

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SINGAPORE TATLER

Is flexible living a new hospitality trend? KeSa House's Ashish Manchharam weighs in

by CHLOE PEK / SINGAPORE TATLER 



KeSa House offers both short- and long-term accommodations, along with six food and beverage options on Keong Saik Road.
(Photo: KeSa House)

The man behind Ann Siang House and most recently, KeSa House, is blurring the lines between hotel and apartment accommodation.

With the persevering popularity of Airbnb offering discerning travellers an option between hotels and serviced apartments, a new concept has been gaining traction amongst millennials around the world looking for a longer-term lodging – flexible living, a no-strings-attached accommodation plan that offers digital nomads, expats, and even locals an instant home with a like-minded community and a suite of amenities and services.

Newly opened KeSa House embraces this trend, offering both short- and long-term accommodations, along with six food and beverage concepts on the vibrant Keong Saik Road.

Developed by 8M Real Estate – which boasts a stellar portfolio of lifestyle destinations in the central business district (CBD) – and managed by its hospitality arm 8M Collective, the 60-room boutique property is nestled in a beautifully restored shophouse with six different room types that appeal to guests looking to "stopover, or stay awhile".



THE TURQUOISE FACADE OF KESA HOUSE IS A BREATH OF FRESH AIR IN THE CHINATOWN DISTRICT. (PHOTO: KESA HOUSE)

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“Historically, the market has been dominated by traditional operators like hotels and serviced apartments; we are trying to create a ‘home away from home’ that fills the gap in between, appealing to the Airbnb audience who still wants a professionally managed, serviced experience,” shared 8M Real Estate’s founder and managing director Ashish Manchharam.

We speak to him about his affinity with heritage shophouses and the inspiration behind KeSa House’s flexible-living model.

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YOU GREW UP IN A SHOPHOUSE ON BUSSORAH STREET. HOW MUCH INFLUENCE DID THAT PLAY IN YOUR BUSINESS MODEL OF ADAPTING SHOPHOUSES – IS IT MORE SENTIMENTAL OR PROFIT-DRIVEN?

I have been passionate about shophouses for several reasons, including the fact that they are conserved properties with unique character and architecture, unlike what is being built today. At the same time, these properties are well located, typically close to the CBD. Over time, the uses of the properties have been rejuvenated and have increased in value. I would say that my passion and affection for the properties has allowed me to benefit from capital appreciation or profits.

THERE HAS BEEN A NOSTALGIA FOR SHOPHOUSES IN RECENT YEARS, PROMPTING BOUTIQUE HOTELS AND BUSINESSES TO TAKE UP SHOP IN THESE HERITAGE BUILDINGS. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS PHENOMENON?

Around ten years ago, I realised that creative, independent food and beverage (F&B) and retail operators were shifting their focus to occupying ground floor space in shophouses, driven by the fact that these properties have their own character and feature prominent street frontage. I saw this happen in Haji Lane where warehouses were converted to boutique retail spaces, and about five years ago, in the F&B space around the CBD.

This phenomenon has been well received particularly as our communities prefer to retain and reuse rather than constantly rebuild, and also lends itself to building up sustainability within our business.



Pasta Bar is one of six new food and beverage concepts by KeSa House. (Photo: KeSa House)

WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY CHALLENGES OF REPURPOSING SHOPHOUSES?

Shophouses are old, some over 200 years, and will have physical constraints which need to be well assessed during the renovation. There are many regulatory challenges in terms of the physical look of the property but also the type of use that would be allowed. As I am focused on F&B and accommodation as primary drivers of our business, having certainty in use of the property is very important.

IS THERE A FORMULA FOR YOUR DEVELOPMENTS? HOW DO YOU SELECT THE VENDORS AND F&B ESTABLISHMENTS FOR EACH ONE?

Location is a key criterion to formulating the right development and targeting the appropriate F&B operators. The team is constantly seeking out new concepts and operators. Once we have a location, we can pick from our pool of concepts for that specific location. Our focus has been to create destinations which are different and to target a variety of consumers.

SINGAPORE TATLER> TIARA SHAW'S BABY SHOWER AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, SINGAPORE

KESA HOUSE'S SLOGAN IS 'STOP OVER OR STAY A WHILE'. CAN YOU SHARE THE ORIGINS OF THIS CONCEPT, AND YOUR TARGET MARKET?

The idea is to fill the gap between daily stays and long stays. For shorter stays, we are targeting recurring guests who are looking for familiarity when coming back to the property. For longer term stays, we want to appeal to young Singaporeans seeking independence (as they typically live at home with parents) who want the flexibility to come and go, and are hesitant to commit to long contracts.

The key elements that we focus on are design, quality, value, a centralised location and a great experience.