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THE Little shophouse of surprises

These time-honoured buildings offer a unique way of life for the discerning home owner

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Over a century ago, shophouses were known for their squalor and poor living conditions, typically housing hundreds of coolies and labourers.

Today, the same houses are being turned into stylish offices and residences. Those at Tanjong Pagar, Emerald Hill and Katong, in particular, are much sought-after by home-buyers.

These quaint buildings, most of which are at least 40 to 80 years old, offer a unique way of life for the discerning home owner. Part of the shophouse's appeal lies in its traditional air well, often situated at the centre or off to one side of the building.

According to Richard Low, an architect with GP Designs, a firm which won two Architecture Heritage Awards in 2000 for restorative work done on shophouses in Kim Yam Road and Prinsep Street, the air well is often the design focal point of the shophouse. It allows natural light, air and even nature to seep into the living areas. This, he said, is one of the reasons for the shophouse's popularity.

"Ventilation is extremely good in a shophouse," said Richard, "With so much air and light, you can choose not to have air-conditioning. And it creates an environment very conducive to living."

Lyn Lee, owner of Awfully Chocolate cake shop in Katong, agreed. She has lived in her three-storey non-conservation shophouse in Katong for three years.

"Any shophouse will come with its own heritage, culture and fascinating history," said Lyn. "But the main reason I love shophouses is their architecture. I can carve out different living spaces as I see fit. I don't have to abide by the conventional definitions of living room or bedroom."

Lyn spent more than \$1 million restoring her shophouse, practically reinventing the original 1929 floor plan. She built a third storey on top of the original two, where her bedroom is located. She also turned the attic into an open-air bathroom overlooking Katong and the air well into a bamboo garden.

To counteract the traditional "dark and stuffy" shophouse feel, she installed a glass skylight on the roof and knocked out several extra windows. "The shophouse was like a blank canvas," Lyn said. "I felt I could do anything I wanted with it."

In fact, there are many more limitations to restoring and renovating a shophouse than there are in doing the same to a traditional house, Richard said.

"There's the issue of structural integrity," he explained. "Shophouses use a lot of timber in their windows and floorboards. So, we need to check for safety."

Other complications, according to Richard, whose firm has a portfolio of about 50 shophouses, relate to the issue of whether to retain, restore or replace original architectural features.

"What's more, the views and orientations of the rooms are restricted because they can only face the back court or the front yard."

Moreover, if the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has gazetted the shophouse for conservation, there are additional considerations such as retaining its facade.

Conservation shophouses often feature decorative walls and floor tiles, along with awnings on the front windows, which must be preserved using original materials. This can prove to be costly and time-consuming.

But Richard conceded that there are more opportunities for creative design in shophouses. "When you look at a shophouse from the outside, you can never tell what's inside," he said. "There are some beautiful shophouses that have used modern interpretations of the space. Visiting a shophouse is always surprising, because behind those doors, you can achieve any look you want."

The URA has gazetted about 6,000 shophouses as conservation buildings, most of which are in the areas of Kim Yam Road, Blair Road, Everton Road, Chinatown, Cairnhill and Emerald Hill. However, on the outskirts of town, in Katong and Balestier, there are a large number of clusters of non-conservation shophouses.

"Naturally, those that have been gazetted as conservation buildings have higher value," said Siti Hajar Ali, a real estate specialist in conservation shophouses. "Because of their decorative facades and also because of their prime locations."

According to Siti, renting a shophouse on Emerald Hill can cost upwards of \$20,000. To buy one, you would have to pay about \$2.6 million. Despite the high prices, living in a shophouse remains de rigeur for young couples, professionals, creative types and even expatriates who are keen to try out the novelty of living in a historical building.

As Lee put it: "This is my first and, hopefully, last home."

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