

## STORES

Birmingham's Bullring is home to the latest store format from River Island. **John Ryan** pays a visit and talks to chief executive Ben Lewis

# A River runs throu

**O**ne of the problems facing any fashion retailer is maintaining relevance. Trends come and go and all too often a store's interior can look wildly misplaced as something almost entirely unexpected in the fashion stakes heaves into view.

For this reason the notion that the time between store refurbishments is becoming ever shorter has currency. Where five to seven years used to be acknowledged as an appropriate span in the lifetime of a fit-out, two to three years is now viewed as perfectly normal.

There is nothing wrong with that if you are a shopper perhaps, but for the retailer it equates to a substantial and unrelenting strain on the capex budget that was not so pressing just a few years ago.

## In-built flexibility

Perhaps with that in view, River Island has just launched a new store in Birmingham's Bullring shopping centre that is based on the notion of 'The Event'. Translated, this means a retail space that has in-built flexibility and can provide a 'wow factor' on a more regular basis.

Designed by the in-house team working with consultancy Dalziel & Pow, this large store sits on what was previously one level of Forever 21, which downsized to a single floor on the lower level in May 2014.

Close to a year later the space has become a two-floor, 23,000 sq ft River Island with an impressive frontage and a raft of new features that qualify the label 'concept' being attached to it.

Standing across the mall from this flagship, it is hard not to be impressed. The majority of fashion stores consist of an entrance flanked by windows and normally the former is considerably smaller than the latter. Not so in River Island Birmingham, where most of the frontage is open and the windows play a very secondary role.

It is worth remarking that while all of the other stores on this top level of the Bullring are the same height, none



### RIVER ISLAND, BULLRING, BIRMINGHAM

**Size** 23,000 sq ft

**Opened** March 27

**Number of floors** 2

**Design** In-house with Dalziel & Pow

**Standout feature**

The entrance

of them have River's open frontage. And given that storefronts should be about standing out, there can be little doubt that this initial fashion health-check is a positive thumbs up.

Moving across the threshold, the initial vista is dramatic. River Island chief executive Ben Lewis says: "We have drawn on the sort of details you'd see at a press event or exhibition to

create a retail space that is interesting and distinctive from the moment you enter the store."

His words are tangible from the off with a large, slanted, circular plinth dominating the entrance and filled with mannequins dressed to tell a particular story. To the left and right of this are what brand manager Emilia Higgins refers to as "icebergs". These

For a video tour of River Island's new Bullring store visit [Retail-week.com/riverislandbullring](http://Retail-week.com/riverislandbullring)



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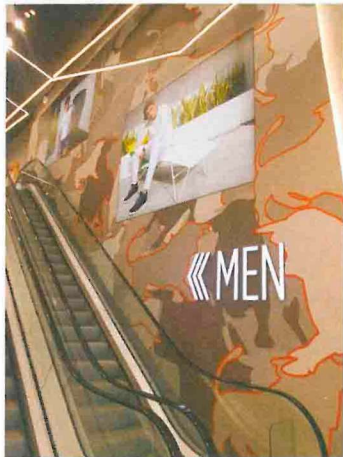
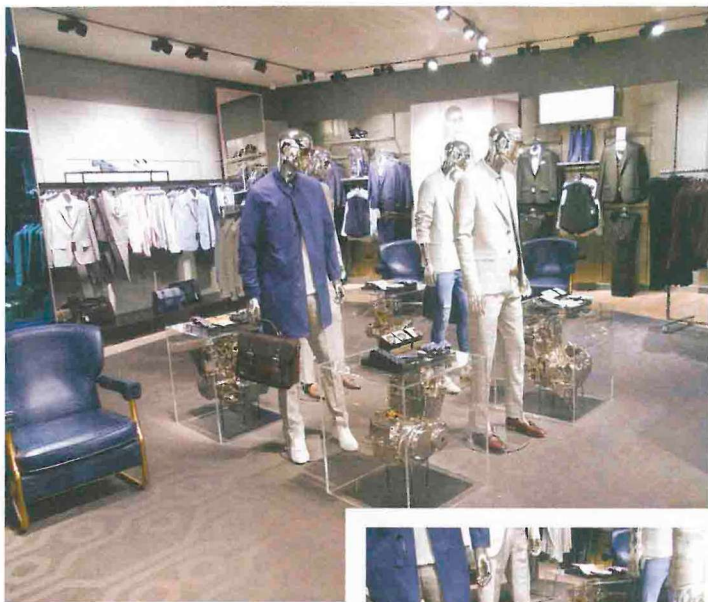
**Ben Lewis, River Island**

are small, irregularly shaped plinths on which small groups of mannequins are organised in order to tell further fashion stories.

The flooring changes as the shopper heads towards the back of the 11,500 sq ft womenswear department, fostering the idea of different shop-in-shops.

Note should also be made of the walls. This is a long, deep store, but

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► there is little sense of it being box-like because the perimeter wall has been reshaped to create eccentric planes that emerge at different angles and which are at different heights, again creating a keen sense of standalone areas.

## Areas of interest

All of which means that when coupled with the one-off pieces of furniture, including a spectacular copper ‘egg’ chair, the shopper will be aware of a denim area, a casual area and a more formal area, among other things.

The mid-shop equipment is, to an extent, River Island standard, but it has been recoloured to create difference and ranges on this floor from ‘rose gold’ to white.

Towards the back there is a long cash desk with a floor-to-ceiling graphic and beyond that there is a “shoe and boot room”. It is carpeted, rather than wood-floored and as Higgins says, has a

strong feel of being a discrete boutique, as well as having an upscale feel, helped by the pair of parrot-print chairs in the centre.

The fitting rooms are spacious and with white neon signage, have glamour about them. And for those with time on their hands and a need perhaps to be clad top-to-toe in River Island there is the new RI Style Studio. It offers a free styling service on an appointment basis and is filled with soft sofas and lighting.

The final element of this floor is the 3,000 sq ft kids shop-in-shop. It is the first time that River Island has had a childrenswear department in Birmingham and it is the retailer’s largest.

Menswear is on the 6,500 sq ft

mezzanine floor and is accessed via the escalator to the right of the entrance. The wall that backs it has an abstract pattern of bulls, helping to give the store a link with its location.

This floor has a rather more sober, urban feel about it and the dominant colour is grey. Once more, mannequin groupings are used to define specific areas, but the most dramatic feature is found in a room towards the back of the floor that is home to the River Island formalwear offer. Here there are glass tables supported by chromed engines, not unlike what could have been seen on the erstwhile *Top Gear* set.

Mention should also be made of the large light box against the perimeter wall next to the formalwear

room. It is one of several around the store and in this instance a chromed *Tyrannosaurus rex* strikes an appropriately masculine note.

## Easy to replicate

This is the second largest River Island in the retailer’s estate – only Liverpool is larger – and it is in the fashion vanguard of this mid-market part of the Bullring.

It is also flexible and capable of being changed quickly. There was a River Island in the unit next door and it closed just one week prior to this one opening on March 27.

The main point about what has been done here is that there are large numbers of elements that can easily be replicated.

Lewis has high hopes: “I’d expect the design to appeal to our loyal shoppers who really buy into and love the River Island brand but we expect we will also encourage new customers to come and explore for themselves,” he says.

Judging by what has been done, his optimism is justified. This looks like a future River Island template. ■