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THE SENSIBLE SANCTUARY @ ENG NEO AVENUE

+ Project Credits

Architect ip:li design **Design Team** Yip Yuen Hong, Lee Ee Lin **Main Contractor** T&T Technology Contract Services
Structural Engineer Uni-Associated Consultants **Landscape** Scenic Landscape **Pond Specialist** Aquateigna
Key Materials Mild steel, timber, brick/plaster, concrete, metaldeck roof, clay roof tiles, glass **Date of Completion** Oct 2003
Floor Area 4,000 sqft **Land Area** 6,000 sqft



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How many architects actually say 'no' to their clients the first time they meet? Well, apparently one did, and it was the start of a beautiful collaboration.

The architect had initially been approached to build a 'Balinese House'. A young couple in their thirties, had the idea of converting their newly-bought bungalow into a residence evocative of the spa-like resorts they had stayed in during their holidays abroad. "I told them 'no'," recounted Yuen Hong of ip:li design. "The reason was that we were building in Singapore, not Bali." There was no way he was going to build a culturally-inappropriate house and he conveyed his stand clearly, but gently to his potential clients. Most clients would have just hired another architect, but not this pair. They recognised good advice when it was dispensed and hired Yuen Hong on the spot.

It is actually not that unusual for clients to approach architects asking for replicas of certain styles of buildings or elements they had seen in the media. In the eighties, wealthy businessmen would troop up to architects asking for Palladian houses with Corinthian columns and Greek statues thrown in for good measure. Unfortunately, there were plenty of designers who actually carried out these ill-informed whims down to the exact brick. The residential scene in Singapore was, for a long time, stuck in a neo-classical, Po-Mo mish-mash of a movement that was at best, unimpressive, and at worst, smacking of European worship. What these architects failed to understand was that behind all these fresco adulation, the clients were really after a sense of grandeur and gravity. With the basic requirements identified, it should not have been too difficult to express them in modern Architectural language.



Similarly, what Yuen Hong's clients wanted was actually a tropical house that was both climatically in-tune and spacious enough for their dogs to roam freely. The fact that the clients became pro-active participants in the brief-making process made the whole journey a dynamic and stimulating one for both parties. As Yuen Hong says, "The architect is amputated if he meets a client who is unengaged." Working on a new and clarified brief, building plans were soon produced.

However, the architect did a double-take when the clients called him up and told him that they had bought half a dozen pieces of stone-carvings from Bali. So involved were they that they had literally carted their own building blocks home. In the quaint village of Batubulan where even young boys were accomplished stone-carvers, the couple had commissioned an artisan to craft out various pieces of white stone embellished with frangipani motifs. "Would it be possible to incorporate these into the walls of our house?" they asked the architect.

"No," he replied for the second time, recovering quickly from in his mild state of shock. How in the world did this Balinese theme creep back again?

"Well, try harder!" was the reply this time.





Despite Yuen Hong's initial reservations, the beautiful stone pieces were incorporated into various locations in the white-washed house. The most striking piece depicting the flowers in full bloom is located in the forecourt of the house, directly opposite the frangipani trees scattered around the pond and terrace area.

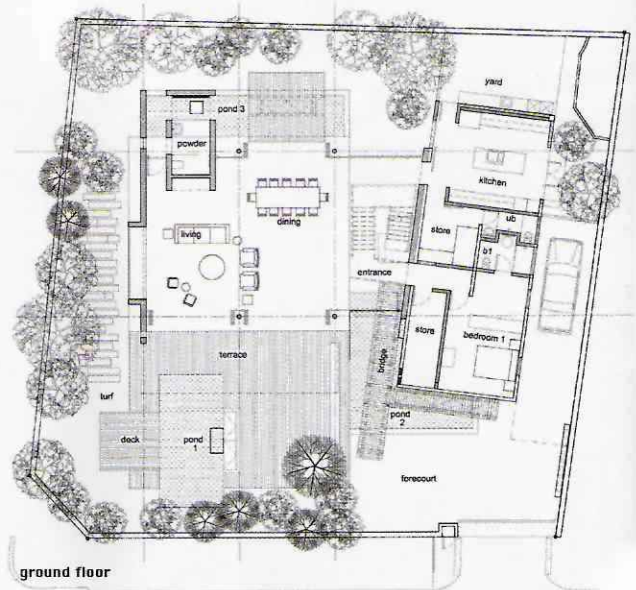
The house is a hybrid of old and new; the original house with its pitched roof was retained and renovated while a new two-storey extension was added on to the western side of the former. Constructed of balau wood and metal, the main staircase wedges itself between the two wings and prises open a natural entrance to the house. The living-room in the new extension opens itself to both the front terrace and back garden. Despite extensive use of folding glass doors, the deep overhangs on both facades help maintain a sheltered and protected feel to the indoor spaces. The architect explains, "The quality of light in Singapore is too harsh and glaring. Thus my intention was really to create a sanctuary, a quieter and darker space where the clients can retreat into." Indeed, with its low roofs and unostentatious facade, the house seems to burrow itself into the extensive greenery of the gently sloping landscape.

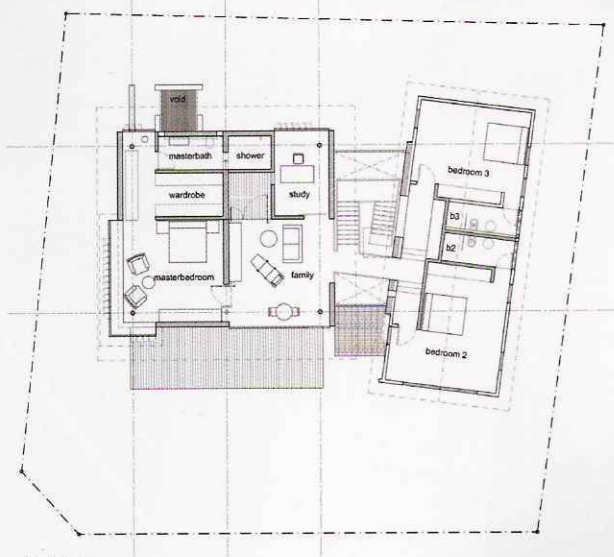
In an architectural context, the word 'sanctuary' implies a place of protection and safety from the environmental elements. In this case, the house, as a climate moderator, offers its inhabitants shelter from the hot tropical sun. An environmentally-sensitive house however, should not be mistaken for a fortress that keeps all elements of nature at bay. The ingenuity of this house is the way it allows nature to penetrate its form by carving out niches of semi-open spaces throughout. For instance, the powder-room on the ground floor is linked to the back garden while the main bathroom on the upper floor opens itself to the sky.

Perhaps this is a cultural oddity: Singaporeans tend to gravitate towards maintenance-free building materials so as to keep their homes looking as pristine and new as when they were first built. Maybe having lived through so many instances of bulldozing and rebuilding from tabula rasa sites in their short national history, they have forgotten that sometimes, age comes before beauty. It is therefore a pleasant surprise to find both the architect and clients readily embracing unconventional 'wisdom' in Singapore. Besides the unstained timber decking on the terrace, which is already turning a beautiful silver with the weathering, one delights in the discovery of a layer of rust on the mild-steel columns and louvers. Yuen Hong says that this is not the first time that he has rusted columns intentionally, having previously used the same device to achieve the dark brown shade in his own home. Just like the Inuit people who have a hundred words for snow, this architect has more than one way to create the colour brown in this house. Structural balau wood, stained chengai wood, rusted mild steel, timber veneer. You name it, he's got it.

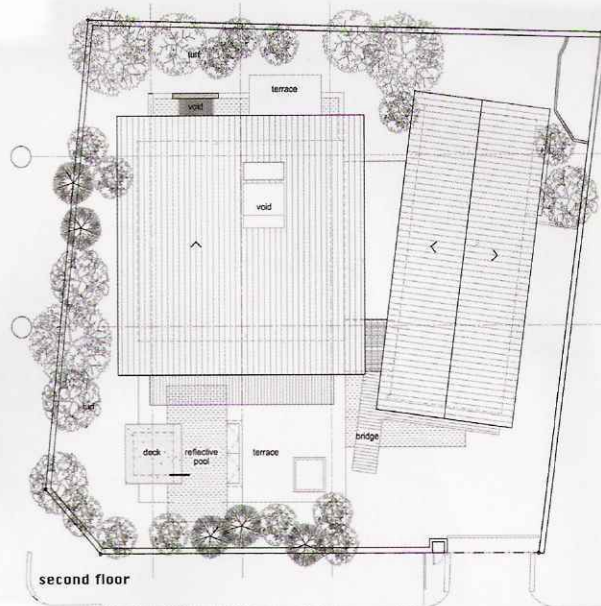
Despite the loving attention that has been paid to the detailing, Yuen Hong does not believe in over-designing. "As an architect, I only design the frame of the house; whether it should be timber or metal, thick or thin," he says pointing to one of the paintings that the owner has hung on the wall. "However, I strongly believe that what lies within the frame should be the owners' responsibility. I leave it to them to decide what furniture to buy, and where to place them." After all, apart from those frangipani stone tablets that they have made him build into the frame of the house, it is pretty much their own lives. ■

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first floor



second floor

