

DESIGN



This is not a typical house, but a contemporary one that draws on Asian typologies. PHOTOS: FINBARR FALLON

When dream architect meets ideal homeowner

Design conventions are cast aside in this semi-detached house. BY CORINNE KERK

IF THERE'S such a thing as a dream architect-cum-homeowner story, this is how it goes: Man visits architect's house and is so impressed, he tells himself that one day, he will ask that architect to rebuild his home.

Years later, that day arrives and said architect is given carte blanche to design the man's house.

That, in summary, is exactly what happened with businessman Patrick Cheo and Edmund Ng of his eponymous architectural firm. The pair are good friends.

Cheo says his only instructions to Ng were to "just design something" based on the land size of about 4,000 square feet (sq ft), and to ensure that the house is brightly-lit. Cheo and his wife live in the semi-detached house with their three young adult children, a helper, a dog and other animals.

"Then he showed us one design, with or without a pool," recalls Cheo. "Simple as that."

Given free rein, Ng came up with a contemporary house that draws on Asian typologies - with a pool in the house.

First things first

Ng knew he had to allow for a large kitchen for Cheo, an avid cook who whips up meals for groups as large as 70. Among other pieces of commercial-grade cooking equipment, Cheo has also fitted the professional kitchen with a marvel of a dishwasher that can do the dishes in 90 seconds flat.

To ensure the three-and-a-half storey house is bathed in natural light, the living area has a double-volume space that extends into the second floor, which is walled with glass. Conversely, the front of the house features a wall instead of the glass doors or windows typical of many homes.

"Why would you want to see the back of your car that's in the driveway all the time?" reasons Ng, while also pointing out that homeowners often install curtains to shield themselves from visual intrusion.

With that wall in place, the Cheos get to enjoy their privacy. Yet, their home remains bright with good airflow, thanks to sliding glass doors on the side of the house and that double-height living room.

Blank slate

Speaking of walls, Ng built them with off-form concrete, which he describes as having Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetics, "like what Tadao Ando would have done". He was referring, respectively, to the Japanese philosophy and aesthetic that embraces beauty in its natural and raw form, and the Pritzker Prize-winning architect known for his minimalist, concrete buildings.

More importantly, perhaps, this is precisely the type of wall that caught Cheo's



Clockwise from above: Concrete walls, stair treads and landings are practical and nostalgic; The off-form concrete walls with their wabi-sabi aesthetics; A screen wraps around the house; Sliding glass doors on the side of the house let in light and fresh air.

"very private" because it is lifted off its typical location on the ground floor to the second floor.

Its placement references indigenous Malay architecture, which features homes built on elevated foundations, and with large verandahs acting as intermediate spaces where people gather without entering the main living quarters.

"So this would be my analogy for that kind of space," says Ng. "It's a beautiful, outdoor verandah where family and friends can get together."

It is no white elephant. Alongside a bathroom and pantry, there is plenty of room next to the 16-m pool. A large sofa and other seating make it a comfortable and welcoming space for entertaining. It is where the Cheos hold their barbecues and do their zumba workouts.

With the pool upstairs, the animal-loving Cheos have a pond for their koi and turtles on the ground floor.

Ng also built a screen to wrap around the house, "capturing" the space and giving it form.

"A screen is also useful in a tight urban context," he says, citing the ryokans in Kyoto, Japan, as examples. "Asian homes are fitted very tightly together, so we need privacy."

A pragmatic abode

While Cheo got his dream architect, the house isn't furnished as flashily as would be expected. It is, in fact, devoid of fancy furnishings; it's hard to even find a TV cabinet.

In keeping with the "less is more" aesthetic, the house also has concrete stair treads and landings because they are practical and nostalgic.

As Ng notes: "Why spend so much on finishes like marble? The next owner will just hack it all out."

As it is, the home is comfortable, functional and great for entertaining.

Rather than slower hydraulic lifts, Cheo went with a large, traction lift that comfortably takes eight or nine people, including wheelchair users.

Above the four bedrooms on the third floor is the master bedroom, which is more like a studio apartment.

It comprises a bedroom, en suite bathroom, study and living area, kitted with a karaoke system.

"Their lifestyle revolves around their children, food and entertainment," says Ng. "It's not a typical house, but it's one that fits their personalities, their lifestyle and also interprets what is tropical and contemporary."



attention at Ng's house in the first place. "They're a bit like art," he says.

Ng also designed a sculptural staircase which took a year to craft. Its balusters are made of metal strips, which rise some 15 m from the ground to the top of the house. He says a house in the tropics should be contextual and apart from the fact that it looks very dramatic, the staircase creates an air well which allows better ventilation for the home.

Asian typology

The highlight of the property, however, is its swimming pool, which is sheltered and

