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Premium

Little shophouse of honours: The stories behind restoring two URA award-winning shophouses



Second floor of the residential shophouse at 105 Onan Road on Oct 23, 2019. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

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SINGAPORE - Shophouses won big at this year's Architectural Heritage Awards.

The annual award administered by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) recognises good conservation practices. Past winners include The Warehouse Hotel, boutique hotel The Great Madras and Jurong Town Hall.

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Temasek Shophouse on Orchard Road was the sole winner of the Award for Restoration, while a residential shophouse in Onan Road in Joo Chiat picked up a special mention. The Straits Times speaks to the two architects behind the sensitive facelifts.

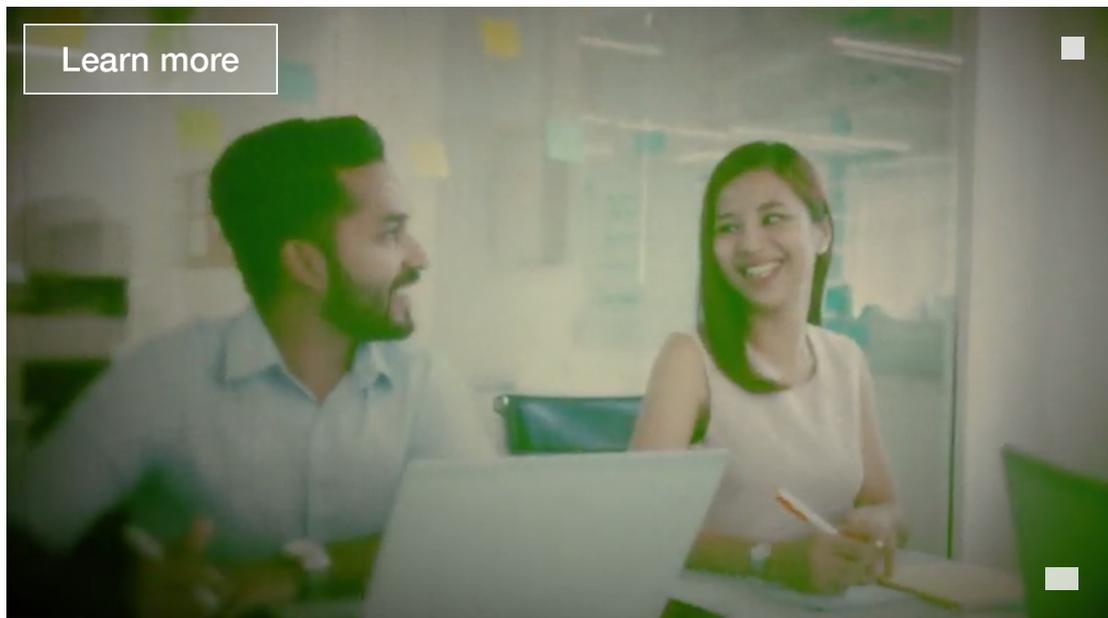
SHOPHOUSE ONCE HOME TO THIS FASHION BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO ORCHARD ROAD AS SOCIAL IMPACT HUB

The two spiral staircases at the back of this award-winning shophouse were once used for the discreet transportation of night soil.

They are among the elements preserved in the sole recipient of URA's Award for Restoration this year, a social enterprise hub which houses Temasek's philanthropy arm as well as a few invited partners with sustainability-focused businesses.

These include a social enterprise café called Foreword Coffee that employs persons with disabilities and special needs. It sits brewing in a corner of the spacious first floor - a hidden gem behind the gleaming Art Deco-inspired walls of the refurbished shophouse.

ADVERTISING



But the building beside MacDonald House was not always a pristine white structure. Before Temasek bought the lease in 2017, it was unoccupied and poorly maintained.

Built by two Chinese merchants in 1928, the shophouse passed through multiple hands over the decades, though it was always mainly used for retail. It housed two separate shops in the late 1920s, a department store called Pmart from 1989 to 1998 and, most recently, low-cost clothing store This Fashion up until 2010.

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Lead architect Ivy Koh (left) and director of Temasek Shophouse Yvonne Tay at Temasek Shophouse. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

When architect Ivy Koh, 38, first saw the neoclassical-style building, the paintwork was worn and the window frames were rotten. Inside, the space was hemmed in by obstructive columns and escalators.

"Temasek was very excited about the opportunity to transform an old building in downtown Orchard into something quite meaningful," says Koh, who led the restoration.

ADVERTISING

An advertisement for a financial literacy app. It features two cartoon characters: a boy with a red face and a girl with a green face, both wearing glasses. The background is dark purple with floating dollar signs and the word 'SPEND!' in green. A blue hand is shown holding a pink coin. At the bottom, there is a pink button that says 'LEARN MORE' and text that reads 'Let your child learn about THE POWER OF SAVING'. A quote from a character says, 'If you want them, grab them, Tommy.'

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The entire project took 18 months. While the building's facade now looks largely the same, the interior has been transformed beyond recognition.

The senior principal architect from urban and infrastructure consultancy Surbana Jurong says her main challenge was optimising the "valuable" space. To open up the ground floor, she did away with the escalators, columns and a lift - as well as a false ceiling so as to extend the headroom.

Public amenities like handicap-friendly restrooms and nursing rooms were added, alongside a striking centrepiece green wall. On the upper floors, office space and 11 meeting rooms were created from scratch.



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Due to the age of the shophouse, Koh left the original supporting structures untouched. Instead, she built on the existing Art Deco elements with the use of arches and modern light fixtures.

Integrated into the design were smart technology elements such as energy-efficient fans and a smart cooling system.

In addition to the spiral staircases, she also kept and restored the original fanlights - small, semi-circular windows that aided ventilation.

Ms Yvonne Tay, director of Temasek Trust, which operates Temasek Shophouse, has made the most of the flexible atrium in the four months since it opened in June.

The Shophouse organises two to four public events a week - ranging from educational exhibitions to film screenings, seminars and workshops. A small meeting room behind the cafe doubles as a flexible space.

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"You get people from all walks of life coming in here - mothers with kids shopping at the mall, the office crowd, students," says Ms Tay, 43. "We thought this was a very good community for us to serve."

Beyond social activities, Temasek Shophouse has also sought to make an impact environmentally. More than 100 species of plants and flowers were brought in to furnish the back-of-house and rooftop gardens. They also introduced a beehive of stingless bees for biodiversity.

The tropical landscaping pays homage to Orchard Road's history as an area of fruit and nutmeg plantations. "We wanted to bring the orchard back into Orchard Road," says Ms Tay with a smile.

She worked closely with the architect on the restoration and is proud of how the finished result has devoted a space downtown to wholly serve the nonprofit sector.

"(URA) told us the award also recognises how this project has breathed new life into an old conserved building by repurposing it for the benefit of the community."

MAKING A HOME IN A SHOPHOUSE: COSY ONAN ROAD SHOPHOUSE ONCE RENTED OUT TO CHICKEN-RICE SELLERS

Retired lawyer Sharon Tay's dream was to one day live in a shophouse. But little did she expect that seven years after moving into one, she would win an award for it too.

Her humble home at 105 Onan Road received special mention for restoration at this year's Architectural Heritage Awards. In what the URA panel jury called "a true labour of love", the project that started in 2010 saw her and her husband working closely with their architect.

They had been searching for a new place after eight years in their first home, a two-bedroom condominium in Tanjong Katong.

After being disappointed by shophouses renovated in an over-the-top fashion, they tagged along with their agent to see a shophouse in Joo Chiat that was not yet on the market.

Ms Tay, 46, vividly remembers the first time she walked into the place. She was hit instantly by a "distinct chicken rice scent".

The dark and dingy shophouse was rented out as rooms to workers and chicken rice stallholders, she says, who used the space to prepare their food.

"We fell in love with the idea that we could actually change this into something we want. We made an offer the very next day," she says.

Principal architect Keith Khoo, 46, of Ezra Architects would be the man to turn it into their dream home. He has always been fond of conservation projects and had worked on several other shophouse projects before joining the firm in 2006. This is his first win at the Architectural Heritage Awards.



Interior of the residential shophouse at 105 Onan Road on Oct 23 2019. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

It was a match made in heaven when he was introduced to pitch for the couple's shophouse project in 2010. Both sides wanted to retain and highlight the building's original features, he says.

"The owners are genuinely in love with shophouses and everything nostalgic. They were very supportive of keeping the old things," he says, citing "imperfect" features like crooked roof rafters and cracked terrazzo flooring.

The couple sourced their furniture from second-hand shops, antique stores and even construction sites.

To turn the place into a home, Khoo knocked down numerous partitions that had been used to form rooms.

He cleaned and reused original materials like wooden beams and the balustrade to minimise waste, and kept the shophouse's iconic fanlights.

From scratch, he created a loft on the second floor that serves as a home office for Ms Tay's husband, also a lawyer. The couple have no children and live there by themselves.

Khoo's aim was to keep the space as "humble and honest" as possible, and let original elements shine. "Whatever we could reinstate and restore, we did."

With the natural ventilation afforded by the fanlights, the couple turn on the air-conditioning only when entertaining. Their monthly electric bill is \$120 to \$130.

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Perhaps most impressive was the addition of an entire extension block. The two-storey block with a rooftop is built behind the original shophouse, turning the former back-of-house into a quaint, open-air courtyard - Ms Tay's favourite spot in the house.

While URA guidelines allow for building extension blocks up to four storeys high, both Khoo and the couple opted for two - so as not to draw attention away from the beauty of the shophouse.



Spiral staircase overlooking the extension of the residential shophouse at 105 Onan Road on Oct 23 2019. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Inside, a striking spiral staircase, custom-made of wrought iron in the style of the heritage spiral staircases in Chijmes, leads up to the rooftop.

Completed in 2012, the project would set off a chain reaction of similar restorations on the street. Mr Khoo notes that three neighbouring shophouses went through various degrees of renovation - with some even building up to the aforementioned four floors.

Her open-air rooftop now has part of its view obstructed, but Ms Tay is unbothered. Calling themselves "uncluttered people", she maintains that the modest renovation better suited their needs.

"Some of the architects (we looked at) will say 'max it out, build four storeys' because it's going to be value in the future if you resell it."

"But my husband and I knew that this was a place that we wanted to call home. It wasn't so much the resale value we wanted to build something for us."

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