

# Deluxe of the Irish

Dublin's iconic  
Brown Thomas store  
now has an equally  
emblematic Luxury Hall

By Mark Faithfull





Photos: Ben Rahm, A Frame

Every major city has its emblematic department store, and in Dublin, Ireland, that store is Brown Thomas. Owned by Wittington Investment Group—the same group that oversees the equally symbolic Holt Renfrew and Selfridges department stores—Brown Thomas has been going through a metamorphosis for much of the past five years, culminating in the opening of its new Luxury Hall.

Toronto-based Burdifilek created the Hall, designed to “transport shoppers into a world of refined luxury.” Dedicated to fine jewelry, watches and luxury gifts, the signature space reflects the sophisticated modernism of the Brown Thomas brand and is intended to strengthen the department store’s positioning as Ireland’s premier luxury shopping destination.

The Luxury Hall builds on previous work by Burdifilek at the store—first the 27,000-sq.-ft. womenswear and shoe departments and, more recently, a revamp of the menswear department. This has increased the men’s trading space by 2,000 sq. ft. to 22,000 sq. ft. and brought all of the store’s menswear, which was previously spread over two floors, onto the lower ground floor.

In renewing the menswear offer, Brown Thomas also made room for a new luxury brand section on the ground floor—the Luxury Hall—anchored by Tiffany & Co. and Cartier. Burdifilek has focused on creating an unapologetically premium environment that articulates an “authority in jewelry,” says Diego Burdi, creative director at Burdifilek. “We needed to create an environment that spoke of this caliber of jewelry and also complemented the envelope of the greater department store.”

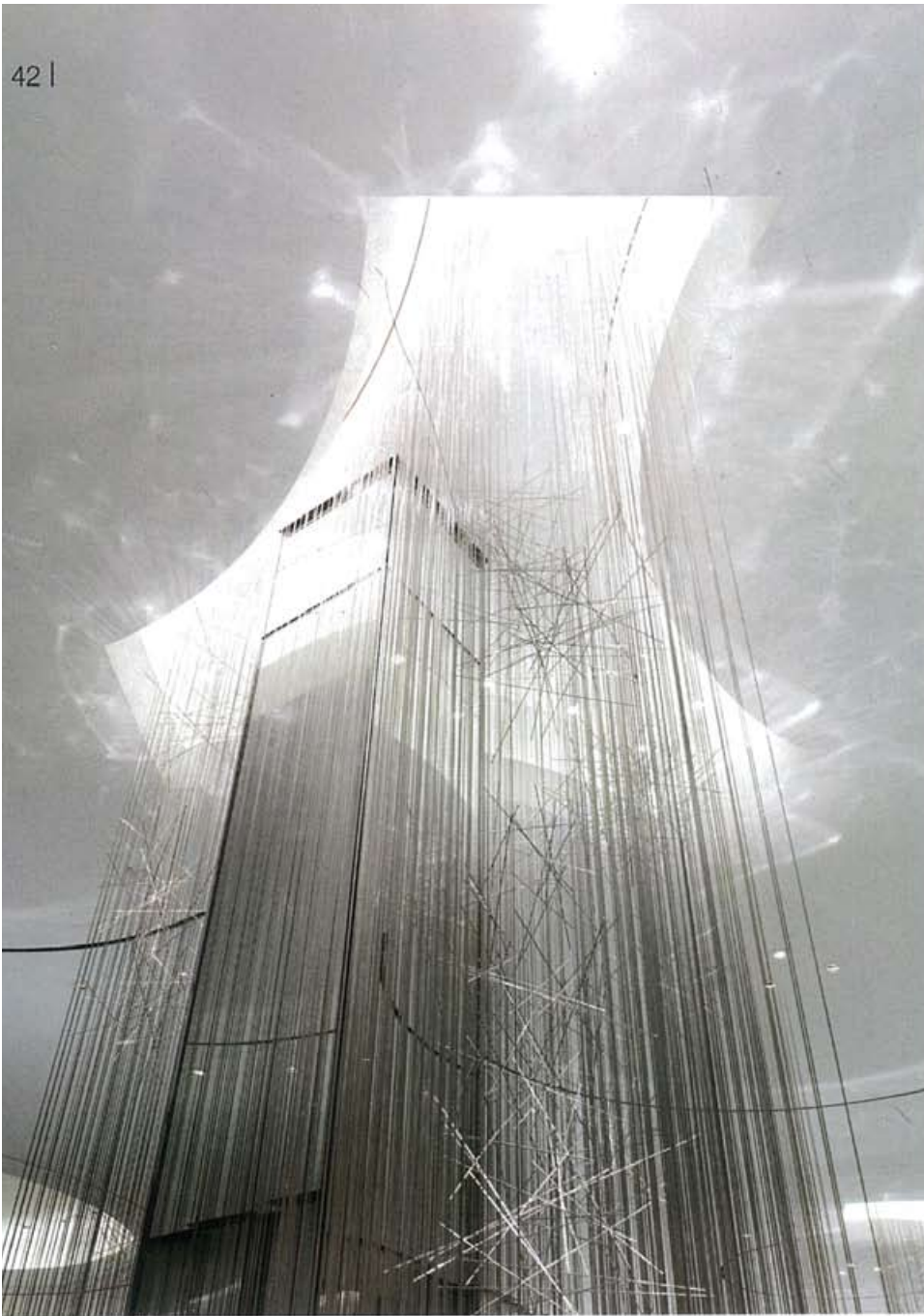
A very bold architectural approach emphasizes the luxe Hall, with the perimeters in regimented, vertical dichroic glass, and the central area conceived as a piazza, with deliberately softer



Opposite page: Burdifilek focused on creating an unapologetically premium environment for Brown Thomas’ Luxury Hall.

Top left: Semi-circular fixtures appear to float above the marble flooring.

Bottom left: A bold architectural approach features perimeters in regimented, vertical dichroic glass and a central area conceived as a piazza with softer, curved displays.



Recurring sculptural installations, hand-articulated in polished nickel by artisan Dennis Lin, add to the Luxury Hall's "sense of awe."

and graceful curved displays in juxtaposition, encouraging exploration. Cantilevered over sandblasted, champagne-colored Starfire glass bases, the semi-circular fixtures appear to float above the marble flooring, while bespoke, oyster-colored suede displays provide an inconspicuous backdrop for the jewelry itself, allowing the product to take center stage.

The displays give the brands a "shop window," Burdi says. "A lot of jewelry stores have a tendency to look the same," he adds. "I think we have created something with quiet elegance and perhaps something which will influence other jewelry stores. The nature of what luxury means is undoubtedly changing, and I feel the Luxury Hall is at the cusp of that."

The design team wanted the architecture to make a statement, while also retaining the product as the hero within the space. To that end, a good deal of consideration was given to the lighting, mocking-up installations to test the results. The end result is that lighting on the counters is of the same quality as that in the showcases—meaning the jewelry remains just as sparkly and vibrant when it is on the counter.

The perimeter of the space is sheathed in reflective dichroic glass, while invisible floating vitrines are suspended on the modulated transparent glass, allowing for a glimpse through to adjacent in-store shops for other top-of-the-line brands.

Recurring sculptural installations, hand-articulated in polished nickel by Toronto-based artisan Dennis Lin, add to the "sense of awe" the designers wanted to create as shoppers walk into the hall. Extending floor to ceiling, the rods appear to be in suspended animation in what Burdi describes as evocative of "an enchanted forest," while columns clad in tinted antique-style mirror further reflect the polished nickel sculptures, maximizing visual impact.

"Shoppers are hungry for innovation, and I think sometimes the public's appreciation of design is under-estimated," Burdi concludes. "Above all, we wanted to make something that not only had a different point of view and reflected its Dublin context, but which had that point of memory." And it seems the designers have created just that—a memorable, iconic new space within Brown Thomas in Dublin. **DDi**

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## The Brown Thomas story

**Haberdashers and general drapers** Hugh Brown and James Thomas opened Brown Thomas on Dublin's Grafton Street in 1849, and the business flourished through generations and various different owners.

Fast forward to 1971, and the famous store was under threat of closure until Galen & Hilary Weston bought it and began a long-term transformation, which accelerated in 1995 when Brown Thomas merged with and developed new premises on the site of Switzers, another long-established Grafton Street department store.

Over the past few years, Brown Thomas has upgraded significant elements of the store, including womenswear, menswear and, most recently, its new Luxury Hall.

*Brown Thomas is part of the Wittington Investment Group, which includes Brown Thomas Group (Brown Thomas and BT2); Seltridges in England; and Holt Renfrew in Canada.*