

## TRENDS

# Making space for work

BY VANESHA SHURENTERAN

**W**hen Google and Facebook startled the world with their hip working culture, other companies strove to emulate them — if not their culture, then at least the working spaces that helped foster it — as long as they could afford it.

This, coupled with a growing number of freelancers and small enterprises that wanted the vibe without the investment, resulted in the rise of co-working spaces in Malaysia.

In fact, over the last five years, the Klang Valley in particular has seen the mushrooming of such spaces. All of them strive to offer something unique to their clients to differentiate themselves — not only from each other but also from conventional office spaces.

*Enterprise* spoke with several founders of these co-working spaces to find out what makes them tick and how they are doing.

## PAPER AND TOAST

Pat Teoh, who hails from Penang, was one of the first to the party. She opened Paper and Toast — a co-working space-cum-café in Kuala Lumpur — in 2010. CEO Wan Imran Wan Abdul Rahaman, who is an old friend of Teoh's, initially found the idea absurd. "When Pat talked to me about it, I felt that the whole idea was simply ridiculous. I mean, this was in 2010, the era of serviced offices," he says.

Back then, those without an office would go to cafés with WiFi, such as Starbucks and The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, to get their work done. "So, Pat thought, 'Why not open something called Paper and Toast?'" says Wan Imran.

Paper represented work while toast was a nod to its café. When the business kicked off, the café attracted foreign digital nomads and freelancers. "A lot of interesting people came to our café. For instance, there was a guy from Firefox, who had a flight to catch that night. He was willing to travel all the way from KL Sentral to our café in Jalan Nagasari and from there, to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport," says Wan Imran.

Encounters such as these convinced him of the growing importance of co-working spaces. "People want a proper place to work, with good internet connection and other amenities that usually come with an office," he says.

## COLONY

Timothy Tiah, founder of luxury co-working space



Colony, says he first learnt of the concept when he was with a friend in Jakarta, who was running a co-working space. "He told me about the whole concept — how it is for freelancers and start-ups, and how everyone is rushing to be the WeWork of Southeast Asia."

WeWork, which was established in 2010, is one of the largest co-working spaces in the US. Headquartered in New York City, it also has offices in 28 countries around the world, including Malaysia.

Like Wan Imran, Tiah had his doubts. After all, this business was aimed at start-ups and freelancers and it did not pique his interest.

He had his moment of truth while on a morning run in the park at the Kuala Lumpur City Centre in his preparation for a marathon. "I saw people on their way to work. They looked sad or harried and most of them were looking at their phones. Few could even muster a smile," says Tiah.

He realised that they were probably hurrying to cubicles in dreary, unimaginative offices. And when he thought about it, although so much in life had evolved. People's working life had remained pretty much the same.

Tiah did some extensive research on competitive labour markets and discovered that the offices of the future in Silicon Valley, which had moved away from the constricted cubicle concept, were providing modern facilities and services. That was when he decided to open his own co-working space. But it would be one with a difference.

Tiah started by looking at locations and concepts. He did not engage a local office designer because he was intent on smashing the paradigm. He approached two luxury home designers — Katherine Cheong and Jason Chen — to help him come up with what eventually became a luxurious, Instagram-worthy co-working space. This set the business apart from the others in the market.

## NOMAD

Nomad is one of the first co-working spaces in Subang Jaya. Co-founder Tan Sung Lin, 27, got in the game early because he saw which way the wind was blowing. "There was large demand from freelancers and students in Subang. People want a place to work outside their home, somewhere they can move around and meet other people. This is what co-working spaces have to offer," he says.

## THE CO.

As the concept took off, foreign companies that offered co-working spaces started to make their way to Malaysia. For instance, Singapore's The Co., which



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> Tiah



opened its doors in the city state in 2013, crossed the Causeway a year later.

The Co. head (of Malaysia and Singapore) Nim Sivakumaran recalls that there were no proper spaces for communities to meet and exchange ideas when it first opened in Malaysia. "We opened in Kuala Lumpur in 2014. Over the years, we have seen ourselves as an innovator. We are constantly evolving as a business and our motto is 'Work via life'," he says.

Nim says The Co. develops spaces that can assist not only with creativity but also growth. "For our space in Bangsar, we developed an open concept to inspire collaborations between the various tenants. But we do have private offices as well. So, we can cater for the different needs of our community," he adds.

## AND THE OCCUPANTS?

When Paper and Toast took off, 90% of the space was taken up by foreign digital nomads. Over time, however, the locals started filtering in. "Now, we are running at a ratio of 60% locals and 40% travellers," says Wan Imran.

It took a while to catch on because most locals

Singapore's The Co. opened in Kuala Lumpur in 2014 with the motto "work via life"



Tiah chose a luxurious, Instagram-worthy co-working space for Colony as he was addressing a different market

empower freelancers and students, it has teamed up with suicide prevention non-governmental organisation Befrienders. Now, people can drop in at Nomad for counselling sessions, which are free, says Tan.

"I believe when people come to a lively space, they will feel encouraged to start anew," he adds.

#### WHAT THESE SPACES HAVE TO OFFER

Nim says what sets The Co. apart from the crowd is that it was one of the pioneers of co-working spaces in Malaysia. He adds that most co-working spaces in Kuala Lumpur focus on the size of the space, whereas The Co. is focused on building a community. "We try to be part of each neighbourhood we are located in, tailoring our perks and events to suit local needs," he points out.

Nim says when new clients rent a space in The Co., they do not just get a desk. "They get access to networks, lifestyle perks and community events — anything from a members' breakfast to a treat to educational resources."

Tiah says Colony caters for a different type of clientele. "We are not looking to be cool or hip. Our space is not designed to look like a hipster café. We are like the Ritz-Carlton of co-working spaces. We have a concierge service and we hire staff from hotels and the service industry to join the team."

Colony's offerings include a nap area, massage room, rooftop gym and swimming pool.

Nomad is keen to keep its space small. In fact, it is housed in a shoplot. This allows the space to feel more engaging as some people are intimidated by larger spaces, says Tan.

Nomad is the first co-working space to accept exercise as a form of payment. "Our 'Get Fit with Nomad' programme has seen steady growth. You get RM5 off for any two of the following workouts: 20 push-ups, 20 sit-ups, 20 squats or a one-minute plank. For RM10 off, you get to select one of these workouts: 100 push-ups, 100 sit-ups, a three-minute plank or a three-minute squat hold," he says.

It also offers free consultation services and counselling. "We open our doors to people who need help and that is the kind of difference we wish to provide," says Tan.

He adds that Nomad has grown to the point where it has to turn away customers. It is currently working to increase its seating capacity so it can accept more customers.

Paper and Toast is usually open 24 hours a day because some companies only come in during the second half of the day as they are working in a different time zone. "They start work about 3am or 4am because they are working on US or European time. We have one crowd in the morning and we have another at night. So, we have a midnight lunch," says Wan Imran.

He adds that Paper and Toast runs a lot of activities as it wants to maintain a healthy balance of work and play in the space. "Wednesday is our jogging day. On Friday nights, we have dinners and outdoor jogging sessions at the KLCC Park. If anyone wants to come along, he or she is welcome. If they do not, it is fine. We understand."

Paper and Toast also has sharing sessions and movie nights. "Yes, work is work. But we also enjoy ourselves. Keeping that balance is important," says Wan Imran. **E**



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were unclear on the concept. "Our biggest difficulty is when people ask what a co-working space is. We have to spend a good 5 to 10 minutes explaining the concept," he says.

Today, with the rising number of co-working spaces popping up all over the place, people have become more aware of this offering. "Now, when people ask us about it, they are able to grasp the concept more quickly as they have heard about office spaces like ours," says Wan Imran.

Colony, however, caters for a slightly different demographic. Its occupants are mostly corporates. "I consider nomads [freelancers and digital nomads] more of a niche market. Whereas small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and corporates are basically a dime a dozen," says Tiah.

The company does not just provide space to the companies, but all the trimmings. It caters to customers with an appreciation for luxury.

Nim says The Co. houses freelancers, start-ups, innovators and multinational corporations. The company intends to be more than just a space to work in. It wants to connect life and business. "We house some

big brands, such as Mobike, the Chinese bike-sharing company."

Nim is very proud of the fact that more than 50% of The Co.'s occupants in Bangsar are women. "This is probably one of the highest in the industry. We do have an in-house member known as HER, which supports female entrepreneurs, who are our clients in Malaysia and Singapore," he says.

Nomad attracts a more youthful crowd, says Tan. In fact, it was the youngsters — freelancers and students — who created the demand for the co-working space in Subang to begin with.

"There are many co-working spaces in Bangsar, Damansara Heights, Mont'Kiara, Taman Tun Dr Ismail and some less well-known suburbs. We always wondered, why not Subang?" he says.

Tan points out that it is not always convenient for Subang residents to commute to offices in Kuala Lumpur with all the heavy traffic. "We decided it would help if those who live in the area had their own co-working space. Then, they would not have to travel so far."

Nomad has taken it a step further. In its efforts to

**Paper and Toast was the first co-working space cum café in Kuala Lumpur**