



Best in show

Westfield Stratford City is now a tangible reality, but with the dust settled and the opening crowds dispersed, what are the standout features of London's latest mall? John Ryan reports

Just over a week after UK retail's big day out (the opening of Westfield Stratford City, in case you were out of the country, on the moon or had been kidnapped by aliens), it's a little easier to be objective about what's on show. The crowds that made certain parts of the mall so difficult to navigate on its opening day won't be at that level again. What shoppers are left with, however, is a stylish centre that provides a snapshot of all that's worth looking at in UK retailing, with the obvious exception of the supermarkets, Waitrose excepted, and DIY merchants.

And there's much to commend. The biggest John Lewis since its Cardiff/Wales flagship opened a couple of years ago, the largest Forever 21 store in the UK to date and a Marks & Spencer with an atrium that will impress all but the most hardened sceptics. The anchors notwithstanding, many retailers have created either one-offs or next step stores, with Currys PC World Black, Topshop/Topman and, on a smaller scale, Hotel Chocolat, all showing off their latest store designs.

Even those that chose to go with existing formats did so in a manner that marked their stores out. River Island was typical of this, using the layout and internal appearance that first appeared in Swindon earlier this year, to advantage.

You do have to wonder about the exterior part of Westfield Stratford City, though. There were a few latecomers to the retailers' ball in the internal area, H&M was the most obvious (now

REASONS TO VISIT

- New format**
- Ease of access**
- Snapshot of UK retail**
- Mall architecture**

Dixons' Black format has ditched the mannequins from the Birmingham store but kept the wooden 'play tables' and product-focused lighting

scheduled to welcome shoppers on September 30), but the open-air street seemed at points to have more vacant units than occupied ones.

In fairness, this mirrors the experience at Westfield London nearly three years ago. When that centre opened there were a large number of unoccupied or still to open units in the 'Village' part of the scheme.

What's different this time around is the public area circulation space in the centre's enclosed areas. As sizeable parts of the ground and first floor's public walkways have large balustraded holes in their middle, there are walkway bottlenecks, which can make getting from one place to another difficult. This will, of course, be less of an issue now that the crowds have subsided, but this is a potential problem.

More positively, where there were empty units, the Westfield team has turned adversity to advantage by creating windows with the kind of visual merchandising that many retailers would dream of.

With 300 shops and 1.9 million sq ft of retail and leisure space costing £1.4bn to construct, this will be as good a barometer of the health or otherwise of the UK economy as statisticians are likely to find. For Westfield Stratford, the road to profitability is likely to be a long one, but as this is a retail show pony it's equally likely to succeed.

Currys PC World Black

Dixons Retail continues to experiment with the Black format that it unveiled

in Birmingham at the end of last year. Back then it was all about mannequins and modems (well, state-of-the-art laptops actually), Fiat Cinquecentos and flat screen TVs. Now the mannequins are gone, as are the visual merchandising props that made the store such a talking point. What remains, however, are the wooden 'play tables' and the low, product focused lighting.

To this has also been added a window with scrolling LED lights that cost a whopping £45,000, although this is nothing when set against the LED overhead installation in the neighbouring HSBC branch, which set the bank back £120,000. Dixons Retail continues to work on the format with London design consultancy Household, and if you need to see the latest thinking in technology retailing, this is a pretty good place to start.

Topman/Topshop

Fresh from having recently opened a Topshop/Topman store in Chicago, Sir Philip Green put in an appearance at his Westfield store to bless the rails. And what he was sanctifying does represent a considerable advance for the fashion stalwart, with an interior created by its in-house design and visual merchandising team.

As in a number of other locations, the Topman part of the store is accessed by an escalator, and brand director Dave Shepherd was quick to point out the new fixtures, including wooden units and suspended rails, which lend freshness to the interior. Couple this





There's plenty of glamour on display in Topshop/Topman

with theatre-style box lights, free Wi-Fi (advertised on almost every pillar) and iPads that you can use to access your Twitter account or check out Topman's range and this is an engaging offer.

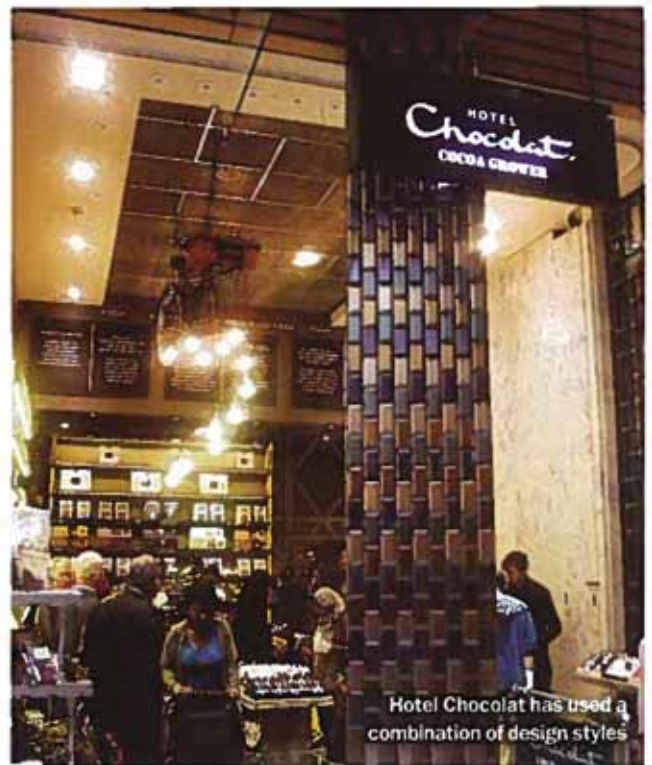
Across the floor, Topshop was, in some ways, more conventional in its layout, although the shoe department looked enticing.

Downstairs, in Topshop proper, trashy glamour was displayed on elon-

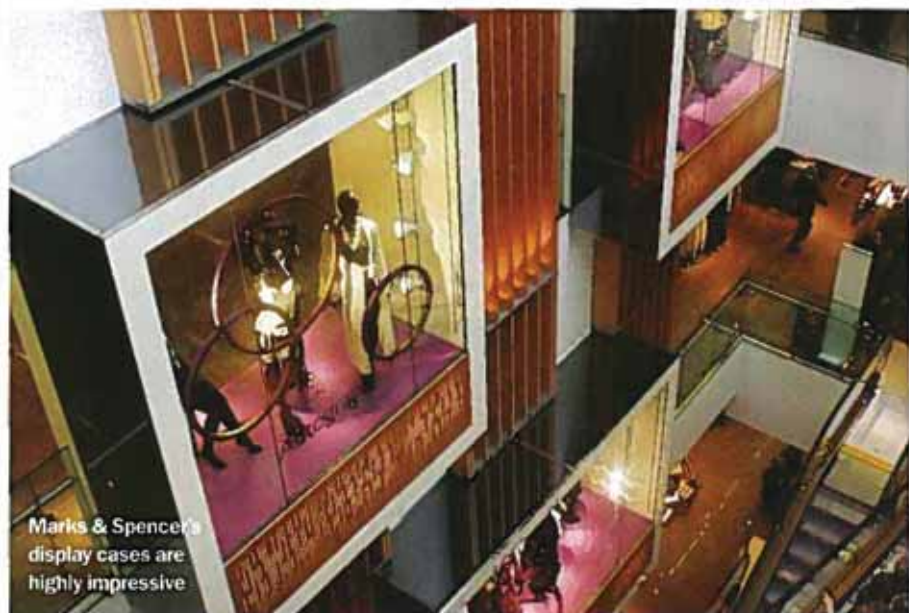
gated mannequins, and there was much to capture the eye.

Hotel Chocolat

Cheek by jowl with Waitrose and in the middle of Westfield Stratford's 'Great Eastern Market', Hotel Chocolat's store is a hybrid that combines elements of a standard branch with large chunks of the Rabot Estate 'cocoa shack', located in London's Borough Market.



Hotel Chocolat has used a combination of design styles



Marks & Spencer's display cases are highly impressive



Uniqlo's sheep have proven to be a talking point

Stretched and printed sacking on the upper perimeter provides the cocoa shack feel, as does a black bicycle that's suspended in the middle of the shop.

Vintage-looking wooden tables in the mid-shop complete the look, and the more standard Hotel Chocolat ambience is supplied by the product packaging. Even the sign above the entrance to the shop – Hotel Chocolat Cocoa Grower – is a departure for the retailer, and it fits well with the faux-Shoreditch meets St Lucia look that Westfield has tried to create at this end of the mall on the lower ground level.

Marks & Spencer

A lot has already been written about what Marks & Spencer is doing in its High Street Kensington store, and it was intended that its Stratford City store would place the new-look interior on a larger platform.

The food on offer in the basement, with its bakery, deli and international food components, was therefore familiar, but its high atrium was not. This consisted of long wooden planks

“WHAT'S ON VIEW IS AN INNOVATIVE WAY OF DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM OF EMPTY UNITS”

Empty units have been given false shop displays

attached to one wall, which curve at the top to meet the ceiling. Set within these are glass-fronted museum-style display cases, which are used to show off the clothing and home brands. Something similar has been done with light-boxes at Peek & Cloppenburg's flagship in Berlin, though this was altogether more impressive.

The cafe was also tempting, with a range of zones and furniture coupled with good views out of the windows.

Uniqlo

The Japanese retailer was busy and country manager Takao Kuwahara conducted a tour of the two-floor, 7,500 sq ft store. Kuwahara said that the interior was a new format, but in truth it looked little different from the kind of thing you might see along Oxford Street, apart from the fact that much of the equipment height was lower.

That said, this was a beautifully merchandised store, as all Uniqlo branches tend to be, and the glass box, complete with mini sheep, that filled part of the entrance was a real talking point.

It was also hard to miss the opening promotion, which took the form of jeans for under £10, as piles of these had been placed on tables just inside the entrance. Given the local demographic, the pricing in this store looks set to have considerable appeal.

Untenanted units

There were quite a few of these, and in normal circumstances you'd expect to find signs indicating that a new tenant is imminent. This approach had been eschewed in Westfield Stratford City, with the developer opting instead to create false shop windows and then to visually merchandise them to within an inch of their glass lives.

It was interesting that in a number of cases the outcome was somewhat better than the efforts made by some retailers. They also succeeded in avoiding that sinking feeling that can engulf the shopper when faced by a row of empty units. These will eventually disappear, but for the moment at least, what's on view is an innovative way of dealing with the problem of still to be let space.

