

Bukit Timah's royal, genteel 'kampung'

Coronation Shopping Plaza may be ageing, but that's its appeal for regulars

By EYD SAM JO

STANDING amid a prime Bukit Timah neighbourhood dotted with landed houses and prestigious schools, Coronation Shopping Plaza is hardly what one might call a kampung, or village in Malay.

But that is exactly how some describe the 35-year-old mall, where shop owners and their regular customers have struck up royal-like friendships and are on a first-name basis.

"It is a nostalgic neighbourhood centre," said Mr Alan Chong, 59, who opened Alan Optics there in 1986.

"People say, 'Your place is not luxurious, not high class, but I love to come here.'"

They feel that this place is very friendly and homely," Ms Betty Chong, who has worked at E-Sun Stationery for about 15

years, agreed: "It is more kampung here. We have that rapport with customers, and everyone's familiar with each other."

The 60-year-old has also seen some of her customers - students from nearby schools such as Hwa Chong Institution, Nanyang Girls' High School and National Junior College - grow up.

"I have seen them graduate, start working and start families. There are some who come back just to chat with us," said Ms Chong, breaking into a smile.

Built in 1979, the four-storey mixed development has 111 shop units on the first three floors, 20 apartments on the top level and a basement carpark.

The plan clearly took its name from the adjacent Coronation Road. Along with Empress Road and King's Road, these were once private roads belonging to the estate of Hokkien merchant Choo Lam Tong.

The roads in the area were later given their current royal names in 1912 to commemorate the coronation of King George V, who ascended the throne in 1910 and had his coronation in 1911. He reigned till his death in 1936.

As a pupil at Farrer Primary School in nearby Lutheran Road in the 1960s, Mr Todd Subramini remembers Coronation Shopping Plaza as "Silo", after an old supermarket which was there then.

There is still a supermarket - the space is now occupied by FairPrice - on the ground floor.

"During the flood days in Bukit Timah, there was a huge drain between my school and 'Silo', where most boys would catch fish and tadpoles," recalled the 41-year-old telecommunication executive.

He remembers the mall had video rental stores, computer shops, a cosmetic store and a book store. Most boys would catch fish and tadpoles," he said, adding that there was also a kacam pating seller and mamak shops beside the

building selling snacks such as 10-cent slices of satay and ice-cream.

Gone are the floods and roadside peddlers today, but the place nonetheless remains a reliable haunt for those in search of anything from a stylish pen to a hearty meal.

"The food here is good and authentic. It is more Malaysian, more creamy, not so spicy," Mrs Irene Lam said, as she slurped up a spoonful of laksa at My Cozy Corner, a popular eatery where boss Leong Swee Meng, 67, has been serving up local and Japanese dishes such as ponkai and beef teriyaki for the past 10 years.

Mrs Lam, a 71-year-old retiree who lives in Jurong,

travels, makes it a point to visit the popular joint about three times a year, whenever she is in town visiting her son, even if it means taking a taxi from his place at Sentosa Cove.

Coronation Shopping Plaza, like Katong Shopping Centre or Beauty World, all of which were "born" in the 1970s and 1980s, look their compared to other new malls such as Jem or Westgate in Jurong East.

But it is precisely the dated feel that has endeared them to many.

"It is a mystical feeling, like you are going back to the 1970s, and you can relax," said Mr Leong.

"I love this old shopping mall. It has a charm about it," said Ms Vismia, a 50-year-old economist from Croatia who gave only her first name. She lives with her family in neighbouring Hillcrest Road.

My son sees his dentist here, and my husband buys from the tennis shop here. There is also a stationery shop, a supermarket, tailors and a photo shop."

Another Bukit Timah resident, Mr Frederic Joubert, is also content with the mall's "old-fashioned" style: "I am not into thebling bling on Orchard Road."

"You don't have to care about what you wear when you come here," quipped the 42-year-old regional sales manager from France.

Student Tan Mui Yee, 17, from Hwa Chong Institution, said she and her friends usually go there for lunch after school.

"It is like a tradition for us. It is so cosy and quiet, and there is a sense of familiarity," she said.

Mr Ramalingam Rathnasami Pillai, 68, who started a craft tailoring shop after retiring five years ago, also prefers the mall's small-scale.

He gets about five customers a day, but is satisfied.

"It is not a mall, but I can survive. It is very peaceful here," he said.

But not all businesses have survived.

The multiple Local Area Network gaming centres, once a hit



Mr Leong Swee Meng (above) of My Cozy Corner has been serving up his popular ponkai for the past 15 years at Coronation Shopping Plaza (right). The 35-year-old mall has seen many changes among its tenants, and despite competition from new malls, retains its base of loyal regulars. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND FOO



with teenagers, have gone. Shop owners say fewer students are coming to the mall as a result these days.

"It is not a mall, but I can survive. And while new food and beverage outlets such as Starbucks have sprouted up, old favourites like Prince Coffee House and Golden Rooster have either moved out or closed for good.



and consent from the landlords, there are plans to make the mall more disabled-friendly.

"This comes after feedback from some tenants and customers that the lift does not serve the basement carpark, rendering it inconvenient for the elderly.

The mall is due for renovation, said Mr Ong. His last major facelift was about 10 years ago.

"Tenants such as Madam Fatme Hamid, 52, who sells toys at her shop Toy Plaza, are eager for an upgrade.

"We need to keep up with the times, she said. "Hopefully, we will bring in more people."

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OLD-FASHIONED CHARM

It is a mystical feeling, like you are going back to the 1970s, and you can relax.

— Mr Leong Swee Meng, 67-year-old owner of My Cozy Corner, which has been selling local and Japanese dishes for the past 10 years, at the appeal of Coronation Shopping Plaza

I am not into the bling bling on Orchard Road. You don't have to care about what you wear when you come here.

— Bukit Timah resident Frederic Joubert, a 42-year-old regional sales manager from France who likes the mall's "old-fashioned" nature

