

NEXT TUESDAY, 150 CIVIC AND BUSINESS LEADERS of Bath will gather to celebrate the topping-out ceremony of SouthGate, the shopping centre under construction that echoes the architectural traditions of Bath. Developer Multi Development, funder Morley, and contractor Sir Robert McAlpine will draw attention to the highest point of the construction, now known as Building B, one of six buildings that will comprise the new centre. By the end of next year, H&M will occupy 21,500 sq ft of building C.

The opening of the Swedish retailer in a modern pastiche development is significant. It would never have considered leasing anything in Bath's irregularly shaped shops in the prime pitch of Milsom, Union or Stall Streets, because it needs modern units. The guests will cheer the fact that the development replaces the demolished 1976 Southgate Centre. The brutalist, inward-looking centre won prizes for the architect, Owen Luder, but was too un-Bath-like to attract retailers or shoppers.

Yet as they cheer, the city's leaders cannot escape the fact that only three retailers have signed leases on the 444,000 sq ft, £350m new centre. Debenhams came on board first by anchoring the scheme with a 125,000 sq ft department store. This will open in 2010, on the former site of the bus station opposite the city's railway station.

At the end of last year, Boots announced that it was joining H&M with a 28,000 sq ft store, but no other retailer has added its name to the tenant mix since then. And at next

week's ceremony, there will be no further announcements to keep the party spirit alive.

Jon Munce, Multi's development manager, says: 'We haven't signed agreements to lease with further retailers, although we are working hard on the major space units, and are hopeful that before the end of September or October, there will be a number of new retailers.'

Munce dismisses the need to think of SouthGate as a shopping centre where, during the construction period, the percentage of floor space leased is minutely tracked by the property industry. He explains: 'I think that from our perspective, we don't want to brand or to have SouthGate perceived as a shopping centre when it is part of a world heritage site.'

'You can't compare it with Cabot Circus in Bristol or Princesshay in Exeter. But having said that, it is a difficult leasing market at the moment, and it would be silly not to admit that. It is difficult to get retailers to commit to high rents, but we are confident that, because of our product, we can buck the trend.'

FORTUNATE DESIGN

Certainly, SouthGate's design is fortunate. Because it has six separate buildings, three of them for shops with flats above, individual buildings can open when they are tenanted. The other buildings are for public use and include a new bus station and an improved Bath Spa railway station.

'Naturally, with only three retailers signed up, Munce is unwilling to discuss rents, apart from

saying: 'We are confident that we will match or exceed prime zone A rents in Bath.'

Prime zone A is now £250.

The only other piece of news that may become public by the topping-out is the name of the housing association that will take over the 25 flats for social housing, interspersed among the 100 units on top of the shops. The flats will be fitted out by a separate contractor from the main contractor, and will probably not be ready for occupation until 2010.

Yet, while occupiers are proving hard to sign up, construction is well advanced, and one of the three retail buildings is now clad in honey-coloured Bath stone. By the next decade, SouthGate will blend in with Bath masterpieces such as the Roman Baths and the abbey.

And while Bath architecture recreates its stone-facaded past, and all 20th-century brutalism is demolished, one of the city's genuinely 18th-century retail jewels has been given a minimalising 21st-century look. Milsom Place is a collection of new and listed buildings that run between the prime Milsom Street and the secondary Broad Street. Restoration and construction ended last week but, according to the developer Ken Elliott, director of the L&R Group, 'There will be no launch. The tenants will just come in and start trading.'

Milsom Place has an advantage over SouthGate in that it was a restoration-and-expansion project. That meant existing retailers could continue trading for the 18 months of work. But like Munce at SouthGate, Elliott →

← insists that Milsom Place is not a shopping centre, and is more akin to the specialist shopping streets of the London estates, such as Marylebone High Street.

Whatever Milsom Place is, it has so far had an unsuccessful 20 years of trading. ARC Properties refurbished the old buildings and renamed them Shires Yard in 1988. But it was a development in the backlands of two streets, made dingy by enclosed walkways and dark wooden finishes. Hermes, which had prefunded the original scheme, sold it to Bath-based developer L&R Group in 2001. L&R had carried out a similar makeover on Royal Windsor station, turning it into a place for speciality shopping, before selling it on to Axa in 2003.

ELEGANT ENVIRONMENT

After securing finance from KBC Bank, L&R set about opening up Shires Yard, renaming it Milsom Place and creating 15 units, partly by buying derelict listed buildings nearby to add to the scheme. The entire transformation, acquisition and development cost £13m.

The most important addition to Milsom Place is the grade I-listed Octagon Chapel, bought on a long lease from Bath and North East Somerset Council. During its consecrated days in the 18th century, the chapel attracted London's best organists and preachers, but it fell on hard times, becoming a saleroom for Malletts, the fine art dealer, and a photographic library, with its windows blacked out. Now L&R has completed restoring it in pastel colours with a moulded ceiling and its friezes mended to create a 7,000 sq ft shop.

As for the question of which luxury retailer will be take advantage of this gracious setting, and at what cost, Elliott will only say that, so far, retailers have found it difficult to envisage the space before it is completed, and that rent is calculated on a base rent and turnover.

Certainly, the occupier will not have a street frontage, but it will have classy neighbours in Milsom Place such as Ted Baker and Phase 8, the fashion retailer that has just leased 3,200 sq ft on the Broad Street end of the scheme.

The scheme is 70% let, but Elliott insists that he is refusing to give away the financial incentives that developers of some large shopping centres have done.

'We have a very firm idea of what we want in Milsom Place, and it is being marketed as a place for quality fashion,' he says.

He already had the comfort from the return of those who were in Shires Yard, such as independent fashion retailer AH Moda, and next month, Jamie Oliver opens one of the first branches of his Jamie's Italian restaurant chain in 5,000 sq ft.

Both Elliott and Munce must hope that Oliver will be the first of many celebrities with faith in Bath who will come into their developments – which must, of course, never be referred to as shopping centres. ■

Bath bubbles

■ The historic architectural style of Bath is making a comeback in two new developments. But will this be enough to tempt businesses? Christine Eade reports



↓ Traditional style: SouthGate is more in keeping with Bath than the brutalist Southgate Centre it replaces



← Come again: the open architecture of Milsom Place, where old and new combine

