



## EYE CANDY

SELFRIDGES BIRMINGHAM, UK



DESIGNED BY London-based practice Future Systems, Selfridges Birmingham opened late this year. The £40m (\$AUD 96m) investment is the fourth Selfridges store, and a focal point of the recently developed Bullring site, part of Europe's largest inner-city regeneration project. Located in the bland surrounds of Birmingham's main shopping district (with the largest population catchment of any UK city outside London), Selfridges is well-placed to attract attention.

Taking less than four years to complete, the new building provides 17,500sqm of retail space that includes shopping spaces, a food hall, bars and restaurants. The ambitions of the competition-winning scheme were not matched by the budget, which was the same per square metre as the rest of the centre.

"We had to find an inventive way of cladding the building," explains Amanda Levete of Future Systems. Disregarding the usual demand for all-embracing ground-level glazing, the exterior is wrapped in a skin of 15,000 anodised aluminium discs, which were chosen for their lustre, and ability to reflect changes in light, the city, and passers-by. The steel mesh and sprayed concrete shell rises 37m from the ground with a fluidity of form that allows no distinction between walls or roof, and conceals the four-storey steel-framed building within.

There is no external signage (the building promotes itself) but a number of entrances from St Martin's Square, the

shopping centre, and a high-level bridge connection access the site. Once inside, the need for daylight is addressed with generous twin atriums, around which floor plates slope, to maximise the light in lower levels. Each level has been fitted out by a different design team, so the atria provides a sense of orientation and fortifies the constancy of the interior. The glossy white GRP balustrades (a welcome departure from customary glass) clearly define each floor, and contrast with the matt-white underbellies of the over-sized escalators. "With triple-height ceilings, highly-sculpted surfaces and the dramatic play of light from the roof of the building, the entire interior space is quite unlike any store," says Levete.

The use of architecture as part of a development sales pitch is not unusual, but is frequently associated with generous budgets. Here, basic construction techniques are applied in order to achieve the extraordinary. "It's a very conventional structure, but it's the way we have used the technology that is unconventional," explains Levete. Selfridges is now working with Japanese architect Toyo Ito and London-based Foreign Office Architects to develop further stores, with the fifth expected to open in Glasgow in 2007.

Cat Martin