

design anthology

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HOME

Timeless spaces



Natural light highlights the textures and colours of a work by Thai artist Mit Jai Inn in the new double-height living area of this shophouse by Brewin Design Office

Image by Jovian Lim



HOME / SINGAPORE

Finding the Elemental

With fewer than 7,000 shophouses left in Singapore, a result of the post-war charge for modernisation, such pedigreed typologies hold strong appeal. They're precious not only for their storied past, but also for their sensible apparatus designed for the tropics, such as light and breezy courtyards, flexible shutters, human-scale proportions and period articulations.

A renovation of one such shophouse, completed by Singaporean firm Brewin Design Office, brings these features to light, transforming a poky dwelling with apathetic spatial interventions into Yoga House, an airy and tranquil home named after the owners' desire for a space to practice yoga. BDO founder and design director Robert Cheng, known for creating strong details, artful atmospheres and tactile spaces, attributed the dark interiors to the small facade apertures and clerestory windows on the second floor. What's more, he says, 'The ceilings were very low, making the spaces feel claustrophobic.'

In response, Cheng's reductive strategy expands the virtues of space and light. 'Designing within an existing context of structural walls and slabs provided a limited framework,' he says. 'The result is an interior architectural language that "audited" an old envelope with the introduction of new wall planes, soffits, details, voids and masses, which created spatial proportions aligned to the new uses.'

The structural constraints called for adroit management of spaces, and Cheng cleverly borrowed square metreage from the courtyard, enclosing it with a skylight and turning it into an indoor living room that enjoys a double-height volume. The removal of walls to achieve this resulted in an increase in natural light and improved flow throughout the ground level. The architecturally trained designer hid the window mullions and structural frames to leave what he

describes as 'a clean and pure opening framing a landscape formed by the movement of clouds and the colour of the sky at different times of the day.'

The rest of the house is similarly streamlined, allowing the qualities of the space and materials to speak for themselves. The ground level now embodies contrasting atmospheres, with low spaces that open up to the living room's five-metre-high ceiling. Cheng moved the kitchen and dining areas to the lower front of the house and harmonised the common spaces' flooring with nude-toned marble and grey-beige hand-trowelled stucco walls.

Columns, now curved, become sculptural elements that gently organise the spaces around them, while large artworks on walls provide intriguing focal points in each zone. Classic Danish furniture pieces, with their tempered, fluid lines and simple materiality, are choice accompaniments to the lightweight foil that Cheng describes as 'Belgian-inspired minimal but bold interior design'.

On the upper level, this tonality continues with lime-washed white oak timber floors. Bamboo-latticed sliding panels filter the courtyard's ample light and maintain a connection between the mezzanine-cum-yoga studio and the living room below.

Working on an existing shell where new qualities reveal themselves during demolition or construction can be a frustrating process. 'It requires you to be creative off the cuff and to manage your expectations during design, as the final result might be different from how you envision it on paper,' Cheng says. But it was seeing those moments as opportunities rather than obstacles that resulted in this beautiful, harmonious home.

Text

Luo Jingmei

Images

Jovian Lim

Previous page and facing page

Brewin Design Office used a series of smart interventions to turn one of Singapore's iconic shophouses into a suitably bright and airy home befitting the tropical typology. A significant move was enclosing the courtyard with a skylight to become a double-height living room, with marble flooring, sculptural columns and classic Danish furniture such as a Poul Kjærholm leather armchair





A canvas by Thai artist Mit Jai Inn catches plenty of light in the living room, as does the ample custom sofa, Niels Otto Møller coffee table and Antoni de Moragas Gallissà table lamp



Facing page, top and this page
In the dining room, the tableau in Wolfgang Tillmans's *Kasper König's Bookshelf* mirrors the dining table setting, while Idris Khan's abstract, meditative *Music Scene* takes over the adjacent wall. Surrounding the Niels Otto Møller dining table are chairs left from a restaurant the clients once owned

Facing page, bottom
The living, dining and kitchen areas flow into one another, the latter made complete with a marble and timber island and Radice stools by Sam Hecht and Kim Colin for Mattiazzi



This page
Brewin director Robert Cheng
drew on his architectural training
to design a deceptively simple
skylight that addresses the
previously poor natural lighting
and frames the view of the
changing sky

Facing page
The nude-toned marble and
grey-beige walls continue up the
staircase



In the bright and serene yoga studio, located on the mezzanine level, a wall of full-height mirrors doubles the light from newly added skylights and reflects views into the living room when the bamboo-lattice screens are open. The oak and paper cord of Hans Wegner's CH25 armchair echo the room's material palette





Facing page
The bathroom faces the courtyard,
elevating the typically functional
space with ample light and
ventilation

This page
The use of natural light is as much
a design detail as the natural
materials and minimal but bold
pieces that characterise the home