



A New Reimagining

In Singapore, three design collectives redesigned the interiors of three conserved shophouses. In that process, they stretched our imaginations with regard to what these time-hallowed buildings could be.

By Bianca Husodo

IT IS TRUE to a certain degree that the history of a city is recorded in its buildings. To many Singaporeans, conserved shophouses are architectural canvases filled with nostalgic charm. Built between the early 1800s to mid-1900s, these terraced structures used to house stores at street level and cramped dwellings above. It was after Singapore's independence that many shophouses, along with other colonial and pre-colonial buildings, were torn down in favour of a build-from-scratch, tabula rasa approach that the Singapore government adopted in order to provide space for new modern developments, specifically public housing for its rapidly growing population.

Today, some 6,500 of the shophouses that remain are now clustered around dedicated conservation areas of the old city centre as well as several other parts of Singapore. Amid the gleaming first-world skyscrapers, these heritage buildings constitute one of the more obvious but diminishing links to Singapore's history.

To people like Fang Wei Low, the Singapore shophouse simply represents his idea of home. The 32-year-old entrepreneur has always lived in shophouses. For the first 12 years of his life, he grew up in a refurbished three-storey shophouse in Tanjong Pagar's Blair Plain neighbourhood. (He recently moved into one on Little India's Petain Road). His childhood shophouse, whose origins can be traced back to the pre-war era of the 1920s, had housed three generations of his family. Later on, Low moved to New York for his studies, interned for the fine art auction house Christie's,

At Canvas House, upcycled furniture, vintage ceramicware and the walls are enshrouded in white with some tiny portions left unpainted, revealing their past.

accidentally broke a cup from the Ming Dynasty and decided to make his exit, couch-surfing the world for a time.

During his travels, Low came to a realisation that he would always pose the same instinctive query before choosing an accommodation: What is the equivalent of a shophouse in this city? "It could, for instance, be like a Haussmann-style building in Buenos Aires," he says. "In every city, there would be all these regional architectural vernaculars that only locals would know."

Enter Figment, Low's shophouse initiative. After returning to Singapore, Low wanted to bridge an unfilled gap for what he calls "localised boutique homes." His father, Low Seow Juan, is one of the principal investors for several shophouses along a street in Geylang, renovated by seven architects into contemporary homes and rented out to art-inclined expatriate families. Now, led by Low, Figment is his co-living follow-up. "A lot of the other co-living operators [in Singapore] are run by expats, and they don't have a first-degree understanding of shophouses. So a lot of it would focus on Peranakan tiles or the facade," he says. "But that's been done to death."

What Low is proposing is a total resetting of the insides. For Figment's first series of co-living shophouses, titled Case Study Homes, Fang roped in three local creative collectives and gave them carte blanche to redo the interiors of three shophouses in three neighbourhoods of Blair Plain, Balestier and Joo Chiat.

CANVAS HOUSE, 28 BLAIR ROAD

"This was the shophouse I grew up in," says Fang of Canvas House, one of the three that occupies a 350-square-metre plot on Blair Road. From the street, Canvas House doesn't look that different from its flanking peers: a three-level shophouse with an archetypal pre-war residential front — half-length 'pintu pagar' (Malay for gate), timber-framed windows, and a decorative panel bearing the Chinese family name of Low's family in gold — set within the quieter section of Tanjong Pagar. Even its exterior, painted in an optically clean white, looks nondescript in contrast to the others' more colourful palettes.

But upon crossing the threshold, you quickly realise that this facade is an aesthetic misdirection — the shophouse is, in fact, a Trojan horse of disruptive design. To begin with, the interior is even more whitewashed: Everything from the floor to the ceiling — the wooden flooring, sofas and chairs, upholstery, wall ornaments — is the same tint of white. It's a literal clean slate.

"All of these memories I have," says Low, "Chinese New Year celebrations, staying up in the attic room with my brother — they were wiped away." The deliberate erasure of pigments was proposed by Colin Seah, the founder-director of architectural and interior design firm Ministry of Design, who Low commissioned for the transforming of his family home into a co-living space.

"When it comes to adaptive reuse projects, the question is always the same, how do we tread the line between the past and the present?" says Seah. Within the first 30 minutes of his initial site visit to the shophouse with the Lows, Seah knew what he wanted to do. "I saw a portion of the walls where these raw bricks were revealed, whereas other areas were plastered away. The mismatch was very disturbing to me," he recalls. "And I said, 'Instead of having this original brick neither fully present nor completely absent, why don't we just highlight some key moments, where it becomes almost like a peek into the past, and seal away the rest?'"

The Lows were intrigued. Seah's suggestion to layer over the existing history — and hence the family's shared sentimentality, too — with a proverbial blank canvas was novel, but it certainly promised a conceptual framework beyond the rudimentary nod to the past. An easy mix of plaster and plywood boards now shields the walls of Canvas House. And wherever your eyes least expect it, single large dots of red brick would rhythmically pop out amid the sea of white, providing glimpses into the past. The house's underfooting, too, is a time-bending canvas of its own: On the staircase, lone circles of refurbished timber wood would appear on steps; in the four bedrooms, wood-exposing outlines positioned under the beds project the dimensional illusion of cast shadows from certain angles.



From top: The facade of Canvas House, of which signage bears the golden strokes of Low's family name; in the 'Alabaster' suite, a vintage wooden vanity dress, dressing chair and a round table were all sourced from second-hand furniture shops.

But this mischievous theatrics of layering different time scopes could not be more blindingly apparent than through the house's curation of ceramics and furniture. Most of them come from over 70 pieces sourced from Singapore's antique stores and second-hand furniture shops like Emperor's Attic and Second Charm. "It's intentionally eclectic," says Seah. "You can tell that they range from mid-century modern to really traditional."

Designed to be a shared living space, the idealist all-white realm of Canvas House may, Seah admits, be a deterrent to potential tenants. Squeaky whites might not suit anything that sits in the darker spectrum. "But people who would be drawn to this property will inherently be attracted to the quality of it. You would have to mentally accept that you would be living in a certain way," he continues. "And that's part of the joy of living here."



SHANG HOUSE, 10 PEGU ROAD

When Scene Shang — the Singapore-based furniture maker — took charge of the renovation of a pre-war terrace house in Balestier’s conservation area, it was an easy match: Both the homeware label and the building’s site had their definitive styles influenced, to different degrees, by the early Art Deco movement.

After Low first brought Jessica Wong, the co-founder of Scene Shang, to see the four-level shophouse on Pegu Road, she went on a research excursion around the neighbourhood. A few doors down the main road, she heard loud clangs. A man in a metal workshop was hammering away on a metal tin. Wong stayed to observe. He was trying to bend it into shape. And then he welded a spout onto the surface.

“Balestier is a very industrial, hard-working neighbourhood,” says Wong. “I think it doesn’t have any sense of pretence to it.” In the mid-1800s, early settlers in the area began setting up rattan-based cottage industries along Whampoa River. While the well-heeled immigrants and townfolk soon gushed into Balestier with their country bungalows later on, the industrial spirit lingered. Wong wanted to instil this old-world essence into the house. “Our design philosophy always weighs history in, what people did in the past. But we look at it through a more contemporary lens,” she says of Scene Shang, the label she and her business partner, Pamela Ting, helm.

Shang House then could well be the apotheosis and synthesis of everything the duo has done. The redecorated terrace house is structurally modern, not much had been changed from the renovation done by its previous residents — but it has now become Scene Shang’s life-sized lookbook: Many of their geometric



Clockwise from top: The facade of Shang House, a prewar terrace house in the Balestier neighbourhood that Singapore furniture maker Scene Shang turned into a co-living space; Shang House’s communal dining area; the house’s living room is a cosy communal space occupied by Scene Shang’s homeware and furniture.

’30s Shanghai Art Deco-style furniture pieces are thoughtfully scattered around the house.

The rattan-manufacturing background of Balestier is, naturally, woven into their design. The first thing you’d encounter upon entering Shang House would be a folding screen, a divider of the main entrance and the living room, made of wicker rattan which Wong and Ting especially created for the house. “It’s porous so it gives you privacy, but it doesn’t obscure the house completely,” says Wong.

In the bedrooms, rattan bed frames and staple pieces like Scene Shang’s Jia Ju, their Ming Dynasty-inflected rocking stool with an angular seat and rattan detailing, and rattan renditions of the Shang System, a modular side table which

can be dismantled into a tray or configured with extra stacks according to your preference.

Of course, it would only make commercial sense for a beautifully liveable lookbook to also be shoppable. Tagged to each piece of furniture is a QR code which is linked to a dedicated Shang House page, where items can be arranged for overseas shipping. “If you spend a lot of time rocking on the stool, or you hang out with your friends on the goosedown couch in the living room, these objects become part of your history and your story,” says Wong. “We think it’s a wonderful opportunity to be able to actually shop and bring that piece along with you when your stay in Singapore is over.”



Clockwise from top: On Joo Chiat’s Koon Seng Road is Still House (at centre), a co-living shophouse with an interior that was redesigned by Studio Juju; inside Still House; on the fourth floor attic, a tatami seating living room.

STILL HOUSE, 15 KOON SENG ROAD

“Contrast” is a word that keeps resurfacing when Timo Wong, the co-founder of Studio Juju, talks about Still House. Wong, alongside his partner, Priscilla Lui, were tasked by Low to redesign Still House’s interior.

“What we like about the house is the contrast between the outside and the inside; the old and the new,” says Wong. The pastel pink terrace shophouse, nestled on Joo Chiat’s Koon Seng Road, has been designated a heritage Peranakan building since 1991. Outside the house, the residential street of Koon Seng is known for its colourful shophouses and the untouched state of their facades; a deliberate freezing of a piece of Singapore’s architectural history. But inside, it was “anything-goes” for Wong. “The contrast is liberating. We weren’t bounded by a certain

history or story that we needed to continue to bring forth,” says Wong. “I think that somewhat reflects Singapore as a country quite well. Around something old and preserved, there’s always a very modernised step-in.”

Another fundamental “contrast” Wong deliberated on would be the paradoxical concepts of a home and a co-living space. “Home is a very personal space. But the irony is that a co-living space isn’t really a home,” he explains, noting the expected impermanence of a sharing environment. “But the design was a way to resolve this.”

The shophouse’s previous three-level structure had two high-ceilinged bedrooms. Wong and his team built another floor, transforming the study and attic on the top floor

into new suites. With four bedrooms, Wong wanted each to be distinctively apart from the others. “So you’d feel you have your own private space,” he says. The rooms are cosy yet spacious. Playful dashes of zesty colour warmly complement the clean design. Two of them feature private living rooms which preface the bed areas. One occupies a study-like chamber, where one side of its wall is fully enshrouded by a wooden storage shelf that doubles as a working desk. The other has a wooden tatami seating area.

“People tend not to like sharing their space so much. But the suites would feel like your own ‘home,’” Wong suggests. “So only when you step out of your ‘home’, that’s when you step into a bigger communal space.” This is why the designer spent a considerable amount of time poring over the dining room. To decorate the dining area, which he considers the prime area for interaction between tenants, a mix of calming optimistic tones: a burnt orange-hued wooden table, wood chairs in muted shades and a selection of bright Enzo Mari paintings on the wall.

Throughout the house, art adds another layer of colour and texture. Wong commissioned a Singaporean illustrator, Wu Yanrong, to work on a cluster of dry brushstroke paintings of migratory birds, displayed by the staircase and in open areas of the house. These paintings hide a poignant allegory. Wong says, “In a way, the people who will be renting the space would similarly not stay here forever.”

