DESIGNED BY London-based practice Future Systems, Selfridge’s Birmingham opened late last year. The £295m (US$500m) West investment is the fourth Selfridge store, and a focal point of the recently developed Bullring site, part of Europe’s largest inner-city regeneration project. Located in the bland surrounding 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 Lewis of Future Systems. "Overcoming the usual demand for all embracing ground-level glazing, the exterior is wrapped in a skin of 15,000 moulded aluminium disks, which were chosen for their texture, and ability to reflect changes in light, the city, and seasons. By the steel mesh and sprayed concrete shell rises 35m 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 across the site. Once inside, the need for daylight is addressed with generous twin atriums, around which four planes shall, to envelop the light in lower levels. Each level has been lifted out by a different design theme, so the atria provides a sense of orientation and fortifies the continuity of the interior. The gleamy white GRP shell stands like a welcoming destination from the customary glass cladding each floor, and contrast with the marbled undercarriages of the open-air 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 other," says Lewis.

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

Col Martin