Street Style: Mr Koh and Ms Teo show off their own Igg's range of T-shirts, together with trendy imports, at their stall. The area has become a magnet for the young.

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Bugis Street a drag?
No, it's buzzing

SINGAPORE Management University student Serina Teo and her boyfriend Ignatius Koh, both 23, chose Bugis Street when they decided to open a shop selling T-shirts and needed a good location.

Their parents were surprised. To many older Singaporeans, the place still hasn't shaken off its old notoriety.

"I told my parents, Bugis Street may have been the place for drag queens and sailors, but no more," said Ms Teo. "Now it is for young people looking for something different, unique, edgy — which is what our T-shirts, Igg's, are all about.

"Besides it looks as if the whole Bugis/Bras Basah area is about to take off with my university and the National Library moving in."

More established retailers agree. Ever since the Urban Redevelopment Authority unveiled its plan in 2003 to turn the area into an arts and learning hub, activity has picked up markedly.

First, a dozen or more private schools including the Boston Academy and 3-D Sense Media School moved in, joining established players such as St Andrew's and the Auston Institute of Management.

Last July, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts' new campus opened in Bendecool Street, bringing 4,000 students.

Over in Victoria Street, the new 16-storey National Library is opening next month and is expected to add up to 15,000 people a day in human traffic.

SMU staff are moving into their city campus in Bras Basah, and their 3,600 students will arrive in August.

Add to that the 2,000 students the new LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts will bring next year.

Street stylists, fashion and stationery shops, spas and nail bars have already sprung up. Sensing the trend, the Parco Bugis Junction shopping center decided three years ago to devote a floor to fashionable youth.

Called The Edge, it was so popular that last year it was expanded and the number of shops doubled to 40.

Centre general manager Yong Kock Wing sees 17- to 23-year-olds forming one of the fastest-growing markets.

"They have money and they have no guilt about spending it. They don't have commitments such as paying for a house or a car," he said.

He has felt a distinct quickening of the pace in recent months, given the buzz over SMU and the library.

So has Bugis Street Development, which is in charge of developing Bugis Street.

It says an average of about 20,000 shoppers a day visit. On peak days that can hit 50,000, and most are young.

It is expecting even more of these shoppers.

To gear up, it covered Bugis Street and added spot-air-conditioners overhead. It has extended the second floor to bring in more shops.

Its Bugis Cafe has set meals at under $6, and anyone who flashes a student pass gets 20 per cent off.

The company has also gone all out to woo 20-something entrepreneurs with shop spaces, some no bigger than an HDD utility room, at rents as low as $800 a month.

A tenant can move in for just a month. No need for long-term commitment. With such tempting terms, the number of stalls has leapt from 250 to 600 in just over a year.

Now the bohemian enclave is being dubbed Singapore's own Chatuchak, after Bangkok's famed market.

Many of the stallholders are fashionably-dressed 20-somethings with an air of confidence that they know exactly what other young people want to buy.

A few, like Ms Teo, are still studying, and juggle lessons with running businesses. They design clothes, jewelry, bags and shoes, and get them made in places like Thailand or Hong Kong. And they set their prices with younger customers in mind.

Alqore owners Adelina Nah, 26 and Sharin Tan, 30, sell colourful bikinis, beachwear, bags and shoes, for $25 to $45. Igg's original T-shirts cost no more than $20.

Over at Parco Bugis Junction, streetwear boutique Pure Milk boss Tiew Wee Kee, 25, caps his prices at $30. Repeat customers are mad about the milk cartons he packs their purchases in.

Regulars in the area include foreign students at private schools nearby, as well as local youngsters who have found a place geared to their tastes and wallets.

J-yo Tan and Auston student Sera Tee, 19, said: "For branded stuff I go to Parco. But to stand out from the crowd, I cross the road to the Bugis stalls."

Schoolmate Stephanie Li, also 19, said she used to shop for "unique" clothes in Bang- kok and Hong Kong, but now finds them in Bugis.

"Once I missed out on a Gothic baby doll dress in Bangkok, but I found it right here when I got back," she said.

Both girls say they spend up to $300 a month on clothes and fashion accessories.

On the other side of the new library building, the famed Bras Basah Complex is stirring too.

Arts supplier Mark Ong, who heads its merchants' association, said several of its 100 retailers are sprucing up their stalls to appeal to younger shoppers.

He remembers the hey-day of the complex when it was known as "book city" and drew a stream of customers from several secondary schools in the area.

By the 1990s, the schools had left and fierce competition arrived in the form of big, air-conditioned malls like Raffles City.

The changes in the area now are good news for Mr Mohammed Sharief, 44, a manager with Basheer Graphic Books.

He said: "If you create the kind of place that young people like to hang out in, they will come. That's why we have decided to turn one of our shop units into a gallery, for design and art students to show off their work."

For some, the Bugis/Bras Basah area has the makings of a tourist attraction too.

British tourist Clare Stewart, 22, said she stumbled on Bugis Street by chance.

"I love the clothes. They have attitude and style," she said.

"This place reminds me of Greenwich Village in New York or Camden Town in London — young, vibrant, energetic and somewhat counterculture. Everything young travellers like me want.

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