



Viewpoint

## Building blockbusters



Time: 15 mins

Region: Greater London

Landscape: urban



### Location:

Wellesley Road / George Street traffic island,  
Croydon CR0 1YD

Grid reference: TQ 32559 65637

### Keep an eye out for:

The tallest building, the Saffron Tower, is coloured to look like a crocus plant - Croydon's name comes from Old English for 'crocus valley'

To many people, Croydon has a rather negative image. At first sight, this view along Wellesley Road could summarise common opinions that the area is a concrete wasteland.

Rows of tower blocks loom above, while busy roads surround us on all sides. Traffic passes from the left, right, ahead, behind and even below us through an echoing underpass.

Yet this scene is one of London's most popular filming locations. Stars like Brad Pitt, Tom Hanks and Kevin Costner have trod Croydon's 'mean streets'. Even Batman has swooped by.

How did unfashionable Croydon become a Hollywood hotspot?



Lower Manhattan from Jersey City © King of Hearts, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA-3.0

Take in the scene – does it remind you of anywhere else? In a certain light - and with some studio trickery – the tall buildings and wide roads could be mistaken for New York or Chicago.

Besides fitting looks, Croydon has attractive costs. Filming in big cities can be expensive, disruptive and time-consuming. A film permit alone in Manhattan is \$300 per day. Add crew wages and other costs over weeks of shooting and a film's budget balloons.

Croydon's competitive fees combine with its 'mini-Manhattan' feel to create an ideal stand-in. Its screen time has led to a fun nickname – 'the Cronx', after the Bronx district of New York. But how did Croydon end up with a New York skyline?

## Box offices

From the 1950s concerns grew in London about congestion. Traffic and pollution levels were high and the city was regularly shrouded in thick smog. To try and solve the problem the government moved some of their offices to surrounding suburbs and encouraged large companies to do the same.

Another factor was conservation. The Second World War left Britain with a severe housing shortage. The quickest answer was to build tower blocks. As London's skyline rose, so did fears about preserving the city's character. So in 1964 the government banned new high-rise buildings in central London.

Located 10 miles away, Croydon was exempt and the borough's authorities sensed an opportunity. Croydon was transformed. By 1971 there were over 40 new high-rise offices, more than in the whole of Manchester. Companies attracted by the location and lower rents included Nestlé and Norwich Union (now Aviva).

Most of the skyline we can see dates from this building boom. Halfway along the left is the Whitgift Centre. Covering over 1.3 million square feet, for 40 years it was London's largest shopping mall. Among the towers on the right, the second-tallest is Lunar House. This space-age inspired block is the headquarters of the UK Border Agency.

Croydon has been called the 1960s Canary Wharf. Its rapid makeover was controversial - the Apollo House tower for example was built on the site of a school. Concerns soon grew over Croydon's appearance and heritage. Around the same time, central London planning laws were relaxed to regenerate areas like the Docklands. Companies moved out of Croydon and several of the offices were converted into housing.

If fashion moves in cycles, film marks a moment in time. And Hollywood's interest in Croydon may be the start of another blockbuster season here.