

# THE MORE WE GET TOGETHER



A slew of co-living projects has opened in Singapore and most are so well designed, we want to move in immediately.

BY LOW SHI PING

## ANTHOLOGY

White, edgy and eclectic, the MOD-designed Canvas House by Figment along Blair Road is a makeover conservation shophouse for creative types



**W**hite. This is the colour dominating a co-living project conceptualised by Ministry of Design (MOD) for developer Figment earlier this year.

Aptly named Canvas House, the three-storey traditional shophouse along Blair Road is blanketed in a layer of white — including most of the ceiling, walls, floors and furniture — and represents an empty, almost theatrical backdrop for its residents to “live out their lives against”.

So explains MOD’s founder-director Colin Seah, who also sought to answer the question of how to sensitively tread the line between the past and present with an adaptive reuse project like this one.

Eschewing focusing solely on preservation — which he finds “paralysing and inhibiting” — Seah went on to interrupt the blank canvas he created with “playful peek-a-boo reveals” of its different

parts to retain that connection to the past.

Canvas House is among a slew of thoughtfully-designed co-living projects that have opened recently in Singapore — there’s also lyf, Hmlet and Cove, among others. In fact, it is one of Figment’s 15 co-living properties, all of which are traditional shophouses reimaged by local designers to offer contemporary suites for let.

“Beyond a good spatial layout, design can also provide unique spatial and stylistic characteristics to a [co-living] space, making it more memorable or appealing,” says Seah.

### COMMUNITY CENTRES

Loosely defined as a hybrid of serviced apartment and hostel, co-living spaces typically have a minimum rental period of three months although certain spaces offer single-night or weekly stays. While the bedroom is private, other amenities and facilities are shared, including living



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areas, the kitchen and sometimes even the bathroom. They are targeted at working millennials and expatriates who are open to informal networking opportunities.

“Co-living spaces support the emerging trend of leisure as work-life boundaries blur,” says Chew Kian Beng, course chair for Hospitality & Tourism Management at Temasek Polytechnic’s School of Business.

“Besides Instagram-worthy and Wi-Fi-ready apartments and communal spaces, residents of co-living spaces can look forward to social activities. It allows strangers with common interests to share a roof without the fuss of renting an apartment. For private property owners, it’s an alternative channel to rent their unit.”

Figment’s CEO and co-founder Fang Low echoes Chew’s definition: “Co-living spaces are ideal for anyone who doesn’t want to invest or spend time thinking about utility bills, the best furniture providers or a mortgage. It’s completely hassle-free and flexible, and yet, you have perks like a community to plug into while you settle down and build your own networks.”

His decision to enter the industry in May last year and to grow the business is predicated on factors like an increasingly globally-mobile workforce looking for flexible housing options, widespread loneliness in urban areas and the rise of the sharing economy.

“There is also a gap in the market for affordable housing options in central areas,” Low observes, hence Figment’s properties are all in or around the downtown core.

Offering a modern-day co-living experience is lyf, owned by The Ascott. Last year, the brand debuted its first and largest property in Southeast Asia at Funan Mall with 329 units. It is conceptualised by



Ascott’s in-house interior design team.

Separate living, working and dining areas offer a space for residents to unwind, exercise, work or have meals, imbued with fun and quirky design elements that make them highly Instagram-able.

“At lyf’s co-living properties, design is integral to enliven the spaces and foster a sense of community, creating more than just a place to stay,” says Joel Oei, who heads the lyf brand. “The design for lyf is centred around our philosophy that every customer is unique.”

For instance, the lobby, named Connect, is intended to be a flexible communal space that’s easily reconfigured into zones for workshops or social gatherings. Another example is Burn, the “social gym”, equipped with a life-sized hamster wheel that doubles as a treadmill. Access Burn from Connect via the social staircase (itself flanking a cosy adult-height ball pit) which has the mantra “I’m on a

diet” printed on it to encourage residents to walk rather than take the elevator.

### DESIGN SINGAPORE

Design is an overarching principle in the co-living experience.

Unique furniture pieces created by local designers take centre stage at lyf, such as the seesaw piper chair and rocking piper stool and lounge by Hunn Wai from Lanzavecchia + Wai. “These colourful yet functional pieces provide a sense of playground fun, like the playgrounds in the neighbourhoods of Singapore,” Oei points out. In the gym, you’ll notice a see-saw lookalike rocking chair, designed by Nathan Yong from Grafunkt.

Five more lyf properties are expected to open in 2021 and Oei says they will have detailed, specific design guidelines to ensure each has its own personality.

Over at Figment, Low also wants to



(both pages) Located in the newly-renovated Funan Mall, lyf Funan Singapore offers residents shared spaces to bond over breakfast, unwind on movie nights or hatch ideas for their start-ups



(this page and bottom) Hmlet's co-living spaces in Tiong Bahru reflect the neighbourhood's art deco charm and boast a mix of traditional and contemporary stylings



DESIGN

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— Deborah Lee

“introduce and connect our [residents] to independent arts and design businesses. If someone’s visiting Singapore for the first time, we hope they can immediately discover the inspiring creatives who are based here.”

MOD is one; another example is local carpenters Roger&Sons, who crafted Figment’s coffee-pod holders using Angsana wood from trees that were felled and would have been disposed of, as part of their Local Tree Project.

Also employing design as a differentiating factor is Hmlet. The self-professed “property and lifestyle platform” launched a collection of heritage homes earlier this year.

The 80 fully-furnished rooms in seven properties within Tiong Bahru feature elements such as exposed brick walls, built-in benches and textured glass doors.

“Our Tiong Bahru properties reflect what the precinct is best known for — the contrast of art deco charm and contemporary tastes — balancing both old and new elements,” explains Deborah Lee, interior designer at Hmlet.

“All design considerations, from featured artwork, furnishings to colour palette, are thoughtfully curated to reference the rich cultural heritage of the neighbourhood’s past, so that they subtly weave into the everyday lives of our [residents].”

Hmlet also debuted a 12-bedroom property set in the charming Peranakan enclave of Emerald Hill. Lee was careful to ensure the interior design maintained a connection with its location through the use of patterned floor tiles, batik fabric prints as artworks and saloon swing doors.



## ANTHOLOGY



Boutique style co-living spaces typically start off as blank canvases, but at Canvas House, designer Colin Seah recreates as much as he retains and celebrates the building’s past

DESIGN

### BLANK CANVASES

While not on the scale of Hmlet or lyf, Figment’s boutique-style co-living approach allows it to be more creative on the design front — as embodied in Canvas House.

“We wanted to subvert the typical preconceptions surrounding the way a shophouse should look and feel,” explains MOD’s Seah. “It was the openness of the client to innovation and new ideas that convinced us to take on the project. And true to his word, Canvas House truly pushes boundaries.”

Apart from the holistic whitewashing of the interior, Seah feels the project “celebrates history in an unusual way and avoids the conventional clichés”. This is encapsulated by the neon artwork on the living room wall with a quote by former American President Thomas Jefferson: “I like the dreams of the future more than the history of the past.”

Yet, he does not ignore the repository of memories found in Canvas House’s previous iteration. “We do not want to completely disregard history by creating something too foreign or novel.”

Instead, Seah employed layers and shadows to rhythmically reveal the past — think a round hole in the wall that exposes the original bricks, tiny cut-outs of the furniture and fittings to show what lies

beneath the layer of white, and even a partial underlay of the floor below the bed. Upcycled furniture — from tables to chairs, chests, mirrors, screens and vanity tables — is used where possible, which saves time and “celebrates the notion of the layering of history”.

MOD also collaborated with the artist Kang, an upcycling specialist, to produce his first series of lights for the project. Three pieces were commissioned using fused plastic made from cling film that’s layered, ironed and heated to create a waterproof, leathery material. These are hung in the five-foot-way, living area and atrium. Unsurprisingly, the luminaires are white too, consistent with the palette of the rest of the project.

While one can’t help but wonder how challenging it would be to upkeep Canvas House, the flip side of this is that even as it is decked out almost entirely in white, the co-living industry it’s a part of is anything but monochrome.

In fact, judging by the way things are, its future looks set to be very colourful indeed. **A**