



In the menswear mood at M&S

Marks & Spencer has unveiled a new-look menswear department at Bluewater. Head of store design Teresa Clark tells John Ryan about the change

There's been a large branch of Marks & Spencer at Bluewater since the Kentish mall opened in March 1999 and in its decade-and-a-half-long life the store has undergone many changes.

They have ranged from a makeover of the food hall with the insertion of deli and restaurant elements to a new look for the shoe department and the construction of the spectacle that is the central atrium.

In many ways such is the magnitude of the store, which spreads across two large floors, that it has been possible to treat significant parts of the offer as shops within a shop, in keeping with M&S's stated aim of segmenting its fashion offer by brand. That in turn has meant that the store has been a testbed for its design team.

This is a busy branch. It is not in central London and the clientele passing through are generally pretty well-heeled, making it a good location in which to test new ideas.

Now it's the turn of the menswear department, which in the Bluewater store measures 14,400 sq ft. By the standards of many retailers that would be considered a large space for this category and the most cursory of glances at what has been done with the section, located on the store's upper level, would suffice to show that it has been broken up into distinct areas.

Concept 11

The department is an attempt to build on 'Concept 11', according to Teresa Clark, M&S's head of store design and international store development. Concept 11 was first given an outing at the retailer's massive store in Cheshire Oaks, Cheshire, which opened in 2012. Back then, the 151,000 sq ft store was seen as M&S's best effort at bringing the online and physical retail together under one roof.

There was rather more to Concept 11 than digital duvet and pillow selectors however. The store also highlighted the

M&S MENSWEAR, BLUEWATER

Created March 2014

Design In-house and selected consultancies (not disclosed)

Size 14,400 sq ft

Ambience Upscale and differentiated

Future Roll-out to 70 stores planned

Trade 8% ahead of control stores since opening

Standout feature Lightbox frieze in the underwear area

retailer's efforts to segment its various private-label fashion brands.

Things have now moved on and Clark says: "Concept 11 delivered new brand areas. Phase two has tackled the department as a whole, looking at the total shopping mission and playing to our strengths in menswear. For example, there's a completely new formalwear department and a new denim department."

Clear differentiation

Menswear in Bluewater looks like an upscale emporium where a range of materials palettes are deployed to foster the sense that there are different product areas across the floor. The outcome really is a sense of clear differentiation between the various brands.

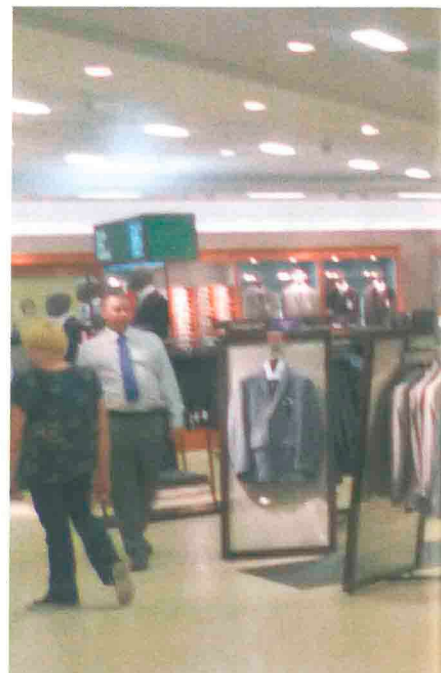
Practically, that translates as something akin to a mini menswear mall with shops for Autograph, Blue Harbour, North Coast, Collezione, Savile Row Inspired and M&S Collection.

Blue Harbour, for example, is separated from the rest by polished dark wood tables in the mid-shop complemented by open-fronted wardrobes in the same wood around the perimeter.

The brand signal is provided by navy wall panels onto which the brand name has been printed in a cream-coloured font. If you were to visit a Ralph Lauren store, you might be forgiven for thinking that perhaps the M&S store design team had also taken a look and been inspired by what they had seen – it has that sort of feel about it.

The treatment does succeed in creating a distinct area for the brand within the department and the same is true of all the other M&S menswear labels that are on display. There are some areas of menswear, however, that defy this kind of compartmentalisation – shirts, menswear, and jeans are all prime examples.

In the Bluewater store the shirt area is, for the most part, like an implant of the kind that Charles Tyrwhitt or TM Lewin might have dreamt up if charged with the task of creating an in-store



For more pictures of M&S Bluewater and more store galleries go to retail-week.com/stores



The new menswear department at Bluewater has been designed essentially as a series of discrete shop-in-shops. Each of M&S's private-label brands has a dedicated section with its own distinct look and feel





The Blue Harbour section of the department features wood tables with open wardrobes around the perimeter

area in a large shop. Shirts organised by collar shape, fit and neck size are displayed on mid-shop gondolas on the ends of which are graphics providing information about what is on offer.

And for those familiar with 'The White Shirt Bar' in the Thomas Pink flagship on London's Jermyn Street, a nod is made in that direction with a wall panel that is devoted to 'The White Shirt Collection'.

"THERE'S A NEW FORMALWEAR DEPARTMENT AND A NEW DENIM DEPARTMENT"

Teresa Clark,
Marks & Spencer

Again, the use of polished wood cladding on the merchandising equipment adds to the upscale feel. Mention should also be made of the jeans shop. Here jeans displayed full-length and forward-facing dominate the mid-shop, with folded stock on shelves around the perimeter.

Above the folded jeans there are lower-body mannequins that show the leg shape of each style. And in order to

avoid the possibility of monotony, mid-way along the wall there is a glass-fronted panel behind which the components that go into the making of a pair of jeans are on show – it's a case of what you see is what you get.

A refreshing change

There is nothing earth-shattering about this, but it is a world away from the side-facing presentation of trousers or jeans that used to typify the M&S commodity offer of old. And it is refreshing in consequence.

According to sources within the retailer, the Bluewater menswear experience is proving positive. The area currently trades 8% ahead of the control stores against which it is measured. Plans are in place to take what has been done here to 70 other stores in the near future and it is certainly a move away from the occasionally bland world of M&S menswear with which shoppers may be familiar.

On the day of visiting, the shop as a whole was busy and it is worth noting that the menswear department was getting more than its fair share of attention. M&S has come in for some flak about its fashion offer, male and female. Whether the stock actually measures up remains a moot point, but it is certainly fair to remark that at Bluewater the menswear department cuts the mustard when set against the competition in the mall.



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