

# Pigs might fly over London's white Elephant

18 MARCH 1999 . BY DAVID TAYLOR

Southwark Council has launched ambitious proposals to transform the 69ha Elephant & Castle area of South London into a car-free 'beacon for regeneration', telling developers that it is a 'blank canvas' on which to work. The borough, keen to capitalise on what it sees as a shift of the capital's focus southwards, is open to radical ideas about road closures, widespread demolitions and the decamping of social housing groups to other areas in the borough.

Strategic planning and investment manager Terry Wilden joined planning chief Fred Manson at mipim in Cannes last week to formally kick off the initiative, which could cost £800 million over 10 years, supported by £25 million from central government. He said the area, 40ha of which is in the council's ownership, had traditionally been seen as a London interchange (with a six minute walk from rail to north-bound bus) and that it was ripe for change. 'We're trying to do something radical by closing roads permanently,' he said. 'We'd like to stop through traffic and reroute it, demolish the existing shopping centre and rebuild it in the centre, and create a more balanced community.'

The aim of the scheme is partly to raise capital and improve infrastructure in the rest of the borough, and partly to give the Elephant and Castle a new image so it can be seen as a development opportunity in the way that Paddington Basin is, rather than as the 'mess' into which it has evolved. Wilden doubts whether the name will change, however. 'Gentrification is a 1960s term, but it is the same philosophy,' he said. 'Basically, it's a blank canvas - anything is possible - we can demolish houses, take away roads, anything.'

The council says that although it does not want to be too prescriptive, it is insistent that the new area should be mixed use, that visible change must come about within three years and that the scheme should serve as a demonstration project of government policy on education, healthy living, integrated transport and welfare to work. It also wants to be an exemplar of policies on housing and social exclusion. although the council is open to demolition of six council estates in the area. It is not specifying a particular percentage of social housing in the zone, but any development partner suggesting none at all will not, it says, be successful. The council does want to lessen its housing management costs, however, and redistribute private income into improvements elsewhere. With demolitions, a rehousing programme of 300 households per year is envisaged.

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A few years ago the borough spent around £1 million on the area on subways, public art and housing improvements, along with cctv which pushed up shopper numbers slightly. But now it wants the broad-brush treatment to one of the largest development sites left in London. The borough also wants 'rigorous design,' along with green awareness and provision of open space, and has set an 18 April deadline for bids. 'It will happen,' says the marketing blurb, 'Pigs can fly.' Selection of the successful development partner will happen sometime between September and October.

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