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Mr Fang Low, chief executive officer of property developer Figment, loves being around beautiful things.

When he was studying in New York University in 2012 for his business degree, he interned at Christie's Fine Art auction house.

"That didn't end well because I ended up breaking a Ming dynasty tea cup that was worth US\$45,000," says Mr Low, 32, whose family has been in the property business since 1990.

Thankfully, he says, he did not have to pay for the breakage as the auction house had insured all the pieces on consignment.

"I didn't just have a passion for art. I had a passion for shophouses as works of art. There are so many things in different cultures that were not originally intended as art, like teacups and bowls, and they are beautiful anyway."

Mr Low's co-living firm differentiates itself from others with its emphasis on design. Its slate of 15 shophouses, with three more in the pipeline this year, are retrofitted to operate in the higher end of the market, comprising private suites with en suite bathrooms and which cost between \$2,000 and \$4,000 a month to rent.

Figment operates more spacious, self-contained suites compared with shared condominium units, which help in social distancing, says Mr Low.

Its tenants, or members, have access to a fully furnished kitchen, in-house laundry utilities and common area facilities. The rentals include Wi-Fi, weekly cleaning services and regular member events.

"I grew up in a Singapore shophouse with art-hoarding parents," shares Mr Low. "That definitely got me interested in the arts and culture at a young age and I soon found myself learning more about heritage and art while working in the East Asian Art Department at Christie's in New York."

When he returned to Singapore in 2012, Mr Low helped his family with the development of boutique shophouses along Lorong 24A Geylang as part of The Shophouse Series, a project involving seven local architects handpicked to revamp a row of eight conservation shophouses.

"I was amazed at the character and vibrancy that the Lorong 24A Shophouse Series had lent to gritty Geylang and resolved to broaden our selection of design partners from just local architects and interior designers to furniture makers and even a botanical design studio," says Mr Low.

The look of Figment properties today draws a lot from partnerships with home-grown creatives to create a distinct character. "We're going for something distinct and not what you'd typically see in the interior or renovation scene," says Mr Low.

"Shophouses are most commonly commercial spaces, so we wanted to re-imagine the traditional shophouse space in the context of contemporary living that still maintains a strong sense of place. I truly believe that art – especially local art and design – serves as a key grounding factor."

The properties showcase a varied palette of colours, styles and interpretations by some of Singapore's top designers, such as Timo from Studio Juju and Ivan Lee from Weekend Worker, who worked on the



firm's Still House in the Joo Chiat area; and Colin Seah from Ministry of Design, who worked on the firm's Canvas House in Blair Road in the Tanjong Pagar area.

Seah, who won the Singapore President's Design Award in 2006 and 2008, says the brief was to design a standout long-stay residential abode that brought out the character of a heritage shophouse, yet was appealing to ultra-modern tenants.

"The design concept was underpinned by the desire to conceptually blanket Canvas House with a layer of white that covers the past, but which also alludes to a canvas for the future," says Seah, who took

four months to complete his vision.

"The white blurs the distinction between new and old as well as between the spatial elements such as walls and ceiling."

Besides architects, Figment has also commissioned interior decor curations from home-grown craftsmen such as Roger & Sons for bespoke woodwork and The General Company for laundry bags made from army canvas.

Mr Low is upbeat about the co-living model despite the pall that the coronavirus pandemic has cast on the hospitality and property sectors. "I believe there will be some degree of slowing down this year but, ultimately, I believe

co-living is more resilient than other sharing economy concepts such as co-working.

"People still need a place to stay and, as we calibrate towards a new normal where working from home is more widely practised and there is less need to step out, our co-living 'homes' have the capacity to mimic and deliver the spaces similar to those of co-working."

Figment is designing the ground floors of its shophouses to be more suitable for work-from-home situations, while the upper levels are reserved for rest and relaxation.

"I expect to continue seeing a lot of growth in the coming years," says Mr Low.

Figment's No. 13, also called the Red Dragon house, is part of the developer's Lorong 24A Shophouse Series. Hyla architects imagined a red dragon-esque steel spiral staircase rising from the ground level pool to the ceiling.

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CARLINA TETERIS