

Reinventing Brum

John Lewis's investment in a new £35m store will make Birmingham the only city outside the capital with a Harvey Nichols, Selfridges, Debenhams, House of Fraser and a John Lewis. Opening later this year, the new 250,000 sq ft department store – one of the biggest John Lewis branches outside London – will anchor the new Grand Central Birmingham shopping centre.

Providing more than 200,000 sq ft of retail space for more than 40 new premium fashion and lifestyle shops, and more than 20 new concept cafes and restaurants, the centre is entering its final stage of construction as it prepares to open its doors this September.

It's been a long time coming for Britain's second city, with complications regarding the construction of the centre, including issues relating to car parks and taxi ranks, delaying opening from pre-Christmas 2014.

But, according to Grand Central leasing director Keith Stone, the wait should be worth it, with the redevelopment enhancing Birmingham's retail landscape. "Birmingham recognises that it needs to provide the best retail offer outside London," Stone says, and Grand Central does just that – transforming its retail centre to rival the likes of Glasgow and Leeds.

The development is fully integrated with Birmingham New Street station on the site formerly known as the old Pallasades shopping centre. Commuters, tourists and shoppers will enter and exit via escalators and lifts that take them directly into the shopping centre's vast atrium, together with entrances from New Street, Stephenson Street and the Bullring.

The domed, transparent roof, made from the same material used at the Eden Project in Cornwall, will be the heart of the centre, where shoppers will be encouraged to spend time socialising, being entertained "or even people-watching", Stone says. "It's designed to encourage dwell time."

The atrium itself is huge – in length it is almost the size of a football pitch, while its height would fit eight double-decker buses stacked on top of each other. For Stone, the fact Grand Central is above New Street station and will share a large majority of the same footfall is crucial. "Transport hubs are being recognised by the retail industry and becoming that much more important. New Street is in the heart of the city centre," he says, describing it as the "major hub station for the UK".

Grand Central Birmingham is one of four major shopping centres opening this year and will be anchored by one of the largest John Lewis stores outside London. **Laura Heywood** gets the lowdown



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Grand Central was the obvious choice for our first standalone store in Birmingham, being located at the heart of the city's retail offer

Sarah King, The White Company

In fact, New Street is the largest and busiest of the three main railway stations serving Birmingham. It's the major destination for Virgin Trains services from London Euston, Glasgow Central and Edinburgh Waverley via the West Coast Main Line, and the national hub of the CrossCountry network.

According to the Office of Rail Regulation, it's the eighth busiest railway station in the UK and busiest outside London, with more than 40 million people using the station annually. It is also the busiest interchange station outside London, with more than 5.1 million passengers changing trains at the station annually.

Such figures prove the "reach of New Street is massive", according to development director Richard Brown, who puts the catchment for Grand Central in the region of 5 million people.

But with popular shopping and leisure



Work in progress: construction continues in the atrium

RAL



Grand Central will bring even more shoppers to Birmingham

complex the Bullring and upmarket shopping and office development the Mailbox simply minutes down the road, how will Grand Central compete?

Complementing the city

“We have to provide something that doesn’t currently exist,” asserts Stone, and that thing is a premium retail offer with an experiential element. “Our aim is to try to introduce the best experience for the consumer – and not just in retailing,” adds Brown.

According to Brown, the new scheme will be “differentiated, rather than homogenous”. “We’re not trying to compete – it’s about complementing the rest of the city and about bringing in more spend. We predict over 50 million people a year will visit Grand Central, some daily visitors and commuters, others shoppers.”

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Our aspiration is for John Lewis Birmingham to become the cornerstone of wider regeneration in the south side of the city centre

Andy Street, John Lewis

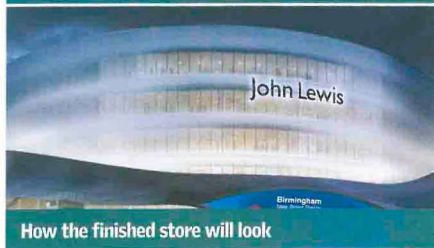
Among the biggest draws for shoppers will be John Lewis, which signed up to the scheme in 2011 and has been critical to its development. Brown predicts customers will flood into Birmingham off the back of John Lewis’s opening. “It will pull in newcomers. A lot of customers aren’t coming into Birmingham. A premium retail offering isn’t in every centre, so therefore it will bring in more spend to the city centre, and will benefit the whole of Birmingham, not just Grand Central.”

The 250,000 sq ft John Lewis store will stretch across four floors, offering more than 350,000 products including fashion, furniture, homewares, beauty and the latest technology.

The opening of one of the biggest John Lewis branches outside London also strengthens the perception that Birmingham – in retail terms – plays second fiddle only to the capital. ↘



The John Lewis shop under construction



How the finished store will look

Grand Central in a nutshell

- £150m premium retail and leisure destination
- Opens September 2015
- More than 200,000 sq ft of retail space
- More than 40 new premium fashion and lifestyle shops and 20 cafes and restaurants
- 85% of space currently signed
- 5 million catchment
- 250,000 sq ft John Lewis anchor store
- Birmingham is ranked fourth in CACI's retail rankings survey, behind London's West End, Glasgow and Manchester

21st-century dining

The food and beverage line-up “resonates with a 21st-century offering”, according to Stone. Popular eating outlets such as Pho, Caffé Concerto, Square Pie and Tapas Revolution will open restaurants in Birmingham for the first time. Most are currently only found in London and the Southeast.

“The investment from such well-known dining brands further demonstrates why we are so confident of the long-term benefits Grand Central and New Street Station will bring to the city,” he adds.

Technology will also be a key feature of the centre, with touchscreens helping shoppers with navigation and additional information. On the outside walls of the centre, facing out to passers-by, three digital screens in the shape of eyes will feature advertising and public information.

There’s no question that Birmingham is a city on the up thanks to the landmark transformational changes taking place. Not only will the opening of Grand Central result in it becoming the only city outside London to offer five of the UK’s major department stores, but it will increase investor interest, deepen the sense of community and further improve the city’s already impressive retail and leisure prospects.

As Stone concludes: “Grand Central is a new premium destination with all the benefits of regeneration. Birmingham recognises that it needs to provide the best retail offer outside of London. All of this investment has a huge spin off and benefits abound in the city centre.”

“Birmingham will have all the main players,” Stone says, with the Bullring boasting Selfridges and Debenhams, while Harvey Nichols, Marks & Spencer and House of Fraser are all nearby.

According to Stone, the early assurance that John Lewis wanted to be the anchor tenant enabled the scheme to attract a high calibre of retail names. “We could build up a premium brand off the back of John Lewis committing,” he explains.

These premium high street retail names include The White Company, Joules, Cath Kidston, Kiehl’s, L’Occitane, Fat Face and Monsoon Accessorize. In fact, about 80% of the retailers coming in are new to the city, Brown claims.

Grand Central’s premium positioning will be new for Birmingham, he adds. “Birmingham’s never had that – there’s been a big gap in premium offering in the city. A big consequence means a lot more affluent shoppers aren’t coming to Birmingham to shop.”

The retailers already signed up to the scheme certainly aren’t the only ones recognising the opportunity to be part of such a massive regeneration. Where the station sits has always been a “busy thoroughfare”, Brown claims, and premises facing the main entrance have already been snapped up by developers, quick to recognise the opportunity to be positioned opposite the main entry and exit points of the city’s newest shopping destination.