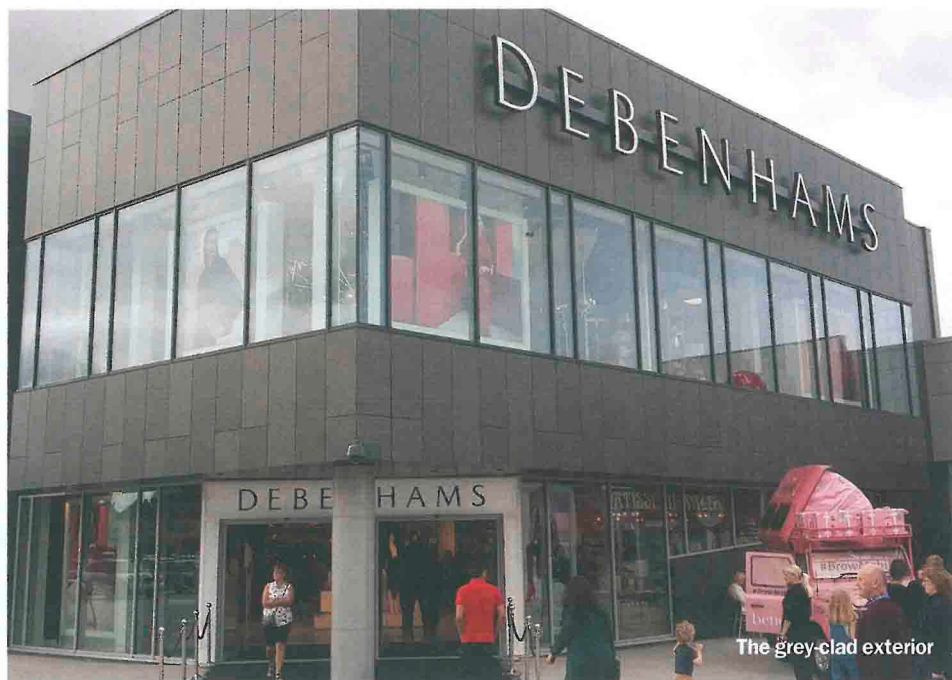


STORES

Bucher's first Debenhams

In an exclusive interview, **John Ryan** discusses the new Stevenage branch of Debenhams and the future of the retailer with boss Sergio Bucher



The grey-clad exterior

At the time of writing, Debenhams' share price was a little above the 40p mark. Three months back it was still north of 50p; a year ago it was above 60p. Things don't look too bright, as far as investors are concerned.

Yet last week the department store retailer gave the first hint that change, real change, is on the agenda with the opening of a store in Stevenage.

At 70,000 sq ft and spread across two floors, this is a shop that would be worthy of consideration at any rate; department store openings are relatively few and far between these days.

The real point about it, however, is that it represents the first demonstration of the thinking of recently installed chief executive Sergio Bucher. He joined Debenhams from Amazon in October last year and one of his first actions in the role was to put a halt to the store revamp programme: "I looked at a lot of stores

and was quite unimpressed by the modernisations and so I put it all on hold in November," he tells Retail Week.

By this time, the Debenhams store in Stevenage was already off the drawing board and construction was well under way. Bucher wanted the blueprint changed, but was realistic about what could be done. "I would describe the store as a hack. We had two to three months to redesign things," he relates.

He says that as well as redesigning the layout and reconfiguring the customer journey, there was a desire to make things "easy and fun" for both shoppers and colleagues.

"We wanted to make the store inviting and friendly. The aim was to make people feel good about being in our store," says Bucher.

This was actually a tall order given that the other requirement was for the store to be designed in-house, and be delivered to the same timeline and budget as originally anticipated.



Let there be light

From the outside, this is a grey slab-sided structure, punctuated by a fair amount of glass, particularly on the upper level, allowing shoppers views in to the Costa café and ensuring that the interior of the store has high levels of natural daylight.

Entering by the main door, what is apparent straight away is that while daylight helps, it is aided in no small measure by a store-wide lighting scheme that uses recessed LED spotlights. This is courtesy of Swedish lighting manufacturer Fagerhult.

A series of neon tube lighting sculptures add zest to the whole layout.

The latter is the outcome of reusing tubes that were stored in the Oxford Street flagship, where they had been deployed as part of a Christmas display.

Reinstalled, they form geometric shapes overhead, creating a sense of excitement to

See more photos of the new
Stevenage Debenhams
Retail-Week.com/Stores



The sculptural tube lighting is dramatic



Debenhams Stevenage

What makes it different?

- High levels of daylight
- Departments are defined by equipment, not internal walls
- 'Mats' do not form any part of the layout, increasing flexibility
- A more slightly more aspirational food offer
- Supply chain changes, taking stock straight to the floor

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**Sergio Bucher,
Debenhams**

fashion, particularly where the ceiling height lowers, away from the several in-store areas void of anything to add drama to both floors.

That said, there is nothing that feels cramped about this interior. This is due both to the fact there are no mid-shop freestanding walls – “we’ve used the furniture to create the departments”, Bucher says – and densities are

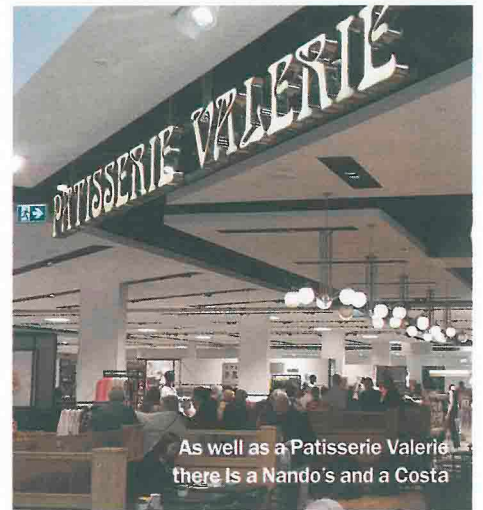
also lower than elsewhere across the estate. Bucher adds that keeping density low means a new way of working has been adopted for this branch: “We’ve had to modify the supply chain to the store with merchandise going straight to the floor, instead of into the stockroom.”

Work in progress

In some ways this is a standard department store, with beauty and accessories on the ground floor, as well as womenswear, while kids’, menswear and homewares are upstairs.

But the fact that no use is made of departmental mats, the usual practice in retail environments of this kind, means it is much more flexible when it comes to remerchandising, according to Bucher.

It is also cheaper, and Bucher says that if the Stevenage modus operandi were adopted elsewhere, fit-out costs would be 10-15% lower. This is a good-looking store, although it is not



the finished article as far as the boss Bucher is concerned. “I don’t describe this as a store of the future, it is a first step in the right direction,” he says.

A new store is due to open in Wolverhampton, and the remodelled Uxbridge store will open with 20% less space.

“What we want to do is to learn from these stores and probably in six to nine months we’ll be in a position to say that our store of the future looks like this,” Bucher says.

Shoppers in Stevenage were clearly impressed on opening day when the store was number two, behind Oxford Street, in terms of turnover.

And if you really don’t fancy buying on your first visit to this one, there’s a Nando’s, a Patisserie Valerie and a Costa to choose from while you mull things over.

Debenhams’ decline might just be about to go into reverse. **RW**