CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY

She comes from a family in the construction business, but Aurum Land's Michelle Yong sees beyond tower blocks into building community and connections into her co-working space

BY ***VIVIEN SHIAO***

SHE may be one of the fourth generation family business leaders of construction giant Woh Hup, but in many ways, Michelle Yong is an entrepreneur in her own right. She is known for heading Woh Hup's wholly owned property development subsidiary Aurum Land, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. Just within the last two years, she had started co-working space Collision 8, as well as fitness and wellness services space Core Collective.

And as if that was not enough, she also started multi-million venture capital fund Aurum Investments last year to invest in promising proptech startups in the region.

But despite how she is making a name for herself shaking up a conventional business, the mother of three initially had no intentions to join the family business, and had harboured hopes of becoming an academic instead.

Ms Yong shares with *The SME Magazine* on why her plans changed, her experience working with family, and new developments in the pipeline.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO HOME

Unlike many next-gen business owners who were either groomed or arm-twisted to join the family business, Ms Yong's journey took a more winding path. "My father said I should not join the family business at the start," she says. "He wrote me a long letter, accompanied by a newspaper article about family firms not lasting beyond the third generation, to back up his reasoning."

At the same time, her brother – who is the same age as her – got a letter stating that he should join Woh Hup. "It was not surprising, because we've always known growing up that Neil (her brother) was supposed to join, but we never really discussed about myself until university, when my dad explicitly said no," she says.

At that point, she was studying in the UK, where she eventually spent nine years of her time. It was where she did her A levels, eventually doing her Masters in Economics at Oxford. She had wanted to go into academia, but the pain of writing her thesis put her off that track. Prior to that, she had also worked for two years at a consulting think-tank for the British government.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING, GREENPLATICSOLDIERS **GROOMING:** SHARON POW FROM LIVING BEAUTY **STYLING:** JONATHAN CHIA **WARDROBE:** HUGO BOSS

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– Michelle Yong, Director, Aurum Land

But despite her father's insistence for her not to join the family business in the beginning, he quickly changed his mind on her return to Singapore. In 2007, she was asked to take over Aurum Land after the passing of her uncle. "It was a time in my life when I was looking for something new. I had grown a bit tired and disillusioned with management consulting – the long hours and constant travelling and writing a lot of reports," she explains. "I wanted to see something more tangible come out from my hard work."

Due to her lack of industry knowledge, she had to work hard not just to get up to speed, but also to gain the trust of the board, who were mostly family members. "For the first few years, I needed to get the board's approval for a lot of decisions, even small ones. And with land acquisitions, in the beginning, I had to bring, like, 30 deals to the table before one would get approved," she recalls. "I really had to substantiate all the recommendations a lot more in the beginning than I do now. So it's become much easier after having earned their trust and respect. It took about two to three years."

Thankfully, she was able to tap into the knowledge and experience of her uncle, who was her supervisor and mentor when she started. Under her leadership, multiple projects were award-winning commercial successes, with Aurum Land bagging an award for the Best Boutique Property Developer several years ago.

In particular, its internationally acclaimed 1919 development, which is a collection of 75 black and white apartments in the Mount Sophia neighbourhood, was the one that truly got Aurum Land noticed.

But even after Ms Yong proved that she can hold her own, she said that the great thing about being in a family business is that the door is always open. "I still go to them for advice. There were some big decisions that needed to be made today, and I could just call up a few members of the board and we made the decision on the phone," she describes.

And while she is very much a part of the family business, she says that she has more autonomy to carry out her plans as she is not directly involved in the construction business.

"The past few years have been truly wonderful – I've been quite surprised at how open to these new business ideas the family and the board have been," she says. "It's changing us from an old-school conventional business into something more dynamic and exciting. We're trying to push boundaries and explore new territories. The more things we try, the more ideas we get, the more we want to do."

TURNING POINT

Ms Yong had inherited Aurum Land from her predecessor, but it was her forays into the co-working space that helped earn her stripes as an entrepreneur.

Interestingly enough, it was by chance that she was introduced to the idea of co-working back in 2015 by a property agent, when it had not quite taken off yet. After some research, she found the idea promising.

She packed her bags to live and breathe in the co-working space in New York, which was where the global concept started. After visiting several co-working spaces and doing her research, she was convinced that there was something valuable in the co-working proposition.

Together with her co-founder, serial tech entrepreneur John Tan, she established Collision 8 in 2016 to create a space where people can collaborate and innovate together just steps away from Clarke Quay. This was followed quickly by Core Collective earlier this year, which is a co-working space located at Anson Road that offers health and wellness services.

While co-working spaces tend to have a reputation for attracting entrepreneurs, Ms Yong points out that they are seeing more SMEs move into co-working spaces. Currently, startups make up 50 per cent of Collision 8, but about 20 per cent of space is being taken up by SMEs.

As interest grew, a tsunami of co-working spaces started to appear in Singapore, with players aggressively competing to gain market share. The recent appearance of US co-working giant WeWork also did not help things. Scores of co-working spaces in Singapore have closed down in the past year due to the competition, but Ms Yong says that her company so far has not been impacted by the competition.

She had identified the lack of strong communities as a gap in the market during her research, where she realised that many users jump around to get the best deals. "There are a lot of pretty co-working spaces, but the people who use them are not very loyal. I thought what's the problem here? And I realised that these places weren't really building very strong communities that create that kind of stickiness," she explains.

"For Collision 8, it's really about community and connections. Everyone here is like extended family. The curation, trying to find people who want to work together, share ideas and collaborate – that is what I think makes us different." Likewise for Core Collective, the emphasis is on building a community, she says.

In a way, it was through connections made at Collision 8 that led to Aurum Investments, which is the final piece of the puzzle. "Usually you start a venture fund, then you go to find the startups. In this case, we found a startup then we started the venture fund," she laughs.

The startup in question is co-living space provider Hmlet, in which Aurum officially invested in late 2017. She was introduced to the Hmlet founder through a member of Collision 8.

Currently, Aurum Investments is not actively looking for startups to invest directly in the immediate future, but Ms Yong says that it will invest with three venture capital funds: Cocoon Capital, NSI Ventures, and Monk's Hill Ventures.

CONSTRUCTING THE FUTURE

With the past two years a whirlwind for Ms Yong, it was also inevitable that challenges would surface. The biggest lesson that she learnt was her first business failure. She had started a café immediately after Collision 8 was established, but she did not take into account the time and effort that had to go into it.

"The board was against it, but I pushed it through. It was a passion project, and I had to admit it failed," she says. "Within five months, I had to go to the board and say sorry, I made a mistake. It was hard to admit, but I'm glad we made the decision quickly instead of sinking another year into it. The lesson is that you can't always follow your heart – you also have to follow your head."

Another lesson that she is still learning to manage has to do with people. Her team had grown from seven people to about 35 in a short span of time of time. However, several team members did not work out recently, she says.

"We have a very rigorous recruitment process that last four or five hours. There are three factors: heart, head and hands. We place most priority on heart, then head," she explains. "Even though we have all these steps, we still made mistakes. I take full responsibility for that, as ultimately it comes down to me for the hiring decisions."

Despite the daunting obstacles that lie in the way, Ms Yong is looking ahead to seize opportunities coming up. With the property market in recovery, she intends to devote more time and energy to the property development side of business at Aurum Land as well. It has secured two sites – 11 Balmoral Road and 12 Amber Road – which they have plans to launch by the end of this year.

She has also been toying with the idea of a retirement resort, and she also wants to continue to grow and scale up the current co-working spaces. But she has no immediate plans to start any new businesses at least for the next two years. "I want to focus on my family and myself a little bit. I also want to grow Collision 8 and Core Collective – I want to make them as good as they can be."

In the same vein, that is also the advice that she says she would give to herself: "Don't get so excited about new opportunities that you neglect the ones you already have."

"It's something about entrepreneurs, because they see opportunities everywhere they look. It's like an addiction in a way. They do get a real high and excitement about starting new. It's unchartered territory that you can shape the future and destiny of," she says. ■

WORK AND PLAY
Core Collective is a co-working space at Anson Road that offers health and wellness services

MAKING IT WORK
It was Ms Yong's (third from left) forays into the co-working space Collision 8 that earned her stripes as an entrepreneur

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PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIIN