other Urban Room success elsewhere in England, the project was piloted in late 2019, as part of the Local Plan review consultation period. We were able to design an initial kit-of-parts and test our learning and exhibition methodology and partnership model; working with internal and external stakeholders such as Historic England, Kingston University and young practitioners such as Sam Bland and Migrants Bureau. In December, at an evaluation roundtable, stakeholders offered constructive, positive feedback, and encouraged the development of the project ongoing.

The Pilot Parent was located in the Whitgift Shopping Centre (open to the public Wed-Sat). It functioned well as an atelier office for council staff as well as hosting a participatory exhibition of interactive historical artefacts, Virtual Reality game, 3D Croydon digital model, and graphical display of the Local Plan proposals. A successful educational programme featured youth surgeries, workshops and open to the public learning and development sessions.
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LEARNING PROGRAMME

The learning programme featured events and membership initiatives such as Youth Cabinet sessions and public CPD sessions where council staff and the public could learn together. A series of workshops with the public and targeted audiences - such as Residents Associations, the Youth Voice forum and school groups - allowed for more in-depth engagement and sought to empower public participation through role play. Participants were able to better understand of the role of a Local Plan, the decision making process of Spatial Planning and the bigger picture on a Borough and even regional level; whilst council staff gained a better understanding of the communities’ ambitions for the future.
EXHIBITION

The exhibition component featured a variety of projects and interactive activities such as historic objects loaned from the Museum of Croydon, a live 'heat map' comment wall, an audio piece by local artist Sam Bland, and an installation of research by Kingston University students. The diverse exhibition offering sought to interest and engage different ages and audiences.
PILOT - ATELIER

The Roving pilot worked well as a flexible platform; visiting 5 High Streets, 4 markets and 5 libraries across the geographical reach of Croydon over 7 weeks.

The kit of parts proved to be accessible in its construction, able to be installed easily in library spaces, high streets and markets with an allen key.
COMMUNICATION & BRANDING

We sought to spread the word about the Local Plan Review in a similar format to the physical kit with a multi-pronged approach; using existing Croydon Council network and social media channels and more, on the ground, targeted poster distribution.

Whilst awareness of the Local Plan consultation review grew over the duration of the project, some further work is needed to ensure the project successfully reaches diverse and less-engaged parts of the public.
Open Crit Roundtable

In the final days of the Pilot, we hosted a roundtable session with key stakeholders and Urban Room experts.

This was a crucial first step in considering the next stages of the project and reflecting on the project so far.
4.0 **Next steps**

We are now seeking funding to establish a permanent home in a high street / shopfront location, and develop our proposed public programme to facilitate learning, exploration and participation.

Our priorities in the next stage of work (2020-21):

1. **Funding & Business Model**
   Funding is an essential focus as part of this next phase of work. We are developing a diverse funding strategy to ensure the project is a resilient and sustainable platform in a challenging financial landscape.

   Developing partnerships with other stakeholders, such as universities and industry, will help ensure the funding model is robust, with access to diverse funding opportunities such as s106, the Greater London Authority and a range of external funding opportunities including, but not limited to; cultural grants, heritage and conservation funds, community funding and education. The possible funding categories can be distinguished under these 4 key strands:

   1. Accessibility, diversity, democracy
   2. Heritage and Historic Value
   3. Culture
   4. Education

2. **Siting and Design Development**
   Finding a permanent shopfront is another primary focus. In the immediate future, we will exhibit a window display of Pilot feedback, and seek to extend the kit of parts as required in the new space, and develop our design of the Parent Urban Room.

3. **Strategic Public Programme**
   The team will also develop an ongoing public programme of activities within the Urban Room that are directly aligned with other Spatial Planning projects. Officer involvement in the programme can flux dependent on funding and resources available.

4. **Membership Network & Communications**
   As part of creating a robust business model, developing an active digital membership and online presence will be a key focus. The strategic external learning programme will serve to expand awareness of the project more broadly, both within Croydon and beyond.