



Left: The recently opened Cube Republic hopes to distinguish itself from other box stores by presenting each cube like a display case in an upscale department store.

Below left: Artcollec's box stores focus on handcrafted items, including jewelry.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Above: Merchandise from vitamins to imported beauty products and novelty lighters can be found at Check Fun, the first box store chain in Taiwan.

Below: Vivid Cube vendor Mickey Yen, an office worker, says that box stores have allowed her to start her own business selling accessories imported from Japan.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

Box bait

Box me in:

Check Fun 格子趣

Taiwan's largest box store chain's shops offer an eclectic selection of merchandise, ranging from vitamins to watches and novelty lighters, at affordable prices. The first location Check Fun opened is at 189, Roosevelt Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路三段189號). For more information and other locations, visit www.checkfun.com.tw

Vivid Cube 生洞

Vivid Cube is geared toward younger shoppers; cubes are filled with stationary, *kawaii* accessories and stuffed toys based on popular cartoons. The shop is located at No. 15-6 in the Taipei Main Station Front Underground Mall (站前地下街); Vivid Cube's blog is at tw.myblog.yahoo.com/vividcube168

Artcollec 集盒創意

Artcollec focuses on handmade items by local artists and designers. Merchandise includes embroidered hairclips for a few hundred NT dollars to heavy, sterling silver pendants for NT\$10,000. For store locations and information, check www.artcollec.com.tw



Cube Republic 多實格

Cube Republic seeks to distinguish itself by creating an upscale shopping environment and offering jewelry and accessories from around the world. It is shop No. 19 in the Dinghao shopping center (頂好名店城) at 97, Zhongxiao E Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市忠孝東路四段97號)



Box stores offer entrepreneurs a quick path to realizing their dreams

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

Cities all over the world are bemoaning the spread of big box stores like Wal-Mart and K-Mart, which detractors say drive mom-and-pop shops out of business.

Taipei, on the other hand, is seeing the proliferation of *small* box stores, which give people ranging from students to retired grandpas a chance to become entrepreneurs.

Box stores (格子店), which also translate as cube stores, are shops lined with cubbies that sellers rent and stock with their own merchandise. The trend took off last summer when Cardtek Digital Technology Group (網錄數碼科技集團) opened its first Check Fun (格子趣) near the corner of Shida and Roosevelt roads. In just one year, the chain has expanded to nearly 40 stores throughout Taiwan.

Jerry Tsai (蔡鎮州), the general manager of Cardtek, which also operates book rental chain Star (十大書坊), says that the lackluster economy helped box stores, which originated in Hong Kong and Japan, take off in Taiwan.

"Office workers might find that they need a second source of income, while store owners can't afford to rent their own brick-and-mortar shop anymore," Tsai says. Meanwhile, box stores lure in customers because lower overhead costs for sellers means cheaper prices and the eclectic selection of merchandise is entertaining to browse, Tsai says.

Check Fun started after Tsai returned from a trip to Shanghai in 2006, loaded with 50 boxes of merchandise that he planned to sell on Yahoo! Auctions. But he quickly discovered the pitfalls of online selling: the time-consuming process of photographing and listing merchandise, and the risk of customers who are unsatisfied with their

purchase once they see it in real life.

Then Tsai read a magazine story about iSOLD It, an American company that lists items on eBay and ships sold items for clients. Tsai originally thought of opening a line of shops offering a similar service. "But then I thought if customers are already bringing in products for the store to hold onto until it is sold online, why not just sell it in the store?" Tsai says.

The first Check Fun opened in August last year and a quick volley of media attention helped attract vendors and customers. Tsai says that over the last year, 10,000 people have rented cubicles from Check Fun for varying lengths of time. Check Fun currently has about 3,000 vendors; rental fees range from NT\$488 to NT\$2,498 per month depending on the size of the cube and the location of the shop it is in.

OUT OF LITTLE ACORNS ...

The chain's oldest seller is a 70-year-old grandfather who sells Buddhist prayer beads, while the youngest is a 12-year-old middle schooler who rented a cube at the Shida store to unload a collection of Happy Meal toys. Short-term renters include college students who want to get rid of their used textbooks, while long-term renters include Check Fun's most successful vendor, who Tsai says pulls in up to NT\$40,000 a month selling novelty lighters in each of the chain's stores.

Inspired by the success of Check Fun, other business owners soon hopped on the box train. Huang Zhi-Lin (黃之琳) stopped selling crystal jewelry in her Taipei Main Station Front Underground Mall (站前地下街) shop in March, and turned the space into Vivid Cube (生洞), where 50 different vendors now rent boxes.

"I thought that a box store would be more appropriate for this location than a crystal shop because of all the young people here," says Huang, referring to the many high school students who congregate in the mall to do their homework, practice dance routines or just hang out. Items available on a recent outing included a Shaun the Sheep (of *Wallace and Gromit* fame) stuffed toy for NT\$390 and fabric cellphone covers and pencil bags in *kawaii* prints for NT\$170 to NT\$290.

Vivid Cube vendor Mickey Yen (顏美琪), an office worker, says that renting cubicles in different stores has allowed her to start her own business, Mao Forest (嗶森林), which sells *zakka* (雜貨) accessories and toys imported from Japan.

"This is a great location with a lot of passersby, but opening a standalone store here is out of my reach right now," says Yen, who also sells on Yahoo! Auctions under the username maoforest630.

Box stores are trendy right now, but some store managers worry about the market becoming oversaturated.

"There are a lot of box stores right now, but you have to have your own distinct style in order to make a lasting impression," says Lu Yen-tse (呂彥澤), the manager of Cube Republic (多實格) on Zhongxiao East Road.

Box stores like Cube Republic and the Artcollec (集盒創意) chain seek to carve a niche for themselves by catering to an upmarket clientele.

Cube Republic, which opened two months ago, intends to stand out by focusing on the store's atmosphere and the quality of the merchandise sold there. Cubes in the small but airy shop are lit and arranged like display cases in upscale department stores such as

the nearby Sogo and backed by floor-to-ceiling windows to entice prospective customers.

Cherry Huang (黃莉雅) says that she picked Cube Republic because it matches the upscale image she wants to create for her fledgling jewelry line, Dromma Resa.

"I care about setting up a good brand image and giving customers high-quality products, so I choose to sell only at Cube Republic because it matches my brand image," says Huang, who is currently working in Thailand and sources her sterling silver jewelry while traveling for her job as a brand manager for a fashion company.

'ENTREPRENEURIAL URGE'

Artcollec, which currently operates three stores in Taipei, focuses on handcrafted items, including custom fabric purses for NT\$1,280 to NT\$2,980 and handmade sterling silver jewelry for NT\$5,000 to NT\$10,000.

"We seek out artists and designers who are talented but might not be business savvy and tell them, 'If you sell in our stores we will help you market your items,'" says Artcollec manager Jo Jim-An (周晉安).

Even after the initial flutter of media attention and consumer curiosity dies down, the company that launched the box store craze in Taiwan is optimistic that the retailing concept is here for the long haul. Check Fun plans to expand along with the Taipei MRT system, opening stores next to each new station. Tsai hopes the chain will have 200 shops across the country within three years.

"Even when the economy is not so great, people still have that entrepreneurial urge. We are here to provide a storefront and managers for them. All it takes to become a business owner is a few hundred or a couple thousand NT dollars every month," Tsai says.



[LIFESTYLE]

Museum wakes up to coffee, colonial-style

The National Museum of History's new exhibition brings to life coffee shop culture during the Japanese occupation

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER

Long before Barista Coffee or Starbucks arrived on these shores, Taiwan was home to a burgeoning cafe culture. But unlike the American-inspired franchise coffee shops that have sprung up across the country's urban landscapes over the past decade, these earlier bohemian hangouts blended a Japanese-style tea shop atmosphere with a European vibe.

Early Taiwanese Coffee Culture (早期咖啡文化), located on the second floor of the National Museum of History, explores this coffee culture in an informative and well-designed, though small, exhibition.

The exhibition investigates two themes: the island's coffee cultivation since the 19th century, and the coffee house culture that developed during the Japanese occupation period.

The museum does an adequate job of recreating the atmosphere of those days — from the lounge-style bars to the costumes of the servers — and even built a replica of a 1920s coffee shop.

The exhibit's large collection of objects from the period, such as gramophones, phonographs, radios, as well as antique furniture and appliances, helps transport visitors back to a time when coffee shops were places to unwind and listen to the latest jazz, watch a silent movie or discuss art.

The black-and-white photos hung throughout the exhibit reveal a marked difference with Taiwan's contemporary coffee shops. Here you won't find crowds of university students spending hours at tables — either sleeping or studying — but well-heeled artists and intellectuals.

Other images show the servers in these haunts — far removed from the modern baristas who press buttons to brew coffee — and who were called *jiyogyuu* (女給), a kind of geisha-cum-waitress. These images show "servers" sitting and chatting with clients.

The museum does a journeyman's job bringing to life those glory days by placing the museumgoer right in the middle of the action. The exhibit also reveals the idiosyncrasies of each coffee shop, where owners would create an ambiance with a unique choice of furniture, art and services, which contrasts the uniform look of today's coffee shops.

The section about Taiwan's coffee cultivation is limited, just like the industry itself. It does, however, point out where coffee is grown and explain the bean-growing process.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Early Taiwanese Coffee Culture (早期咖啡文化)
WHERE: National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號)
WHEN: Until Jan. 4. The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays, from 10am to 6pm; closed on Mondays
TICKETS: NT\$30
ON THE NET: www.nmh.gov.tw



Though small, the Early Taiwanese Coffee Culture exhibition does an admirable job of introducing and bringing together the various objects that were hallmarks of Taiwan's Japanese-era coffee culture.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY