

by Tan Shin Bin

It isn't often that you get to live in a shop you once frequented in your youth. So when a Singapore couple bought a shophouse that formerly accommodated a bookstore they used to visit, they seized the chance to create something special, marrying elements from the past and present.

At first glance, 125 Joo Chiat Place presents a regally faded front, quietly resplendent in its pale, washed out colours and worn but intricate ornamental motifs. Inside, however, is a completely different story. The doors open up to a bold landscape of warm exposed brick and dark wood floors, starkly framed by black metal girders.

The owners of this conservation property grew up in the Katong area, but eventually moved away and worked abroad. Their decision to relocate back to Joo Chiat and to make this shophouse their home was a unique homecoming, marking both a re-visitation of their younger days as well as the start of a new chapter in their lives. The restored shophouse reflects this charming dichotomy of old and new.

HONOURING OLD MEMORIES

The double-storey shophouse was built in the 1920s according to a "Transitional" style, and once housed a bookstore called "The Lucky Book Store", with the ground floor reserved for retail and the second level for storage. The bookstore had been an old haunt for the couple, both of whom had fond memories of browsing through the stacks of comics and buying music cassettes and cheap chewing gum.

The couple worked with an architect friend to conserve the shophouse and convert it into a home. They also bought a plot of concrete land behind the property and transformed it into a single-storey extension of the house, surrounded by a garden that links the extension to the main shophouse.

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

/ design



photos: Invy & Eric Ng - Shooting Gallery







The process of conserving the shophouse was not unlike working on an archaeological site. The project team took pains to retain traces of the property's former life as a shop, rediscovering and protecting the original structures and finishings of the shophouse. To reveal the original tone and colour of the front façade, multiple layers of paint had to be carefully stripped off, and the base protected with transparent sealers to prevent the delicate surface from flaking. Across one front pillar, the faded sign "LUCKY BOOK STORE" was discovered - this too was retained as a homage to the building's previous occupant.

Inside the house, non-structural partitions were removed to expose the old brick walls, timber rafts and floor joists. Like the original façade, these were carefully restored and protected. Existing cavities in

the walls were left uncovered as clues of how the space was originally configured: the cavities had been created by floor joists, which had previously supported a mezzanine space used as additional storage for the bookstore.

Visible reminders of the original site layout were also retained in the form of fragments of the former boundary walls. Where the couple built new columns to support an extended roof over their dining area, these were kept distinct from the old brick walls, in order to reveal the old party-wall profile of the shophouse. The building's height remained unchanged to match the height of its neighbours.







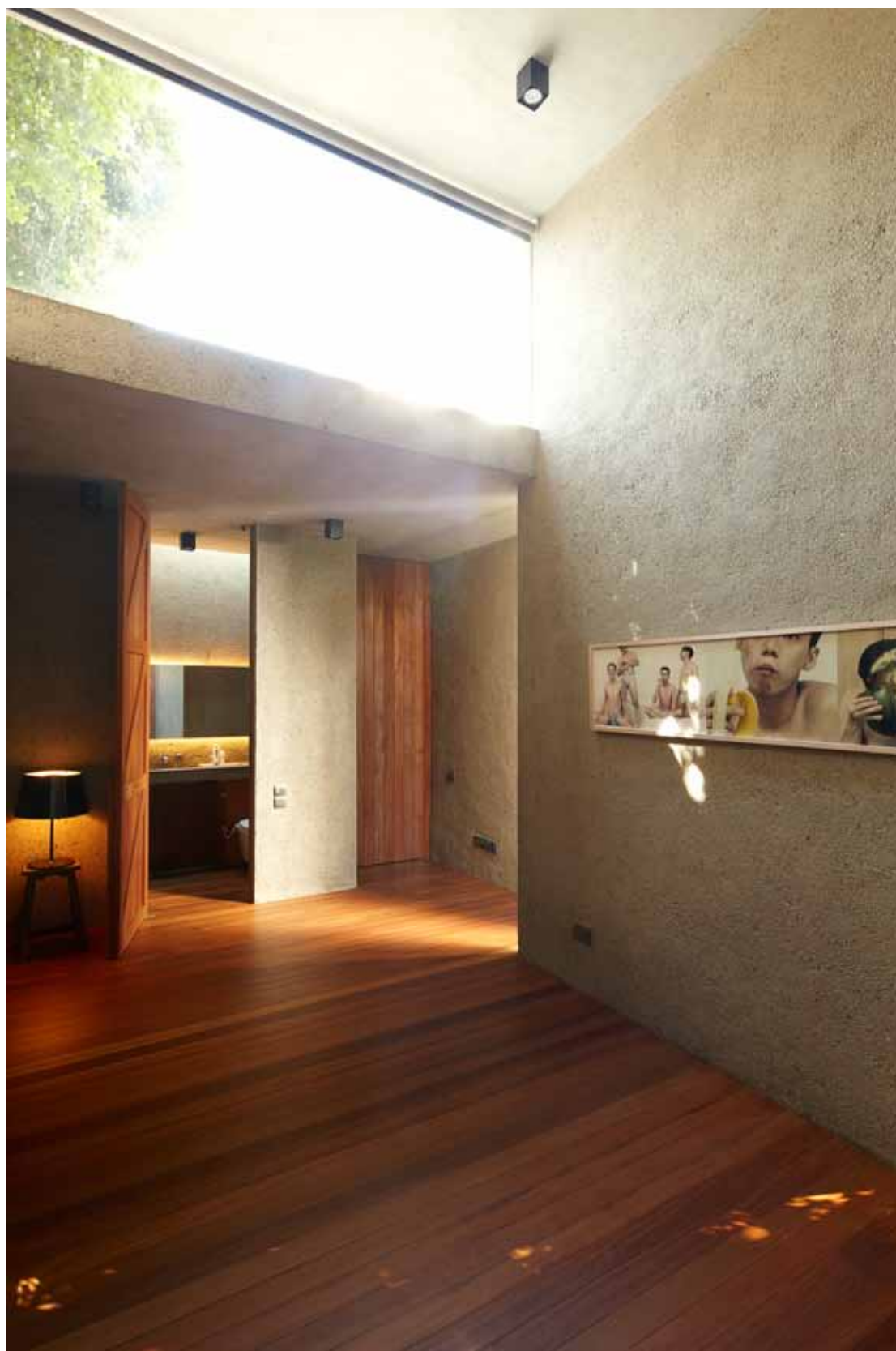


CREATING NEW SPACES

While elements of the original shophouse were faithfully retained, the property was also modernised for its new use as a home.

The new owners wanted to keep the space as flexible as possible, in order to accommodate visits from parents and relatives. To achieve this goal, the revised layout of the shophouse was kept simple. Furniture and fittings were placed along the centre of the building with the sides kept free as corridors for human traffic, allowing the stunning brick walls to stay uninterrupted by obstructions. This configuration provides clear views running 55m through the property on either side, flanked by the brick walls and framed by a pair of 6.2m-tall timber sliding panels. When the panels are pulled shut, they reveal a set of floor-to-ceiling windows that allow daylight to flood the space. These windows also provide a view of the garden on both sides, even when the spaces are closed off.





Joo Chiat

Joo Chiat was originally part of coconut plantations that stretched from the coast to what is known as Geylang Serai today. The growth of the area started in the 1900s, as people who sought an escape from the overcrowded city centre were drawn to the east.

A large portion of this land was owned by Mr. Chew Joo Chiat, a wealthy philanthropist and landowner who had the nick name “King of Katong”. In the early 1900s, Mr. Chew built roads and gave them to the municipality. In honour of his contribution, the roads were named after him, and subsequently the area came to be known as Joo Chiat.

Many members of the Eurasian and Peranakan communities settled in Joo Chiat in the early 1900s. Peranakans are descendants of 17th century Chinese and Indian immigrants who married natives from the Malay Archipelago, while Eurasians are descendants from Europeans who intermarried with local Asians.

Joo Chiat was awarded conservation status in 1993. It was also named Singapore’s first Heritage Town in 2011, by the National Heritage Board—an honour that provided additional funding for heritage and community activities.

A walk down the streets of Joo Chiat today brings back memories of yesteryear. The neighbourhood is characterised by two-storey conservation shophouses and terrace houses that were built in the 1920s and 1930s. Rich historical links to Peranakan culture are also evident, from the traditionally Peranakan houses like Rumah Bebe and Katong Antique House, as well as the many restaurants offering delicious Peranakan food.

At the same time, the area is experiencing a metamorphosis of sorts. Art galleries, trendy restaurants and cafes, retail shops, boutique hotels and design studios have set up shop here, drawn to the rich heritage of the district. Today, Joo Chiat is vibrant and lively, as people from all walks of life flock here to sample its diverse offerings.

The team also removed a second-storey slab to create a double-volume dining space, which serves as a large communal gathering place for family and friends. The high ceiling of the dining space allows it to visually connect the first and second floors, and the room opens out to the central garden area and the new single-storey extension behind the shophouse. The beautiful garden oasis, unusual in its location in the middle of the development, provides both visual relief and a breath of freshness.

When planning the rear extension, the owners took a similarly enlightened approach in designing a low-density building rather than a multi-storey one. Its enclosures have a rustic stone finish that blends well with the green setting and complements the rawness of the old brick walls in the main shophouse. The rooms are organised in a staggered manner to optimise the internal space, which has the effect of creating vertical apertures for natural cross-ventilation and day-lighting. This helps reduce the energy needed for cooling and lighting. Not only is this unconventional arrangement economical and environmentally friendly, it cleverly introduces views of the greenery outside in a way that maintains its occupants’ privacy on both sides without the need for curtains.

KNITTING TOGETHER THE OLD AND NEW

The design of the development effortlessly marries the old and the new elements. A beautifully cohesive end-product is created through a thoughtful choice of materials, as well as interior configurations to provide visual connections to all parts of the development.

Recognising the sensitive restoration and innovative design of 125 Joo Chiat Place, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) awarded it an Architectural Heritage Award in 2013.

Today, it stands as a wonderful example of creative restoration, where one can traverse the three distinct parts of the development and yet still experience a sense of seamless continuity between the old and the new. ❀

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