

Shipping containers repurposed in hip and interesting ways



The Social Entrepreneurship and Eco-park Development in Punggol East houses seven container restaurants. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

More used containers are being repurposed to house new cargo – art studios, shops and restaurants

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Shipping containers past their prime are being given a new lease of life, with developers here using them to house restaurants, shops and artist studios.

Not only are they eco-friendly and cost-effective, but containers are also sought after for their trendy, industrial-chic aesthetic.

Mr Adam Aw, 34, sales director at OSG Containers and Modular, which supplies new and used containers, says that the global trend of container architecture is catching on in Singapore.

“In recent years, we have begun to see more repurposed containers being used here as retail shops, food and beverage outlets and extra event spaces,” he says.

He adds that the lower cost is part of the attraction. While using a 6m container as a building can cost between \$1,500 and \$2,500, building a structure of a similar size would cost \$2,000 to \$3,000.

In the past year alone, there have been multiple container developments.

In February, Social Innovation Park (SIP) debuted its Social Entrepreneurship and Eco-park Development in Punggol East, while Goodman Arts Centre unveiled its Greenfield Modular Studios last August.

Over the next two weekends, flea-market enthusiasts can look forward to Artbox Singapore, which will be partially housed in shipping containers.

Other projects include Deck, an independent arts venue in Prinsep Street .

Old containers can also be an environmentally friendly option.

“Recycling and a focus on green features guided the design for Greenfield Modular Studios, so we constructed them using recycled shipping containers,” says Ms Sabrina Chin, director of precinct development at the National Arts Council, which oversees Goodman Arts Centre.

Mr Melvin Tan, 41, a director at Laud, the architectural firm responsible for Deck, adds: “If we look at it in terms of sustainability, containers are used because life is given to an otherwise discarded material.”

But Assistant Professor Joshua Comaroff, 43, who lectures on architecture and sustainable design at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, cautions that customising containers can incur high costs.

“As containers are ‘monocoque’ structures – which means that forces are distributed evenly across their surfaces – wanting to cut a hole (for windows) will require additional metal framing to make them structurally sound. This can be expensive.”

However, repurposing shipping containers could still be an economical alternative if one is looking for a temporary solution.

Ms Wong Pei Shan, 30, director of SIP, says: “With only a short threeyear lease, using shipping containers is still cheaper than building a structure.”

SEED AT PUNGGOL EAST



The exterior of Boost@Banks, one of the restaurants at Seed. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Incorporating upcycling was a key design feature of the new Social Entrepreneurship and Eco-park Development (Seed) in Punggol East.

The 15,340 sq m development consists of seven container restaurants and a community farm.

Ms Wong Pei Shan, 30, director of Social Innovation Park (SIP), which manages Seed, says: "As we are calling it an eco-park, we needed to ensure the construction process was environmentally friendly."

With only a three-year lease, a cost-effective solution was needed, and not building a permanent structure was a huge draw for SIP.

Mr Edward Gao, 29, who owns Boost@Banks, one of the restaurants at Seed, tells The Sunday Times: "Altogether, we spent about \$120,000 on this container restaurant. If we had to build (a structure) from scratch, it would have easily cost us 20 per cent more."

Launched in February, the seven container restaurants serve a range of dishes, from fish and chips to Hong Kong-style desserts.

He says he was attracted to the concept of outdoor container restaurants.

"I think it is quite special because it is one of the first container restaurant concepts in Singapore."

However, heavy rain is a challenge.

Mr Gao says: "With limited indoor seating, when the rain comes, we can effectively call it a day."

Next door, Mr Kiang Siang Heng, 46, head chef at D'Grill, is preparing for night service.

The chef of 28 years has developed a system to ensure his team can work efficiently in the limited space.

He says his five-man kitchen crew has to multi-task because they cannot accommodate more people.

As for Mr Gao, he has no major complaints so far.

"Operations have been going quite smoothly, it's almost the same as in a regular kitchen."

GREENFIELD MODULAR STUDIOS



Greenfield Modular Studios offers 11 studios housed in 30 recycled shipping containers. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

To meet the demand for project studios at Goodman Arts Centre, its Greenfield Modular Studios opened in August last year, offering 11 studios housed in 30 recycled shipping containers.

"We wanted to create something flexible and non-permanent while keeping construction costs down," says Ms Sabrina Chin, director of precinct development at the National Arts Council, which oversees the arts centre. "Due to their modular nature, they can be reassembled to meet future needs, are affordable and are also faster to build."

With all 11 studios occupied and a growing waitlist, Greenfield is already looking like a hit.

Artist and painter Danya Yu, 34, moved there from a rented factory space in Tai Seng that was smaller but more expensive.

She says: "The lighting condition there was not as good. Here, the skylight provides me with even lighting, which helps with painting."

Another tenant, contemporary artist Francis Ng, who is in his late 30s and founded multi-disciplinary studio Wowwowwow, moved into one of the container studios about six months ago.

Originally occupying a project studio in another block within the arts centre, he decided to relocate as he saw the advantages of the container structure. "Unlike my previous studios, the container studios are very effective, especially when some of the pieces I work on can be up to 2 to 3m tall," he says.

However, these container blocks do pose some challenges.

Mr Nicholas Yeo, 30, a manager at the arts centre, says: "As the structure was assembled using shipping containers, during periods of torrential rain, some parts of the building can get quite wet."

ARTBOX SINGAPORE



Artbox Singapore will feature refurbished shipping containers, an iconic feature of the original market in Bangkok (above). PHOTO: ARTBOX SINGAPORE

Over the next two weekends, Bangkok flea market Artbox will be making its first stop outside Thailand in Singapore, as part of its Artbox Asia Tour.

The flea market will feature more than 10 refurbished shipping containers, an iconic feature of the original market in Bangkok.

Besides housing the Artbox Singapore merchandise shop and partner booths, the containers will also provide marketgoers with a backdrop for photo opportunities.

Mr Lee Haoming, co-founder of Artbox Asia, says: "Repurposing shipping containers is not only environmentally friendly, but also a great proof of concept on how we can manipulate spaces to create refreshing, unique and versatile content."

Modular scaffolding will be used to create stalls for vendors, a nod to the pasar malam, or night markets, here.

Also unique to Singapore is the selection of stall vendors - one in four will be from South-east Asia. They will offer a wide variety of merchandise, including home and living, fashion and food.

Spicing up the event are performances by local bands as well as a live muay thai showdown.

The structure of the shipping containers will be put together off-site before being transported to the fleamarket venue at Bayfront Event Space, closer to the start of the event.

"Having these containers constructed off-site helps reduce the cost of site rental, as time taken to fix the containers on-site would translate into additional on-site days," Mr Lee says.

Undergraduate Haiqal Zailani, 21, has made plans to head to the popup market next weekend.

"I haven't had the chance to go to the one in Bangkok, so I'm excited that Artbox is coming to Singapore. It's pretty cool that the flea market is being held in shipping containers," he says.

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