

At close Quarters – St James is shaping up

The clutch of nine tower cranes – topped with red warning lights – have stood sentry-like for more than three years, a highly visible sign that something new and exciting is emerging on the site of the dilapidated and unloved St James Centre.

Now as the £1 billion St James Quarter nears completion and these lanky landmarks are dismantled, Edinburgh residents are eagerly waiting to see first-hand how this retail, leisure and residential project will impact on our ancient European capital.



St James Quarter aerial view courtesy of the developer

The construction stats are impressive. At the behest of developer Nuveen, Laing O'Rourke have excavated 350,000m³, installed 11 concrete cores, 58 risers, 26,087m² of roofing, 111,000m² of metal decking, while more than 38,000 lifted pieces of structural steel, 52,000m² of blockwork and 13,500m² of granite flooring has been put in place in a scheme which will include 22 escalators and 49 lifts.

Described as Edinburgh's largest development in a generation and predicted to contribute more than £260 million annually to the city economy, the 1.7 million sq ft masterplan comprises

of 850,000 sq ft of retail space, a multi-screen Everyman Cinema, 30 restaurants, cafés and bars, and it will remain the home of Top-of-the-Walk evergreen department store John Lewis.

The development includes building 152 luxury apartments and nine new public squares and awkwardly, given the city's move towards cutting traffic and emissions, 1,600 parking spaces.

The project's PR machine spews out new "signings" on an almost monthly basis, driving home the message that Edinburgh's retail offering is moving up to sixth gear in what will be a welcome boost to the city after the commercial carnage of Covid-19.



Nine cranes have stood sentry-like over the site for three years.

The alphabet soup list of High Street names which may threaten Glasgow's dominance as Scotland's fashion shopping mecca, includes Kurt Geiger, Carvela, Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Dune, & Other Stories, Mango, Zara, Bershka, Pull & Bear, Stradivarius, Russell & Bromely, Miele, Next, Pandora, Hotel Chocolat and H&M to date, but no doubt more will be added.

And when you have shopped until you drop, stay standing because even fashionistas need fed and watered and there will be no shortage of options. Anchoring the food hall will be Bonnie & Wild demonstrating "the very best of Scottish produce and hospitality, while also delivering a uniquely theatrical experience".

Covering 16,700 sq ft, Bonnie & Wild will be the largest food and beverage site in Scotland with five retail offerings, eight food stalls and three expansive bars serving an array of alcoholic and non-alcoholic craft Scottish products. Fresh and packaged food and drink will also be available from a variety of artisan butchers, fishmongers, grocers, cheesemongers, chocolatiers and bakeries.



St James Quarter Edinburgh, W Hotel topping out.

Staying with food – if you have room – Bross Bagels and Glaswegian interloper Salerno Pizza will open their individualised food outlets alongside @Pizza, Five Guys and The Alchemist. Dining wise, the hottest ticket in the Quarter is sure to be the internationally acclaimed SushiSamba restaurant group, which will occupy the rooftop at the W Edinburgh hotel. The restaurant will serve up a blend of Japanese, Brazilian and Peruvian cuisine, culture, music and design from the main dining room which has unparalleled views over the city skyline, alongside a vibrant bar and lounge, chef's table, and outdoor terraces.

Without doubt the most controversial aspect of the project is Starwood Hotels & Resorts' first foray into Scotland and the centre-piece 12-storey W Hotel. While the marketing gurus would have you believe the building's exterior of "free-flowing spiral ribbons" reflects Edinburgh's festival spirit, some locals take a more pedestrian view that this striking addition to the city skyline more resembles a "golden turd".

Scatological humour aside, W Edinburgh are confident the hotel will redefine the city's hospitality landscape and pledge that the brand's Whatever/Whenever service philosophy will deliver whatever guests want, whenever they want it.

With 214 stylish bedrooms, including 20 suites and one Extreme Wow Suite (their interpretation of a Presidential Suite), the 75 room luxury aparthotel brand Roomzzz, a destination rooftop bar and outdoor terrace with 360-degree views, a spa, gym and event space, there is little doubt that the hotel and the St James Quarter combination will add some much needed wow to Edinburgh as it recovers from the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic.