

Heralding the arrival of a British icon

Topshop's first New Zealand store is bringing excitement back to retail. Elly Strang found out more about the sprawling two-storey, 1200 square metre Queen St hub.

The initial opening hype from its March launch may have died down, but Topshop won't be soon forgotten.

Managing director of Top Retail, Jamie Whiting, summarises Topshop's opening week in numbers: over 1200 people, queued three blocks down Queen Street, before the doors opened at 10am on March 12. The queues continued for four days.

Excited fans were even camping out on the street the night beforehand just to be one of the first customers through the doors.

"This says it all," he says.

The Queen St flagship is Topshop's first standalone store on New Zealand soil.

Not to be confused with Retail NZ's Top Shop competition, Topshop the label is best known for being in the vanguard of the international "fast fashion" movement. It provides fashion-forward consumers with affordable pieces based off current catwalk trends.

Topshop and its menswear offering, Topman, have been stocked at The Department Store in Takapuna since 2009, but that first taster is nowhere near the same scale as the Queen St store.

The Queen St store stocks Topman and Topshop's full ranges and is a department store in itself.

The store is owned by Top Retail, which is made up of Whiting, award-winning New Zealand designer Karen Walker and rich-lister Philip Carter through his company Crossing CBD.

Whiting says it was important to Top Retail and Arcadia Design (Topshop's UK architects) that the Queen St outlet was a true flagship store

in every sense of the word.

The location, the scale of the store and the design all had to reflect this.

"Bringing such a high profile fashion brand like Topshop Topman to the market and being our first store in New Zealand, we wanted to bring the best of what the brand had to offer, and give the New Zealand fans a sense of something new and exciting," he says.

The corner of Queen St and Victoria St was picked as the prime location.

It was formerly occupied by a bank and had little engagement with the street, Whiting says.

He says the design brief was to transform a tired urban environment into a dynamic retail space and shop front, which would enhance Queen St's streetscape.

An extensive team was assembled to bring the first New Zealand Topshop store to life.

Architects hailing from three different countries collaborated on the store.

Whiting says UK-based Arcadia Design controlled the concept of the store and the design, as it has done worldwide with its Topshop stores.

Arcadia took inspiration from "The Grove" store in West Hollywood, LA for the Queen St store's design.

"The Emporium" store in Melbourne and New York's fifth flagship opened up during the design process, so Whiting says design elements crept across from those two stores.

UK-based Zebra Architects was the implementation architect, while the local implementation architect was Jason Gerrand from Auckland-based JCY.



The local documentation architects was Australian-based Studio Ginger.

Whiting says though Arcadia chose the 'personality' of the store, the New Zealand team was heavily involved with the store layout and what would work best from an operational and customer flow point-of-view.

Seeing as the shop's previous life was as an ANZ bank, major external and internal changes were made.

This included a complete refurbishment and retail fit out, including a shop front and canopy replacement and an escalator and feature wall installation.

Studio Ginger design principal Luke Cannon says only the structural columns and lift remained from the building's previous design.

The internal walls, external canopies and shop front were removed and replaced.

Cannon says the new shop front and external canopy were some of the more challenging aspects of the redesign process.

"Working on a high visibility corner with ramped footpaths challenged JCY, the engineers and Alaska [the tenderers of the project]," he says.

Walls were erected around the shop front while work was being done, shrouding the shop's appearance in secrecy until the big reveal.

Cannon says the challenge internally was to make sure the space could hold the stock and customer volume.

The shop receives a product drop of up to 300 new items a week, so ample space was needed to accommodate it.

A slab infill increased the floor plate on the mezzanine, which houses menswear, while the grand staircase and escalator provide in store transport for large amounts of people.

Whiting says the highlight of the shop for him personally is the grand staircase.

"The scale and design is just awesome, and the engineering behind it was quite a feat," he says.

The stairs are constructed out of steel framing and clad with corian stone balustrades and white European oak treads.

They had to be craned section-by-section into the space.

"It is definitely a key feature in the store design as you walk in the store – the scale and height is so impressive," Whiting says.

The colour scheme has been kept neutral, with black ceilings and white walls and flooring. Pops of colour are provided by the clothing on the racks and mannequins.

JCY's Gerrard says store staff change mannequins' outfits weekly when new products arrive, to keep up with the fast-paced fashion environment.

He says the colour palette of the store is



deliberately done to create contrasts.

This includes putting shiny metal alongside rough brick finishes and coloured glass and porcelain alongside wide timber planks.

Luxurious and industrial design features are also juxtaposed to create a modern, on-trend look.

Bold neon lights are placed on feature walls, which look like the wallpaper is peeling off.

Gerrard says the design of the store was carried out on a very tight time frame from inception to delivery.

The busy setting was a hindrance, as contractors had to work around when Queen St could be partly closed to deliver and install the steel and glass.

Wind tunnel testing and a wind report had to

be done at the council's request to make sure the new glass canopy would be feasible and provide shelter for passers by.

A unique feature of the store is separate individual stylist suites to provide a personal shopping service.

"The personal stylist rooms are definitely quite a different service we provide that isn't common amongst other fashion retailers," Whiting says.

"[Shoppers] can book a personal styling session with either Topshop or Topman, and our stylists will work with you to assess your personal style, then pull together outfits and designs that will work with your look."

There are also shoe and beauty specialists and

in-store DJ booths for DJs to play music live.

"The whole environment is designed to create the hype and excitement that goes with Topshop Topman's vibrant brand personality," Whiting says.

Studio Ginger's Cannon says the scale of the store is a feat in itself.

"We haven't experienced these single-brand stores that, in store size, sit between standard strip shopping and department stores," he says.

Three months have passed since the opening and on any given day, customers are drawn into the store like bees to honey.

The shop is still bustling with activity and is arguably one of the liveliest stores operating in Auckland city.

It has also opened up 55 jobs in retail, from styling managers to PR people.

This number is bound to increase, as plans are underway to roll Topshop out to other cities in New Zealand.

Wellington has been announced as the next Kiwi shop to open.

Walker told the Dominion Post that she thinks they may have found the right location for the Wellington store, but Whiting is staying coy on the subject.

He says finding the right place for a store involves a detailed process internally with Arcadia, so he can't confirm whether they've found a place.

"We are actively working on future sites at

present, but are not at a point where we can confirm any further details about these right now," he says.

There are also plans for a Christchurch store and a second store in Auckland.

A British powerhouse like Topshop bringing its full bricks and mortar offering here brings a thrill of excitement back into Auckland CBD's shopping scene.

It may even pave the way for other overseas brands to make their way here, making the CBD an international retail destination.

With its fast-paced, vibrant environment targeted at the younger generation, all hope is not lost for the future of retail. By the looks of things, it's just getting started. **R**