

STORES

John Lewis's newest store is a great addition to Birmingham's retail landscape. **John Ryan** reports

John Lewis sets stand

It has been a long time coming, or at least it seems that way, but the new John Lewis store in Birmingham is finally open. And perhaps the first question that needs to be asked is why has it taken middle England's favourite department store so long to reach, well, middle England?

Birmingham has long had the 'second city' tag applied to it, but in recent years that mantle has, to an extent, headed north to Manchester.

Yet Birmingham is a city that already boasts a House of Fraser, Selfridges, Harvey Nichols and Debenhams, on which reckoning it would be reasonable to suppose that John Lewis might have been in place long before now and that second city status would have been assured.

Whatever the thought processes that informed the decision not to open a branch in this location earlier, it is here now and the 170,000 sq ft, four-floor edifice is a futuristic vision made of steel and glass – and it looks very shiny.

The store sits above the revamped New Street station and is the anchor of the newly opened Grand Central shopping mall, which is between the city's Bullring and Mailbox shopping centres.

Inside Grand Central, the store dominates its surroundings. The John Lewis logo takes pride of place, positioned directly above the sign that indicates the station.

Branded house

In a former life Grand Central was a decades old scheme called The Pallasades. Part of that scheme forms the entrance to John Lewis. The ceiling heights are lower than the new centre and because of this the architects have had their work cut out.

It means that the entry to the lower level, where the store entrance is located, has a much lower ceiling than the rest of the interior and one of the challenges, according to John Lewis's head of store design, Kim Morris, was to make this inviting.

The solution has been to create a very wide walkway with beauty brands on either side, affording shoppers views into the more spacious



JOHN LEWIS, BIRMINGHAM

Opened September 24

Size 170,000 sq ft

Design In-house with elements from Dalziel + Pow and GP Studio

Store fit-out ISG

Standout features

The Place to Eat and the homewares floor

Ambience Calm with a sense of humour

main body of the shop. The floor covering at the entrance has been kept light to banish dinginess. And although there are many big-name beauty brands in this area, it is immediately apparent that it is wholly owned by John Lewis, rather than being quasi-appropriated by brands.

It is a line of thinking that informs much of what has been done in the store. Morris says: "Our research has shown that while our customers like the 'calm' interiors that we have, they



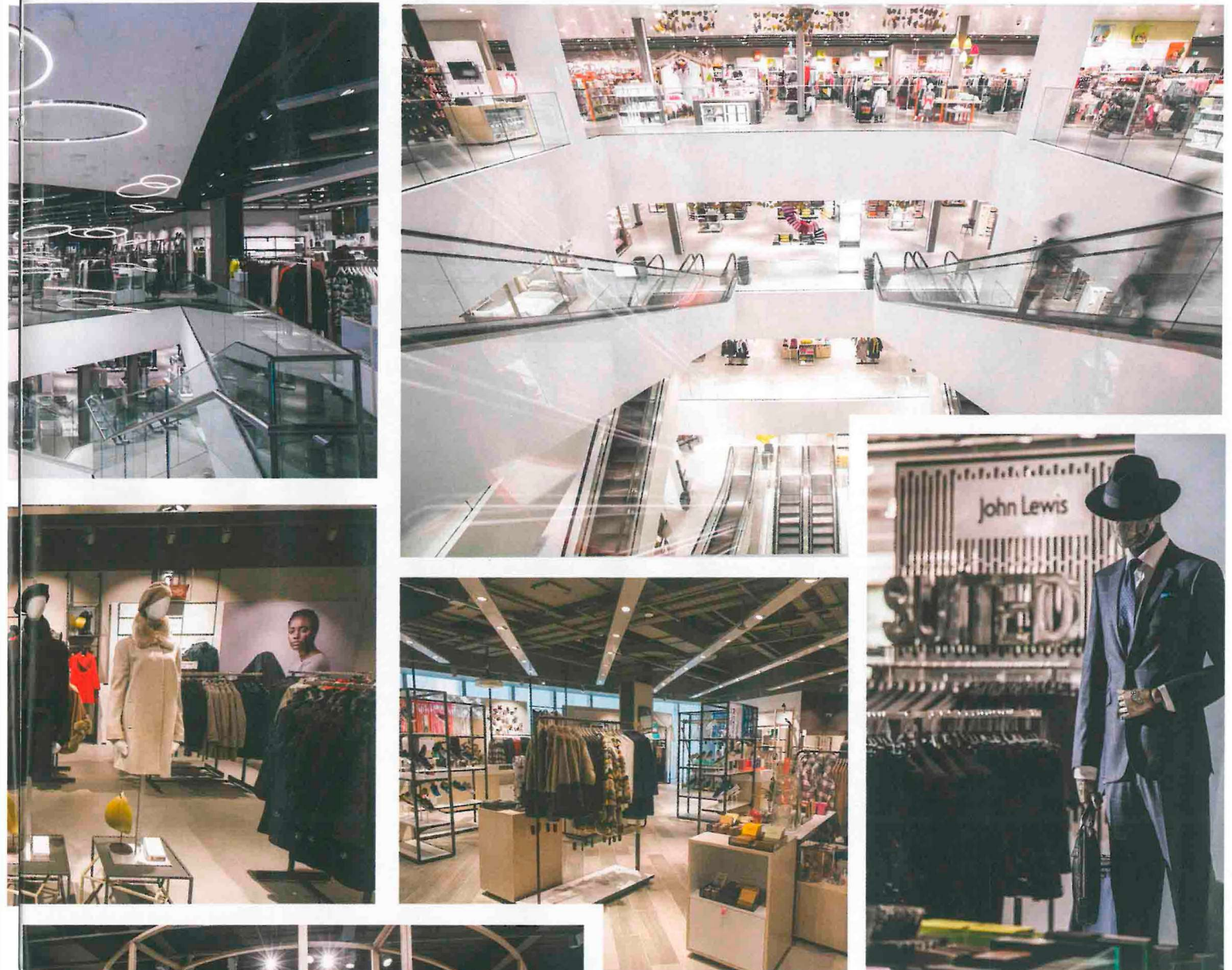
sometimes feel that we have lacked inspiration. So we've effectively taken every department from homewares and The Place to Eat to haberdashery and gone back and asked ourselves 'how could we do things better?'"

She observes that this is the first full-line store to open since the Stratford branch four years ago, and the nature of omnichannel retailing has changed the rules for retailers: "We've had to come to terms with the fact that more shopping is done online, so

Watch John Lewis head of store design Kim Morris explain the Grand Central fit-out at Retail-week.com/JLBirmingham



ards in Birmingham



we need to provide more inspiration in our stores.”

Product pizzazz

Walking beyond the beauty department shoppers arrive at the central escalator atrium that offers views up to the other floors. Windows have been inserted on each level around the atrium enabling the store’s visual merchandising team to tell stories detailing what each floor is about.

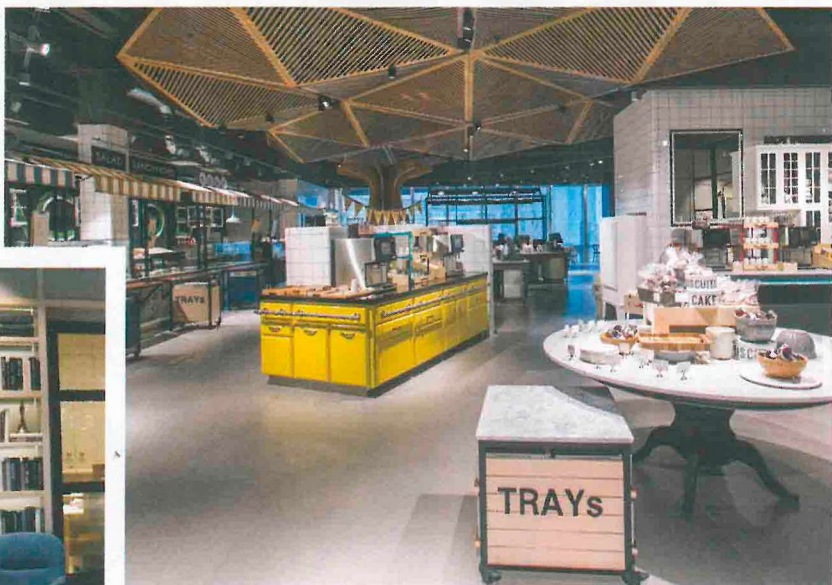
On the same floor as beauty is the

menswear offer, a rapidly growing department for John Lewis and one where the visual merchandising is of the same high standard as its standalone menswear rivals on the high street.

Part of the floor is devoted to kitchenwares, with a highlight being a scary display of knives contained within a raised glass cabinet attached to part of the perimeter wall.

Those in search of gifts, electrical appliances, silverware and stationery, ▶

STORES



will also find them on this floor.

The second floor is focused on women's fashion with the new Loved & Found semi-discrete shop-in-shop forming part of the level. A white neon sign marks out the department, while a collection of suspended neon circles add a little pizzazz to proceedings.

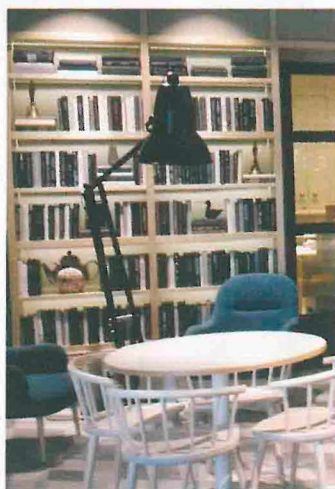
The 'branded house' strategy has been pretty rigidly pursued, but there is still a sense of the brands being allowed to express their voice amidst all of this.

Category authority

The third floor, home to homewares, is the level that Morris says she is happiest with. This is a floor of many parts, from lighting to beds, but what unifies the departments is a sense of humour coupled with category authority.

The fabric department is a case in point. There is little doubting the sense of authority about such a large space devoted to rolls of fabric, but the fabric insects crowding around fabric toadstools on one of the walls and the extended mobile featuring a flock of cream-coloured seagulls overhead make it fun to visit.

A similar experience awaits those heading into the bed department, where a white neon sign announces The Sleep Room, accompanied by an array of mattresses lined up verti-



"We've taken every department and asked ourselves 'how could we do things better?'"

**Kim Morris,
John Lewis**

cally against a wall and a visual prop composed of Zs. The visual merchandising on this floor really sets it apart.

On the top floor the product mix is comparable – in many ways – to what is done in the Oxford Street flagship, with a technology shop and sports department, among others.

There is also a toy shop, which is about children having fun, according to Morris. In this area there are child-level orange microphones into which children can speak and their voices will then be transmitted to speakers around the department. At the same time they can examine the toys with the aid of outsize magnifying glasses, also orange, that are attached to the sides of the gondolas.

The show on this floor however is stolen by The Place to Eat a cafe that features market stall-style

serveries, giant lampshades over the tables and a library wall that features books bought from a company called Books by the Foot. If this were a high street eatery most shoppers would probably head in through the door and the feeling in this cafe in a department store is likely to be more or less the same.

"We've tried to find new ways of bringing the assortment to life," says Morris. It would appear she and her team have been successful, but would she have done anything differently? "Every time you walk round you tend to think 'I know what I'm going to do next time'. For me it's a case of joining the dots," she adds.

For shoppers in Birmingham, this looks likely to be a destination store and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. ■