When hostel beats hotel

A new Queenstown hostel designed like a condo provides students a stylish home away from home

Tay Soon Chiang

Some students have come a long way from back in the 1990s when they were in basic rooms—with a bed, desk and cupboard that had seen better days—and often with small windows.

“Take, for example, the latest to open here, at the Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS). Visitors can be excused for wondering if they have stumbled into a condominium by mis-take, as the rooms at MDIS Residences Stirling come with fancy touches such as bay windows and balconies.

And no wonder—the 15-storey hostel for international students cost $60 mil-lion to build and is the largest run by a pri-vate school here. It is located on the site of MDIS’ Stirling Road campus near Queenstown.

It can take up to 1,700 students and comprises 100 single bedrooms, 602 two-bed rooms with either balconies or bay windows and 80 four-bed rooms with either balconies or bay windows. Monthly rental starts from $483.50 for a room shared by four to $827.75 for a single room.

In addition, there are 14 suites in the residences which cater to visiting lecturers and their families, or the families of international students.

Since the hostel began accepting stu-dents in March, more than 300 of them have moved in.

Ms Chua Chun Hoe, assistant secre-tary-general at MDIS, says the school decided to build its own hostel, as “there is a shortage of hostel rooms for students in the vicinity.”

Having a hostel on campus also allows students to “have a holistic learning expe-rience, where they can live, learn and play in one location,” he adds.

The hostel was designed by local award-winning architecture firm Ong & Ong. With its blue and white facade, the building stands out from its surrounding HDB flats. “We told the architects to make it distinctive,” says Mr Chua.

Stylish features such as balconies and bay windows let the students feel as if they are staying in condos, he adds. The only difference is, the rooms do not have attached bathrooms. Instead, there are common toilets on each floor.

The rooms come furnished with beds, study desks and built-in wardrobes. There is a pantry on each floor that is equipped with a microwave oven. Students also have their meals at a food court on campus.

Aiming those who have moved in is Ms Nguyen Phuong Thao, 25, who is studying for her master’s degree shares a four-bed room with three fellow Vietnamese stu-dents. Their room comes with a balcony that she says “makes the room more spacious and I can see the outside from my bed.”

Rooms with balconies are popular choices among students, says Mr Chua. As with living in a condo, the school is fussy about what students have on their balconies. Plants and outdoor seating are fine, but laundry is not.

Mr Nguyen’s roommate, 17-year-old Nguyen Mai Huong, moved in after hear-ing about the comforts of the hostel from her classmates. She had been staying in a hotel in Orchard Road for two years, before moving in two months ago.

“My parents and I had a look at the hostel rooms, which are beautiful. They told me that I would be comfortable staying here, so I moved in,” she says.

The hostel is divided into two blocks, one for males and the other for females, with two bridges that connect the blocks. House rules for the students include having to return to their own blocks no later than 10pm and returning to the host-el before midnight. Students have access to their own floors and rooms via an access card.

The hostel not only comes on locks and safety but also on the green front. It was awarded a Green Mark Gold Plus Award by the Building and Construction Authority last year, making it the first green hostel here. Green Mark Awards are handed out to developers of green buildings.

Planet-friendly features include solar panels on the rooftop terrace. Solar ener-gy is tapped and used to heat up water for the hostel’s use. Also, there are two funnel-like structures by the hos-tel which collect rain-water for irrigation.

Air-conditioning is available in the rooms available only at night. In the day, students are expected to use a fan. The large windows in the rooms also allow in plenty of natural light.

Mr Chua says such green features help the school save $500,000 annually in electricity bills and $17,000 on water bills.

While the school prides itself on hav-ing a green hostel, for students, it is the little indulgences that make hostel living a pleasant one.

MDIS student Naureen Hathiaram, 22, has been staying in a single room since starting school three months ago.

The Indian national says she chose a single room as she likes having privacy. At 7.6 sq m in size, her room is cozy but not tiny.

“Don’t feel like I’m away from home.” Another perk: “Being able to wake up 30 minutes before lecture time.”

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Special drying racks mounted outside the window of each hostel room at Hall 3 (left) help students to easily hang and access their laundry. ST PHOTOS: MALAVIYA SINGH

Nanyang Technological University (NTU)

The tertiary institution offers 9,200 places spread over its 16 halls of resi-dence. It plans to provide all under-graduates with a hostel room (single or shared) on campus by adding 5,000 new places by 2015.

In the last five years, it has built about 680 new air-conditioned rooms, offering 1,100 more places for its undergraduate students.

In preparation for the inaugural Youth Olympic Games last year, for which NTU was the official games village, upgrading works were done for eight halls of residence.

This included fitting air-conditioners in almost 3,500 rooms which previously had ceiling fans only.

Other improvements included installing vinyl flooring and bed furn-ishings with lower drawer compart-ments (below). Toilets were also reno-vated and fitted out with new mirrors, tiles and basins, while the floor in all halls was retrofitted. Barbeque pits were also built.

The two latest halls of residence to be completed are halls 3 and 18.

As with the other halls, single and double occupancy rooms are available. A new feature found in these two halls are special laundry dry-ing racks. Each room has its own rack outside the window, unlike other halls where the drying facility is in the common area. Having personal drying racks means stu-dents are less likely to get their laundry mixed up.

NTU will be including this feature in its upcoming hostels.

Monthly rates start from $180 a person a month for a double occupancy room.
Here, students have a choice of six halls of residence – The Prince George’s Park Residences, Ridge View Residences and Kent House residences.

And most months, three new residences will open at NUS, offering a more varied learning experience designed to encourage interactive peer groups and help students fulfil their lifelong learning needs.

These new residences are across the road from NUS East Ridge campus.

Two colleges, Cinnamon and Tamarind, will offer 2,200 beds for undergraduates. Each will have 50 single bedrooms and 49 six-bedroom suites. A single bedroom costs $101 weekly while a six-bedroom suite is $152 a week.

Each college will also offer a small residence for single and married graduate students. The apartments are configured as five-bedroom suites for single students and one-bedroom units for married students. It will offer 1,000 beds for single students and 100 units of married student apartments.

“The aim is to create a friendly living environment for graduate students to study, relax and socialize,” says Tan Tai Yong, NUS vice-president for life.

While “the new registration and allocation process for residences at UTM is still ongoing, but applications numbers have been very good.”

What makes residences at UTM different from the others at NUS is that students can live and learn under one roof. For example, students need only take the lift down from their rooms to their classrooms.

The number of students who will be moving into the new residence is 10,000 each fall season student: Ng Yong Fan, 23. He will be staying in a six-bed room suite with five friends at Cinnamon college. This will be his first time staying in a hostel. "I'll be more than happy to be in a single room, but this arrangement will allow me to have friends with me."

This is certainly the best life for students. The hostel (right) sits not far from the University Town, which is home to several schools and universities in Singapore.

Korean student Hwang Jae (left) shares a room with a Malaysian classmate and finds the accommodations perfect for two people.

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