

Westfield is going for gold at Stratford City

Westfield Stratford City is more than a place to shop. This summer it is the gateway to the London Olympics, February 15, 2012



Patrick McDonnell

Westfield Stratford City is not just a shopping centre, it is the gateway to the Olympic Games, which takes place mainly in east London this summer. It is anticipated that 70% of spectators will be routed through the mall, passing along the tree-lined Chestnut Plaza before entering the Games Park.

The Olympic Park and Westfield Stratford City are such a massive undertaking that the Post Office has allocated them their own E20 postcode. Westfield Stratford City is so much a part of the London Games operation, that it became the world's first official Olympic shopping centre in a £10m deal that uses the London 2012 brand and logo. Westfield Stratford City is the ninth retail project the Australian Westfield Group has undertaken in the UK. This £1.5bn project provides an east London counterpart to the £1.6bn Westfield London, which opened in White City in 2008.

A new shopping city

Covering an area of 1.9 square miles, Westfield Stratford City is home to 300 retail outlets, a 17-screen multiplex cinema, a bowling alley, a casino, three hotels, as well as 70 bars and restaurants. This commercial offer is served by nearly 5,000 parking spaces at three locations within the retail site, as well as a wide range of public transport links.

The developer said it placed special emphasis on clear signage, electronic guidance systems and wide bays. “Westfield Stratford City represents the latest evolution of our thinking and skills in design, retail and leisure mix, technology and sustainability,” says Steven Lowy, co-chief executive of Westfield Group. “Our focus is on enhancing the consumer experience by the use of technology, including advanced car park payment and guidance systems, an electronic ‘FindMyCar’ service, and the latest in mobile applications to assist both retailers and consumers.”

An attractive parking experience

Westfield is keen to make parking a pleasant experience at the start and end of each shopping trip. Myf Ryan, Westfield UK’s general manager, marketing, says: “We learnt from Westfield London and now we know what works and what doesn’t. It’s an ongoing process and we’re always looking to improve our car park offer, making it as easy and stress-free as possible for shoppers.”

The car park is managed on a day-to-day basis by Secure Parking, which also looks after parking at the rest of the Australian group’s UK sites. The parking operator was consulted on all aspects of how parking would work on the project.

A key issue to address was reducing the time it takes visitors to find a parking bay. When drivers arrive at the Westfield Stratford City they find vehicle circulation routes clearly signed and bays well demarcated. Cars are directed to the nearest available parking bay by an electronic signalling system, reducing the problem of bottlenecks caused by drivers looking for a parking space.

Developed in the USA, Park Assist uses sensors to monitor the occupancy of each parking space and ceiling mounted sensors to indicate which ones are not occupied. In the UK Park Assist is also used by clients such as Lend Lease and Tesco. The real-time sensor networks detect the presence of vehicles in each parking space. It directs customers to the vacant spaces using electronic messaging signs and red/green LED indicators above each space. A refinement of the Park Assist system for Westfield Stratford City is the use of blue lights to denote Blue Badge bays and pink lights for parent & child bays. Reducing the time cars circulate looking for parking also improves air quality in the car park. Ryan says

that where Park Assist systems have been installed there is also a reduction in vehicle carbon emissions of 56%, as well as 3% increase in parking space utilisation, and a 1-3% decrease in costs.

Once parked, customers find that even the standard bays are wider than normal to allow shopping bags and bulky objects to be loaded without having to squeeze between cars. And 6% of the parking spaces are designated for disabled Blue Badge holders, while 2% are reserved for parent & child use. Routes to the lift lobbies and shops are clearly signed. There are floor markings on the walkways and signs which set out the best pedestrian routes to anchor stores such as John Lewis and Marks & Spencer, or leisure venues such as the Vue cinema and bowling alley.

Having guided people directly to the malls, the car park is designed in a way to help them remember where they parked. Each of the five floors are distinctively colour-coded. Car park signing supplier Woods and Woods have provided colour column-wraps to add to the effect. Once they have done their shopping, drivers still unsure where they parked their vehicle can use an electronic 'FindMyCar' service. This is a phone app and function on the interactive directory stations located in the car parks, foyers and parking concierge desks throughout the centre.

FindMyCar enables drivers to locate their parked vehicle through the use of automatic number plate recognition (ANPR technology). Having typed in their number plate, shoppers are shown a photo of their vehicle along with a map displaying its location. The mall's concierge staff also carry electronic tablets, which allows them to provide parking information.

Paying for parking

In contrast to the major out of town malls Lakeside Thurrock in Essex and Bluewater in Kent, with which it competes, Westfield Stratford City charges for parking, with an introductory offer of two hour's free parking for shoppers who signed up to Westfield's database, allowing the centre to engage with these early adopters to encourage repeat visits.

Entry to and exit from the car parks is controlled by a Scheidt & Bachmann Entervo pay-on-foot system. A total of 40 Entervo pay-on-foot stations have been installed around the mall. Rather than issue magnetic-strip tickets, the system dispenses a plastic chip-coin at the entry barriers which drivers present at the pay stations for validation and use at the exit barriers.

"Chip coins are more environmentally-friendly," says Ryan, "they're difficult to lose and they don't wear, so they're robust and last longer." Scheidt & Bachmann also provided the automatic number plate

recognition cameras monitoring entry and exit lanes.

A safe and secure environment

The car park has achieved Safer Parking Scheme Park Mark status. There is a team of 20 car park attendants and supervisors and there is 24-hour CCTV surveillance. There is an extra layer of security because of its Olympic location. The London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) is operating random security checks on vehicles coming through the Olympic Park to Stratford City at 'security plazas'. Vehicles are selected at random and screened before continuing the short, final journey to the shopping centre. This measure will end after the Paralympic Games in September.

In fact, although the shopping centre remains open for business during the Games, all of its parking will be closed to the public for the duration of the event. LOCOG will be taking over the car park during the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, using 3,000 spaces to house temporary offices for many of the 200,000 people it will employ. The rest of the centre's public parking spaces will become operational LOCOG parking during the games.

Engineering the car park

Westfield Stratford City's 5,000 public parking spaces are provided on five levels. While the car park is a massive structure, every effort has been taken to keep its design, engineering and operation uncomplicated, says Tony LaCroix, project director on the Stratford City scheme.

"Buchan Group International were the scheme's architects," he says. "The over-ground decks of the car park used a conventional structural steel frame erected by Severfield Reeve as part of the main scheme, with metal decking by Northern Decking/Studwelders. Prefabricated and precast options were not appropriate here because of the amount of both the 'hook time' needed to erect the planks and the restrictions of working adjacent to the High Speed 1/Eurostar cutting and the restrictions that imposes."

The structure was thus built using a metal frame with concrete decks poured on-site. The concrete was 'pan float' finished by PC Harrington and Stuarts Industrial flooring, and floor finishes applied by Progressive Group. The car park interior was painted by S Lucas and E Poole. The exterior mesh surround and cladding by RED Architectural and Irvine Whitlock."

The parking areas feature novel and time-saving techniques. For example, one of the parking decks features pre-fabricated deck slabs called Pardak created by the Dutch company Zootjens. Laid by Briggs Amasco, Pardak comprises vacuum-formed concrete slabs supported on pressure distributor pads with adjustable tensioning elements.

“Pardak was used for one level only,” says LaCroix. “This allowed an insulated layer above the retail shops, which is topped with a flexible paving slab finish above that and does not require jointing between slabs and can accommodate a degree of structural movement. The advantages of the system are a lightweight, flexible cost effective solution, independent of the waterproof layer.”

Providing the right amount of parking in just the right place

Car parking provision is relatively modest across Westfield’s retail portfolio. While the new Westfield Stratford City has 4,997 spaces, consisting of the roof car park’s 2,128 spaces, two levels of car parking under the centre with a capacity of 1,309 and a standalone car park adjacent to the John Lewis department store with a capacity of 1,560 vehicles. This is far less than those found at out-of-town shopping centres such as nearby Bluewater and Lakeside malls, which have 13,000 spaces apiece. Westfield’s shopping centres tend to have a lower level of vehicle capacity because they are built, in the main, in urban areas that are well served by public transport.

To ensure that access is good, Westfield Group works closely with transport infrastructure providers to upgrade public transport links ahead of openings, as has been the case at Stratford City.

Visitors heading to Stratford City are encouraged to utilise public transport where possible. The site is adjacent to both the new Stratford International station, which is served by Southeastern domestic services on High Speed 1 and Docklands Light Railway services to London City Airport. While no international services call at Stratford, Eurostar will review stopping there after the Olympic Games.

The existing Stratford Regional station is served by London Overground, Docklands Light Railway, London Underground and National Rail services. Crossrail services are planned to stop at the station from 2017. For people arriving on foot there is a pedestrian bridge connecting the development to the existing Stratford town centre.

The urban context and excellent transport links actually mean that, while the rival Lakeside and Bluewater malls offer free parking, Westfield sets a £2-an-hour charge at Stratford. Indeed, charged parking is the norm at Westfield’s urban malls. The exception is Merry Hill in the West Midlands, which has 10,000 free spaces set in an out-of-town context.

With Westfield Stratford City launched, the Westfield is planning further developments in the UK. Sprucefield Park Phase II in Lisburn, Northern Ireland, is currently subject to a renewed planning application. This will see up to 3,000 parking spaces provided. The planned Westfield Bradford, with a parking capacity of around 1,800 spaces, is currently on hold due to the current economic climate.