Books and city buzz for SMU hostel students

BY JANE NG

UNDERGRADUATE Denise Lim, 19, is excited about going clubbing and having supper at her doorstep when the new semester starts next month.

As part of the first batch of Singapore Management University (SMU) students to live in its city apartments, the second-year student will need just 10 minutes to get from her Prinsep Street quarters to classes at the business school.

To her, the best thing about living in the city is being where the action is, compared to the quiet of her Sembawang home.

"I can hang out with friends and not worry about having to catch the last train home," she said.

The hostel, called SMU Residences @ Prinsep, is surrounded by a wide array of restaurants, cafes and shops, and is within walking distance to the city buzz.

Among the more established names are Soon Heng for its famous fish head curry, the popular fish shop at the corner of Prinsep and Commercial Street, and a 24-hour convenience store at the corner of Prinsep and Middle Road.

The S.U. has Residences to offer.

The three blocks of former three-room HDB flats – all conservation buildings – have been given a $13 million facelift and there are now 48 apartments. Each has a living cum dining area, with four air-conditioned bedrooms – two single and two double – which can take up to six residents.

The compact single rooms have just enough space for a loft bed cum study table cum wardrobe.

HOSTEL WARMING: Looking forward to their stay in their new home are (from left) Karen Ng, Jose Paolo, Johan Olsson, Denise Lim and Eric Ng, who will be the first batch of SMU students staying in the university's city hostels at Prinsep Street.

The double rooms are bigger and some ground-floor units have a generous balcony for residents to sit and watch the world go by.

There is also a three-seater sofa and a six-seater stainless steel dining table.

The kitchen comes with a granite kitchen top and refrigerator, but cooking is limited to the use of a microwave oven.

The exterior of the flats now has a tropical atmosphere complete with landscaping in a shared courtyard with alfresco seating, barbecue pits and a timber deck rooftop.

Its overall look is not unlike that of a condominium.

Such student apartments are a first for undergraduates here and an SMU spokesman said they reflect the institution's intimate and interactive learning culture.

The hostel can take up to 263 students, and so far, more than half the places have been taken.

Priority is given to foreign students. For the first year, locals will make up 10 per cent of residents.

City living comes with a higher price tag. Room rates are double most of what is available at the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University.

A single room at Prinsep Street costs about $440 a month whereas most single rooms at the other two universities cost just over $200.

And to add on to that, utilities and air-conditioning charges are billed separately, and students use coin-operated machines to wash and dry their clothes.

All in, a student living in a single room would have to pay slightly over $2,100 for a 15-week semester. Some students have already groused that this is too much to pay.

But SMU says its hosts are good value because they have been newly renovated, with the furnishings and amenities and "apartment-style space".

Not all students will pay full rates, however. A group of "residential seniors" will be allowed residents to take part in more school activities.

Miss Karen Ng, 22, a fourth-year business management student, said that so far, she has hesitated to take part in late events as she lives with her family in Tampines.

"But it'll be different if I'm living in the city. I won't have to worry about expensive cab rides and won't have to wake up at 6am. I'll be literally two traffic lights away from my school," she said.

Also in the works are outreach programmes for residents to engage the surrounding community through volunteer work.

The hostel’s housemaster, Mr Timothy Hui, said one possible target group would be the disabled and elderly folks living in flats in the nearby Tekka market and Little India areas.

"It is part and parcel of character-building, and would make hostel-living more meaningful for SMU students," he said.

SMU president Howard Hunter told The Straits Times he is looking forward to the residents bringing a "youthful vitality to the city."

"This is a further extension of what we mean when we talk about SMU as a ‘living and breathing’ campus – a place that is not mere a set of impressive buildings, but a place where dynamic and intellectual exchange can take place among people who work and live closely together," he said.

Like other places with city universities, the Bras Basah area will be enlivened by having student residents, while they too can take advantage of all that the urban surroundings have to offer.

The SMU Residences @ Prinsep are a start. The university is in talks to build more city hostels. Prof Hunter said it hopes to have living quarters for more than 2,000 students within the next few years.