

## BEYOND REASON

FUNCTIONALITY IS FINE FOR MOST PEOPLE BUT IF YOU ARE AN ARCHITECT, YOU WILL WANT IN YOUR OWN PERSONAL SPACE, EVERY WALL AND EVERY CHOICE OF MATERIAL, TO COUNT. EVEN IF IT SEEMS BEYOND REASON.

**PHOTOGRAPHY** TIM NOLAN

Homes of any kind are interesting subjects for analysis. They reveal implicitly, through the choice of furniture and objects, the way the occupiers live and think. The home of the architect however, is particularly interesting for its additional textures and layers.

Take the home of architect Lee Ee Lin for instance. Together with her partner Yip Yuen Hong, they recently started the small design firm called ip: id design. One of their first commissions was to turn their apartment, which was built over twenty years ago, into an office cum home.

The apartment building, a low rise fair-faced brick structure, has a surprisingly restrained existing façade compared to other buildings of the same period, with only arched white-framed timber terrace doors, as its only concession to the popular post-modern styling of the period. These of course, due to the restrictions set by the management committee, could not be altered in the slightest. Regardless, both Lee and Yip managed to look beyond this minor setback. Indeed, they managed to look beyond the terrace doors towards Keppel Distripark, about 500m away. Marked by industrial-strength cranes that tower over the tree-line of Telok Blangah, they made the architectural gesture of drawing an axis with the distripark to set an industrial tone to their apartment.

An immediate response to the original two-bedroom apartment was to make the floor plan more open and flexible. With architectural backgrounds, both were inclined towards experimentation. "If it didn't flow so well, we did not hesitate to knock it down," says Yip. The walls that came down were those around the kitchen and the front bedroom. Both these rooms faced a long deep-set communal corridor with views towards Mount

Faber. In the existing plan, not very much natural light would reach the centre of the apartment where the dining area was located. "Air flow was also bad," remembers Lee.

By knocking down the walls of the front bedroom, natural ventilation was improved immediately. The wall separating the kitchen from the living area was also knocked down and replaced by a parapet wall that reaches average eye level. This wall is high enough to conceal the clutter usually found in kitchens but low enough for Lee to maintain conversations with guests while she, a "serious cook", prepares dinner. Light from the communal corridor also filters in over the parapet wall giving the impression that the area beyond the kitchen, the service yard, is much bigger than it actually.

In the new scheme, a home office comprising of a solid redwood timber table almost 2m square and 15cm thick, takes up most of the space that was once the front bedroom. Sandwiched between the living area and office table is a smaller dining table. It is a slightly awkward arrangement but it somehow works. This is partly because two specially designed towering mild steel frames (storage shelves in reality) have been inserted into the office cum living area. These cleverly help to reconfigure room and also add a perceptual shear factor that gives this little apartment a sense of.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The bathroom, which has now annexed the balcony, is an environment unto its own.





The mild steel frames, which have a natural rust finish, seem to have been inspired by the cranes in Keppel Distripark and can be argued for on several grounds, including cost - the shelves, constructed with adjusted nuts and bolts, and costing under \$3,000 were very cheap to make. It is a little harder to rationalise the need for mild steel doors that add considerable access load to already heavily laden floor. But the designers do. "We wanted to use materials that were tough," says Yip who explains that the home had to be bull terrier-proof (There are two resident bull terriers).

The steel door in question is pivot-hung and swings into the master bedroom. It takes a little effort to push the door open because it is so big and heavy but the door is a natural extension of the steel frames and the pivot hanging mechanism does allow for a clean sweep without fussy door jambs. More important is that the designers wanted simply to express the inherent qualities of each material used. A metal door should be heavy and rusty and a 15cm thick table should be made of solid wood and not plywood covered in timber veneer. Even when plywood is used, the edge showing the layers of laminated wood are expressed.

So it is not a really a surprised to find that the bath tub was actually designed as a concrete water tank and the bed hovers in a loft over a timber deck made of recycled planks castaway from a construction site.

Perhaps the sublimity of the concrete tub is lost because it seems to want a lot of attention, sitting as it does in the centre of the bathroom, which in the old plan, oddly sat between the bedroom and the balcony. Making the best of an odd plan, the tub is now to focal point of the master bedroom and because of its geometry, it almost seems to float like a puck on an ice-hockey pitch, an effect a regular bathtub could never achieve. Cream-coloured hexagonal mosaic tiles that are used in the kitchen are also found in the master bathroom except that the line of tiles continue a little way into the bedroom.

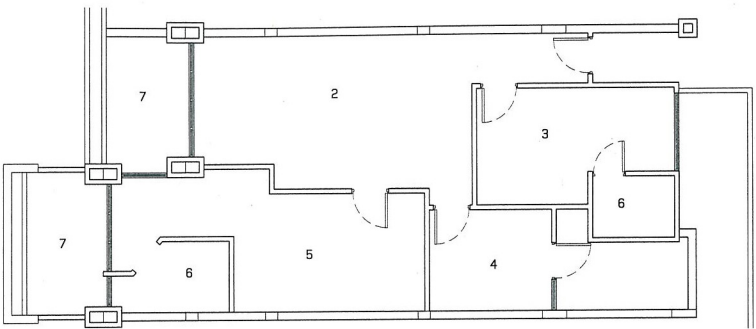
The subtlety of this detail - the continuation of the tiles outside the bathroom - or the little peep-hole above the loft-like suspended bed would be lost on most clients and as such, these



details do not appear in most commercial jobs. The partners have had clients walk into the apartment with a look close to horror. It is not for everyone. Why make a door so heavy when one could have replicated the look with a bit of plywood and metal laminates? With the same economy that was used throughout the design of the apartment, Yip simply says: "It would not have sounded the same."

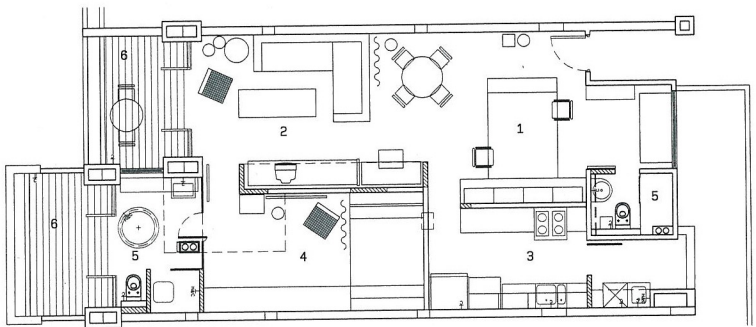
1. Recycled wood bought from a construction site is used to form the slats of this bunk bed. The peep-hole at the top opens out into the kitchen so that at least in concept, the spaces really flow continually. 2. In this small space, it makes sense to reduce different work areas like the kitchen and home-office into clearly defined planes that can dominate even clutter. Cable trays are used in the kitchen for services to continue the industrial aesthetic. 3. A combination of mosaic tiles, steel and plywood has the uncanny effect of making this space look like anything but the guest bathroom.





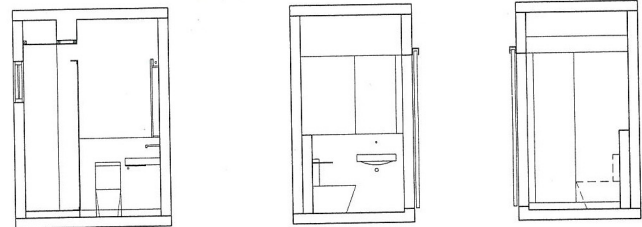
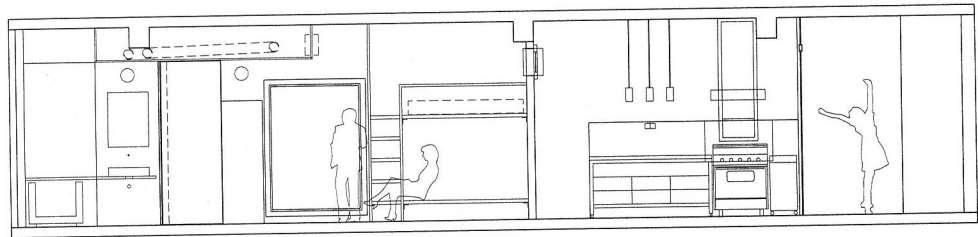
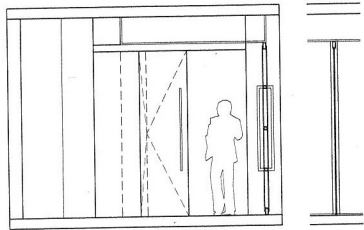
- 1 COMMON CORRIDOR
- 2 LIVING/DINING AREA
- 3 BEDROOM
- 4 KITCHEN
- 5 MASTER BEDROOM
- 6 BATHROOM
- 7 BALCONY

EXISTING PLAN



- 1 HOME OFFICE
- 2 LIVING/DINING AREA
- 3 KITCHEN
- 4 MASTER BEDROOM
- 5 BATHROOM
- 6 BALCONY

PLAN



SECTIONS

OPPOSITE PAGE: The metal shelving, which stands like two cranes in the living room, also give the space a secondary order which contain the various floating elements including the chandelier, with a shear force.





There is a resonance that comes from the way the elements of this home – like the 10cm thick radwood coffee table and the rusted steel shelving – that can only be attributed to an astute sensitivity towards material qualities.