



(From above) Atelier If's artist's impression of Lily Garden, a three-storey semi-detached house in Bukit Timah; coasters from Kelly Ser Atelier; and The Leaf Edit dinnerware collection with wooden Lapiz Tray from Domi Living. The brains behind these brands are among the designers here who have found success by setting up their businesses online during the Covid-19 pandemic.
PHOTOS: ATELIER IF, DOMI LIVING, GAVIN FOO

NO SHOP? NO PROBLEM

Designers are ditching the costly overheads of bricks-and-mortar spaces in favour of webstores, co-working spaces and retail pop-ups



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About a decade ago, designers who wanted to start their own business would have had to rent a physical space for their professional practice or to stock their wares.

But with new online platforms and avenues such as co-working and space-sharing options, a bricks-and-mortar presence is no longer needed for enterprising design talent.

Designers are now launching their businesses online first. Only after seeing growth do they move into co-working spaces or start selling their designs on consignment at larger retail stores.

This allows them to ditch costly office or showroom rentals and channel precious resources into designing better websites to attract customers.

This may be a lifeline for many in the industry, including architects, who feel that they cannot take the pressure of being an employee in a design practice.

A 2022 survey by the Singapore Institute of Architects found that only seven in 100 architecture graduates said they would stay on for the long haul in their firms.

In the survey of 536 young graduates, the majority cited low wages and long hours, a lack of work-life balance, and high stress and a poor work culture as reasons for wanting to quit.

Statistics from Singapore's Board of Architects (BOA) show that 15 new sole proprietors were registered in 2020, but the figure has been climbing steadily.

In 2021, it went up to 21 and, in 2022, it jumped to 29.

A few clicks are all it takes to launch a design website or e-commerce store nowadays, says freelance marketing communications consultant Adda Chua.

She says new business owners have the "luxury" of easily kick-starting their e-stores, thanks to a range of online avenues and "social

commerce" platforms.

"While there are popular e-commerce sites such as Shopify, Wix, BigCommerce, Squarespace and WooCommerce, many users these days prefer to shop on their social media platforms, as they are able to browse and purchase items without leaving their Instagram or Facebook apps," says Ms Chua, 35, who has been advising corporations and small businesses for the last eight years.

"The top two social commerce platforms today would be Instagram Shop and Facebook Shop."

By having a virtual store on these social commerce platforms, businesses are also able to easily engage with their audiences through live streams or by hosting live shopping events to sell their products.

Ms Chua says many prefer these platforms to renting costly commercial spaces, especially with the effects of the pandemic.

According to online listings by real estate agencies, a 240 sq ft shop space in Far East Plaza costs about \$5,000 a month, going up to \$80,000 a month for a 5,000 sq ft commercial space in prime districts near the city centre.

In comparison, subscription plans for opening an online store are priced from just \$30, depending on the complexity of the e-commerce features required, says Ms Chua.

"This also means that new businesses will need innovation, creativity and consistency to stand out in a saturated online marketplace," she adds.

Registered architect Fiona Tan, who started her own studio in 2021, says that the pandemic had dispelled many of her long-held notions about starting out on her own.

"For one thing, the normalisation of working from home made it possible to minimise costs," says Ms Tan, 34, who runs architectural firm Atelier If.

"I was able to keep the costs of starting a firm to the minimum by doing away with a full office set-up and its attendant renovation and rental costs through co-sharing of resources at the National Design Centre (NDC) in Middle Road."

She took up the NDC co-working space about six months later as business picked up.

Another firm believer in the pervasive power of the Internet is Ms Kelly Ser, who founded Kelly Ser Atelier in 2021 as an online webstore for her artwork.

Her online showcase has helped her stage an exhibition at Tangs at Tang Plaza on Level 4, featuring homeware and other works of art with a contemporary spin on Singapore's iconic symbols, landmarks and culture. The exhibition runs till the end of March.

Ms Yuen Lee, senior director of C.K. Tang Limited, says the department store has always supported local designers and intends to host many more.

"Tangs provides local brands like Kelly Ser Atelier with a platform to highlight their creations," she says. "In doing so, our shoppers enjoy a multifaceted range of products and services in comfort."

Ms Lee says that meet-and-greet sessions with designers before Covid-19 were well received by shoppers and such "high-touch" events allow shoppers to gain a deeper understanding of the brands' ethos, as well as for brand owners to meet shoppers.

"Collaborations and showcases featuring workshops and brand presentations will continue to be part of Tangs' customer experience, particularly with the recent announcement of Dorscon green in Singapore," she adds.

Dorscon green indicates that Covid-19 is now considered mild, posing minimal disruption to daily life.

Another boost for enterprising young talent is the establishment of incubation centres in universities, which let design undergraduates test their products while still in school.

At Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), the incubator programme is open to design and technology innovators in the SUTD ecosystem.

"SUTD is looking to open a venture studio tailored to the creative industry to further the prospects of designers," says Ms Celestine Khoo, senior director of SUTD's Venture, Innovation & Enterprise office.

SUTD, which runs a design-centric curriculum, sees about 500 design students graduating each year.

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Indie designers carve out niche

FROM C1

At the National University of Singapore, Associate Professor Christophe Gaubert, director of the Design Incubation Centre (DIC) at NUS College of Design and Engineering, says that the centre's mission is to incubate ideas, projects and talent.

"DIC takes part in the emergence of a new generation of Singapore designers, helping design students and young graduates to develop

and achieve their projects until production and commercialisation," he says.

Established in 2006 as a strategic initiative, DIC – which is a part of the NUS Division of Industrial Design (DID) – is a dedicated design research laboratory.

NUS produces about 130 architecture graduates and about 40 industrial design graduates each year.

"By also developing research, prototyping and educational programmes, DIC contributes to identi-

fying new industrial, social, environmental and cultural territories where design will gravitate and grow in the coming decades," Prof Gaubert adds.

One of the centre's first commercial projects was by NUS alumnae Lin Qixia, who designed five handcrafted porcelain figurines called the Ji Jian Wu collection, featuring pure gold trimming and produced in Taiwan, after her graduation in 2019.

The collection, priced at \$128, was made available for purchase at the end of 2020 on didit.sg, the centre's online store.

"When it came to my graduation in 2019, the NUS Design Incubation Centre launched the Incubation Programme with its first open call for final-year students to feature their thesis design project," says Ms Lin, 31, who is now a user interface and user experience designer in a global design practice.

"I decided to join the one-year programme from 2019 to 2020 to have my design go from idea to finished product."

The collection was later sold in retail stores on a consignment basis as part of DIC's promotional efforts to raise awareness of its young designers' works at Design Orchard, Scene Shang, Design Anthology and Singapore Airlines' KrisShop.

Home-grown lifestyle brand Scene Shang, which was founded by Ms Jessica Wong a decade ago, has been partnering local designers and artists from the get-go.

Just before Christmas last year, Ms Wong moved away from the bricks-and-mortar showroom approach which she adopted in 2013 when she relaunched her brand through a hybrid arrangement.

She sells her homeware and lifestyle accessories not only through her online store, but also

at a creative space called Scene Shang @ OCBC Wisma Atria.

Her brand is one of six retail and food and beverage partners in a 20,000 sq ft showroom, which is OCBC Bank's largest integrated lifestyle and banking branch in the heart of Orchard Road.

She has included Ms Lin's Ji Jian Wu collection, which she says is a "good fit" for Scene Shang's range of minimalist, ultra-contemporary designs for the home.

She observes that the range of online and offline platforms available for new designers and architects is "unprecedented" and bodes well for the future of the industry where small players can compete with the big names.

"When we launched in 2014, we had fewer than 10 designs, which were certainly not enough to launch a physical store on our own," says Ms Wong, 38.

"Starting on platforms such as Naisie allowed us to get a taste of

the demand for our products in a manageable way," she adds, referring to the retail incubator for new designers which was launched in 2013 and is now an online marketplace.

Going forward, she says, designers cannot function in silos and need to work with entrepreneurs, marketers, technology experts and engineers to create products, services and solutions that stand a good chance of success.

"One of the biggest challenges of being a designer in Singapore is that our local market is very small," she adds.

"I would like to see more international programmes for local designers, such as a Singaporean design show in an Asean country. This would open doors not only to work with makers and talent in the region, but also for our designs to travel beyond Singapore."

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Daring to dream in a pandemic

The founders of three creative studios talk about taking the plunge despite the doom and gloom of Covid-19

KELLY SER ATELIER

After more than 10 years in the civil service working among the top echelons of management, Ms Kelly Ser traded power suits for brushes, palettes and easels.

The 36-year-old government scholar decided to open her own art and design studio, Kelly Ser Atelier, in 2021 to focus on art – something she has no formal training in, but which she has loved since her secondary school days.

Her work is sold through her website, through sales events and in physical retail stores such as Design Orchard.

Ms Ser has no regrets about ditching a high-paying job to follow her passion, as the pandemic gave her pause to take stock.

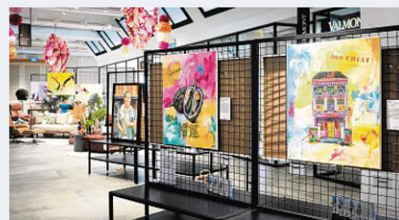
"Before 2020, I sometimes wondered whether the life I was living was really what I wanted, or out of familiarity and convenience," says Ms Ser, who obtained a first-class honours degree in chemistry from Imperial College London in 2008; a Dean's List master's in water science, policy and management from the University of Oxford in 2009; and a master's in Communications Management (Dean's List) from the Singapore Management University in 2018.

"According to the Singapore education system, I had done well and was awarded a government scholarship to study overseas. I returned and had a stable job with a strong career trajectory.

"But during the circuit breaker, when we were all hunkered down at home, it gave me the downtime I needed to reflect on my life," she recalls.

In 2021, a year after the onset of the pandemic, Ms Ser took a three-month sabbatical from work and flew to France, where she had more time to immerse herself in painting and creative work.

She says that when she took the plunge to pursue her passion as a full-time artist in November 2021, it was exhilarating and fuelled by adrenaline and purpose. Her family was also "very supportive" and close friends acted as a sounding board, weighing in on the pros and cons



Ms Kelly Ser (top) at her exhibition at Tangs at Tang Plaza. Her works (above) put a modern spin on Singapore's iconic symbols, landmarks and culture. Her exhibition runs till end-March. ST PHOTOS: GAVIN FOO

of her leap of faith.

She works from a home studio carved out of a corner of her living room in a three-bedroom private apartment in Bedok.

Besides building a pipeline of designs, she also works on commissioned art with corporate clients and conducts art workshops.

"The saying, 'If you love what you do, you will never work a day in your life,' sums up how I feel after having left the civil service," says Ms Ser, who is married to Mr Erwan Philippe, 44, a global sales

manager for a multinational technology firm based in Singapore. The couple have a four-month-old daughter.

"I had also mentally prepared myself two years ago that taking this path as an artist would be more than just painting.

"As an entrepreneur, I have to wear many hats not only as a painter, but also as a business development manager and public relations cheerleader for my work."

One of the driving forces of her business was the speed at which her art was snapped up.

Some of her earliest pieces which were put up at Design Orchard in Orchard Road were sold within a few days.

"I realised I was filling a gap in the market with my style of contemporary art, inspired by Singapore history, culture and daily life," says Ms Ser.

Over the last two years, she has been focusing not only on finding ways to scale her business, but also on maintaining a growth mindset.

"I knew when I started out that I had a limited amount of time a day to paint and it would be unrealistic to expect myself to be churning out new works every week," she says.

"I needed to continue creating original works, but I also needed a way to scale my business without becoming a painting 'factory' headed towards burnout."

Instead of churning out new works, she focused on designing merchandise which featured reproductions of her paintings on homeware and stationery at affordable prices, ranging from \$10 for a magnet to \$55 for a luxe coaster set.

Looking back, Ms Ser says that there may be risks involved in giving up the financial security of a successful career to live the life of an artist.

"But in the grand scheme of things, I was more fearful of living a life full of regrets by not taking a chance."

Info: Go to shop.kellyseratelier.com



Domi Living's wares include lead-free water goblets made with soda lime glass and hand-blown in the Philippines (\$84 for a set of six). PHOTO: DOMI LIVING

DOMI LIVING

Best friends Sonam Uttamchandani (right) and Nayantra Dhillon (right below) started Domi Living, an online homeware business, in October 2020 with the aim of helping skilled women artisans by showcasing their handiwork online.

Ms Uttamchandani, who was born in the Philippines, says they were a little intimidated at first. Breaking news of the Covid-19 pandemic around that time had caused panic as global businesses and borders shut.

Their brand name Domi, the Latin plural for "home", encapsulates the core of the business. It not only makes unique homeware that is sustainably sourced and produced, and available in Singapore stores; but also supports artisans globally, starting with those in South-east Asia, who work in cottage industries involved in weaving and beading.

During the pandemic, the founders communicated with artisans in the Philippines, Vietnam and India through "endless Zoom sessions" to slowly build up their merchandise.

When border restrictions eased, Ms Uttamchandani, 33, and Ms Dhillon, 38, spent the last two years travelling to boost the range of products available online at Domi Living.

In the Philippines, they worked with artisans to produce handmade trays. In Vietnam, they sourced for table napkins featuring tribal designs.

They also worked with independent makers in India and China to curate a range of home decor accessories such as tableware and crockery.

Ms Uttamchandani says that with any new business, there is always fear over whether it will do well. "But we felt that we were embarking on a business with purpose, one that supports talented women in crafts and cottage industries throughout South-east Asia," she says.

Ms Uttamchandani is also heavily involved in the family business, Esquire Financing, the largest non-bank financial institution in the Philippines.

She works with her family to grow their foundation called Help, which microfinances entrepreneurs. She recently launched Founders Beauty, a vegan skincare line which manufactures its products in New Zealand.

India-born co-founder Ms Dhillon brings to Domi Living her love of art and intricate ornamentation. She has a diploma in Indian Art and Mughal Miniatures from the British Museum and a master's in art and archaeology from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

The duo researched the local market before putting together their online merchandise, sourcing for homeware that was not only well-crafted, but also affordably priced. For instance, the table napkins from Vietnam sell for \$46, while a handmade black marble cake stand from India is priced at \$178.

Domi Living homeware is also available at bricks-and-mortar stores such as Silk Walk in Tanglin Mall in Tanglin Road, Design Orchard in Orchard Road and the Gourmet Pantry at the American Club in Claymore Hill.

Info: Customers can make an appointment by contacting 9669-7467 (telephone or WhatsApp) to view the latest arrivals at Domi Living's showroom at Tong Building, 302 Orchard Road, or go to www.domilivinggroup.com



ATELIER IF

Amid Covid-19 uncertainty and a global economic crisis, Ms Fiona Tan (right) decided to start her own architectural practice.

The 34-year-old Singaporean's years immediately after university had been shaped by jobs in two award-winning local



architectural firms: CSYA and Zarch Collaboratives.

As a junior designer, she worked on projects ranging from master-plan studies and hawker centres to residences and pop-up pavilions such as the Pathfinder at Fort Canning Hill, which won a Singapore Institute of Architects design award.

But in 2021, she left Zarch Collaboratives and founded Atelier If in a co-working space at the National Design Centre in Middle Road.

"I was under no illusion that it was going to be an easy ride," says Ms Tan.

The open living room of a two-storey home in Bukit Timah called The House Of Many Faces, designed by Atelier If. PHOTO: FINBARR FALLON

"Starting a fledgling business during a pandemic where supply chains were disrupted, resulting in higher costs of construction, meant greater uncertainty for the business as clients generally would be more hesitant to start new projects.

"It became more important for the architect to strategise with the client to manage the risks without sacrificing the design intent of the projects."

Ms Tan observed that the pandemic generally impacted large-scale projects, such as luxury developments and infrastructure, more than residential housing and smaller commercial undertakings. But morale was still high among her business associates and fellow designers, she says.

"There is always a demand for new, albeit smaller, design projects and most were confident that things would pick up post-pandemic."

Being small also meant that she could be more agile and selective in bidding for projects, without worrying about high overhead costs such as rental and staff payroll.

"Instead of trying to grow the business as fast as possible, I wanted to focus on ensuring each project reflected its own unique-

ness through attention to detail," says Ms Tan, who completed her architecture degree in 2011 at the National University of Singapore and went to London later that year for her master's at the Bartlett School of Architecture in University College London.

Her husband, Mr Kok Hong Bin, 34, is a Singaporean pharmaceutical engineer.

Ms Tan says of her business: "I must admit that it was daunting at first, but I told myself that establishing a fulfilling architectural practice takes years of effort and that there would never be a 'perfect time' to make such a life-changing commitment. You either do it or you don't."

Today, she manages a mix of architecture and interior design projects, and is looking to expand her studio.

"There is a greater realisation today that smaller firms can also do great work, and clients are more willing to look beyond factors such as a firm's size or history," adds Ms Tan.

"Growing an architectural business is really a marathon and not a sprint. You have to be in it for the long haul."

Info: Go to atelier-if.net and www.instagram.com/atelier_if/