



Lifestyle

New, hip stores in old malls

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Drawn by cheaper rentals and the eclectic charm of older shopping malls, young entrepreneurs are opening chic stores there

Instead of glitzy shopping centres or trendy neighbourhoods, some hip stores have chosen to go off the beaten path and set up shop in malls that have seen better days.

Drawn by the low rentals and unique character of the malls, these newcomers have made their home in the past two years in ageing shopping complexes such as Bukit Timah Plaza, Beauty World Centre and Peninsula Shopping Centre.

For example, indie stationery shop Small And Able opened at Peninsula Shopping Centre two months ago. The mall, set up in the 1970s, is known for its guitar, camera and tailoring shops.

Small And Able's owner, Ms Chin Siew Hoon, 31, says: "I don't want to be in a new mall where the rent is high. It is also too mass-market."

Rental costs in old shopping malls can be almost half of those in new malls, says Ms Edith Tay, director of real estate company PropertyBank, which specialises in commercial properties.

In general, there are strata owners in older malls who charge between \$7.50 and \$15 per sq ft per month, depending on the location, size and floor level of the units.

Newer malls in town can charge between \$15 and \$50 psf per month, while rents at more popular suburban malls can be between \$12 and \$30 psf per month, also depending on the location, size and floor level of the units.

These malls may also take a small cut from their tenants' revenue.

Drawn by the cheaper rent, Ms Ruth Tan, 34, too, chose to open a craft and language studio in Beauty World Centre last month. The 1980s mall has enrichment centres, a supermarket and homeware shops.

She says: "I was approached by some of the malls in the city and suburbs but rentals in those places are too high."

She runs The Workroom, which offers workshops such as silkscreen printing and art classes for children.

She used to run a craftshop in Holland Village Shopping Mall but moved out after the rent increased when Holland Village MRT station was completed.

Business has been encouraging so far and she reports a take-up rate of about 70 per cent within the first two weeks of opening.

But there are disadvantages to opening in old malls, such as less foot traffic and the occasional power outage.

Mr Nicholas Lin, 28, director of restaurant group Platypus, chose to open his second outlet, called Platypus Family Kitchen, at Bukit Timah Plaza last year.

The refurbished mall, built in the late 1970s, is now popular mainly for its enrichment centres for children and a FairPrice Finest supermarket.

But foot traffic for his 50-seater restaurant is about half that of his city outlets, says Mr Lin, who also runs Platypus Test Kitchen at Clifford Centre, Platypus Kitchen at Bugis Junction and Platypus Gourmet2Go in Golden Shoe Carpark.

Power trips also occur about once a month and the air-conditioning is weak in general, he adds.

"I want to have my brand in as many locations as possible but I do not make a lot of money at this outlet, just the bare minimum. The challenge is how to make this outlet a destination."

He plans to introduce a delivery service to cater to nearby residents.

One shop which has found success in an old mall is vintage store Granny's Day Out, which opened at Peninsula Shopping Centre in 2004.

Owner Loh Hsiao Ying, 38, says: "Back then, the other tenants warned us that there were few women who came to shop at the mall.

"But we were featured in the local media, so people got curious and came here to check us out. Before long, we were getting repeat customers, who helped to spread the word."

Ms Loh and co-owner Kyra Ching, 34, like Peninsula Shopping Centre for its eclectic charm. She says: "It fits in with our identity as a vintage store. It was a huge gamble but it remains home for Granny's Day Out."

Retail expert **Lynda Wee** says old strata-titled malls, where the shops are owned by different landlords, can be a good option for new-to-market brands as new malls run by a single management often require businesses to fulfil certain criteria, such as a particular business concept, before they are allowed to open.

Dr Wee, an adjunct associate professor in retail management at Nanyang Technological University, adds: "There is more flexibility to negotiate one-on-one with the landlord of a shop. There is a risk in opening in old malls but there are those who are entrepreneurial enough to do something different and make it work.

"The world today is so well-connected. A small shop tucked in an old shopping mall can create a following based on social media platforms and pull in a physical crowd. As long as you are interesting, people will come."

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Owners Kyra Ching (above) and Loh Hsiao Ying opened vintage store Granny's Day Out at Peninsula Shopping Centre in 2004. -- ST PHOTO: CHERYL FAITH WEE

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