

A Fine Balance

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Justin Loh, Shininghead Media unless otherwise stated

Metropolitan Office Experimental
designs a house that marries restraint with exuberance.



HOUSE ABOVE:
The elevated garden provides views and privacy from the street



GLIMPSE OF GREEN:
Slits in the concrete block provides glimpses of the planter behind



A change in regulation is usually a

cause of much vexation when the design of your home has pretty much been completed. However, for this house in Katong, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

“When we submitted [the drawings for approval], it didn’t have a basement – it didn’t need one,” says architect [Edmund Ng](#), founder and director of [Metropolitan Office Experimental](#). “Then, the Orchard Road floods happened and the authorities raised the [minimum] ground level. They wanted the first level to be 2.6m high from the existing road.”

The entire two-storey house was elevated by one storey – garden included – and a basement inserted underneath. This move not only gave the owners a better vantage point, it also allowed for the design of more interesting spaces for entertaining, which the owners do plenty of.

From the street, one approaches a boundary wall of rough-hewn rocks and timber gates. Beyond and above this, a neat composition of interlocking copper and concrete forms floats above a glass box. “It’s like a concrete box floating in the air, held back by the copper wall,” expounds Ng of this formal gesture. “In terms of the visual language, it’s something that is very dynamic.”

Both volumes feature what Ng describes as a “barcode” design on their sides. From the copper-walled face, one is privy to glimpses of the dining space on the first storey and the family room above through irregular slits of light. The incisions slicing the concrete block that runs the length of the site are tighter, with only fragments of green leafy plants peeking out to give a hint of what lies behind.

The plan is essentially very straightforward. A C-shaped block wraps around a mineral swimming pool, with the more communal spaces like the living, dining and family room in the front and the most private zone – the master bedroom – tucked right behind. Along the central spine running the pool's length are the vertical circulation, kitchen and guestrooms. Finally, an open terrace and garden on the flat roof offers unblocked views of the surroundings and opportunities for rooftop parties.

With the house raised, the clients now have the view of lush landscape from their living room, instead of parked cars or curious looks from passers-by. The additional basement, which doubles as a gallery for artwork, contains the utility and storage spaces – large panels keep the latter hidden from sight when guests arrive.

As one starts to explore the house, a certain tension becomes apparent – or rather, the attempt to balance opposites – like that which Ng has described of the façade: the streamlined with the organic; the raw with the polished; the light with the heavy; the open with the insular. This all adds up to an architecture



“IT’S LIKE A CONCRETE BOX FLOATING IN THE AIR, HELD BACK BY THE COPPER WALL...”



PICTURE FRAME: ↑
A poetic vista in the basement leads through the art-lined gallery to a courtyard beyond

→
OPEN HOUSE:
From the study, one looks across the pool to the copper-clad communal areas





←
**FAÇADE
TENSION:**
*The copper-clad
block interlocks
into the concrete
and timber-
screened form*



that is more than just an exercise in clean, modernist articulations.

Take for example, the timber brise-soleil Ng has layered parts of the house with – fixed along the second storey corridor and as movable panels at the master and junior master bedrooms. Here, it lends warmth to the industrial copper and concrete mix; its feathery lightness also a relief to the strong, robust forms.

“[With] a glass house, you sometimes feel naked. The screen provides privacy as well as natural ventilation and shade throughout the home,” Ng comments. “With the double layer, we allowed opportunities for the windows to be left open. Even when it’s raining, you can leave the glass doors open and let the breeze through.”

For Ng, response to and inclusion of tropical elements is a key consideration – he’s even brought the landscape upstairs with a planter box that stretches the length of the second storey.

“The idea is that even though they’re on the second floor, they can feel like there’s a garden around them,” says Ng as he points to the window behind

↑ **DOUBLE SKIN:**
*The timber
screen provides
shade and
shelter at
the corridor
along the
swimming pool*

the junior master bedroom. Here, he’s created the perfect bedhead feature – a row of plants against the concrete wall filtering light into the intimate space. “With the whole strip of planters behind your bed, your backdrop is ever changing depending on the weather.”

Such devices have led the clients to describe this as “a truly contemporary tropical house” even though it eschews one’s typical assumptions of pitched roofs and Balinese aesthetics.

Ng’s mastery of restraint and attention to detail is not just obvious in the architectural form and layering, but also in the complex treatment of



← **WARM CONTRASTS:**
In the dining area, crisp
Driade Lago chairs
juxtapose against an
organic wooden table made
from a 200-year-old tree

materials, where concrete columns are left unfinished – their rather archaic beauty standing proud like sculptures – and the unusual choice of silver quartz flooring with its silvery veins shimmering like the light reflections on the pool’s waters.

This material dexterity is perhaps best exhibited in the bathrooms, all of which satisfies the clients’ request for “every toilet, every stone to be different”. In the basement powder room, the WC is contained in an outhouse-like timber box and the basin shaped from a chunk of sand-coloured rock; the acid-etched treatment of the Carrera marble in the junior master bathroom emphasises its rippling textures; the master bathroom features a wash basin carved from a long slab of black granite, its bouldering surfaces heightening a sense of the natural against a glossy mirrored base.

“The clients’ characters are more colourful. We adhered to their wishes but nevertheless each bathroom is intricately designed. Despite the busyness of [myriad] things, it still has a quietness and the details are always there,” says Ng, who admits his taste usually adheres to a more consistent, neutral palette.

One can’t help but observe how Ng’s aesthetic appears to have been influenced by his years of working under *Mok Wei Wei* of *W Architects* – the doyen of tropical contemporary. Ng had worked in the firm since graduation and left only five years ago to start his own practice.



↑ **UNEXPECTED RHYTHMS:**
The randomly
angled timber
screens are
manually
adjustable

“Wei Wei is like a mentor to me. He taught me to resolve issues contextually, whether it’s sensitivity to site, [landscape or the] local climate,” ruminates the 40-year-old architect. “Of course, he also has a very fine eye for proportion and detail.”

Now a ten-person company, Metropolitan Office Experimental’s portfolio ranges from small commercial projects (*Club 21, Bedrock Bar and Grill*) and resort interiors to houses and recently, apartment blocks. In 2009, Ng came to attention with his contribution to the *Lien Villas Collective*, a cluster of six houses, each designed by a different architect on the land of late pioneer banker

“DESPITE THE BUSYNESS
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PHOTO CREDIT: LUO JINGMEI

← **TROPICAL BATH:**
*The master bathroom features a
step-down shower, natural materials
and plenty of light and green*

↑ **GREEN TOP:**
*The staircase ends at
the rooftop with a lush,
meandering garden*

and philanthropist [Lien Ying Chow](#). Even then, his formal and contextual responses – it featured a crisp, black-painted solid concrete façade shielding the house against a busy street – were evident.

Quite often, a well-executed design is not just a result of an architect’s keen eye, but also that of having receptive clients. Ng describes of the reciprocal relationship he had with the clients, “They are wonderful clients. They gave me a lot of freedom and room for expression. They didn’t have pre-conceived ideas of what they wanted. We just explored along the way.” ♦ edmund@mo-x.asia

PROJECT INFO

Architects Metropolitan Office Experimental
Project Team Edmund Ng (Principal Architect),
Leslie Maza, Marquel Macaballug
Builder Join-Aim Pte Ltd
Civil and Structural Engineer KKT Consultants
Quantity Surveyor KH Lim Quantity Surveyors
Interior Designer Studio Zync

Time to Complete 18 months
Total Floor Area Approximately 827sqm

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Furniture Custom-made dining table from Gapetto (Indonesia). Driade Lago Leather dining chairs from Space Furniture. Junior master bedroom bed custom-made by Project Solutions.

Lighting Generally throughout, recessed ceiling lighting and ceiling down lights from Light Basic Studio. Dining area mild steel pendant light is custom made.

Finishes External façade is fairface concrete. External cobalt oxide finish copper wall by Golden Roofing Engineering. Front gate and screen timber is Balau wood. External decking is Chengai timber. Internal Indian

Rosewood timber strip flooring, staircase thread veneer and basement wall panelling from Floorrich. Boundary wall, external staircase and basement floor Chinese grey granite, swimming pool glass mosaics and first storey and master bathroom silver quartz flooring from Futar Enterprises. Master bathroom custom-made Chinese black granite basin from Stone Element. Generally throughout, aluminium doors and windows from Vento Systems.

Fixed & Fitted Master bathroom Hansgrohe sanitary fittings from Bretz. Living room Boffi Air fan from Boffi Cream Studio. Kotoku Junior master bedroom fan from Kind System.

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