



LUNAR NEW YEAR

## The house of Hui

Architect Tan Kay Ngee shows how he lends a modern context to traditional Chinese architecture.

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by

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EVERYTHING ABOUT AWARD-WINNING architect Tan Kay Ngee's resume points to him being the quintessential cosmopolitan practitioner.

He was a student of Catholic High School in the 1960s when it was still a Chinese medium school, before moving to National Junior College. After graduating from the school of architecture at National University of Singapore, he spent four years at London's Architectural Association.

Mr Tan started his career at Studio Tomassini in Italy and then at Arup Associates in London, and also taught design at The Bartlett, University College London. In 1990, he established Kay Ngee Tan Architects in London, but it was only in 2003, that he returned home to start his Singapore studio.

The 65-year-old has projects in Asian and Western cities. For example, there is the Kinokuniya book store in New York and the Homage boutique hotel in Istanbul.

He was one of 12 architects who designed villas for a hospitality project known as Commune by the Great Wall in Beijing, and he also designed the Chuzhou HQ & Ceramic Museum in Anhui province. Locally, Mr Tan designed Singapore Management University and Breadtalk IHQ.



His name is one that pops up when people think of architecture with an Oriental influence. "But funnily, when I first started, my designs were more contemporary British style," he says.

But he developed an interest in Chinese culture and architecture some years ago, when he was impressed with the way Japanese architects could modernise their own aesthetics. Along the way, Mr Tan delved more into Chinese architecture, particularly Hui-style architecture, which avoided the use of bright colours in its buildings, and used more muted materials such as cement plaster, wood and grey stone and grey roof tiles.

"I find the language of Hui-style architecture elegant, with its focus on proportion and aesthetics. I didn't want to follow it literally, but rather to recreate it with a modern interpretation," says Mr Tan.

His interpretation of Hui-style architecture can be seen in this bungalow off Holland Road. Belonging to a doctor, the house has subtle Oriental influences, the way Mr Tan intended for it.

The client approached Mr Tan to design her home without specifically asking for a Chinese house. But it was through conversations that the two discovered they shared a love for Chinese aesthetics.

"The idea is not to design the home with too much Chinese architecture, but to create an overall feeling," says Mr Tan. "We needed to make the home liveable, fulfil the client's requirements and also reflect her personality."

The land comprises two houses - a main building for the client, and an annexe wing for her second son. Standing in front of the property, the differences between the two buildings, both two-storeys high, are obvious. The main house is wide while the annexe wing is a slender structure. "The house is designed with two components, the horizontal and vertical brush strokes of Chinese calligraphy," says Mr Tan. He doesn't practise Chinese calligraphy but is a regular contributor to various Chinese publications, penning his views on arts, architecture and cities.

At the annexe block, an open lattice timber screen fronts the building representing the vertical brush stroke.

The timber screen allows breeze and sun to enter into the living space. Mr Tan explains that the openness of this building reflects the characteristics of the son, who loves the outdoors. The first floor houses an open kitchen and a gym, and there is a bedroom and bathroom on the second floor. A lap pool separates and acts as a watercourtyard for the two blocks.

The minimalist aesthetic of traditional Hui-style architecture is visible in the main house, through the offform concrete facade. The horizontal calligraphy stroke is a slab of silver quartz stone that partially wraps around the facade.

While the main house looks imposing on the outside, it is the opposite on the inside. Step in and it is a two-storey tall timber lattice screen, much like the one on the annexe block that visitors immediately see, with hints of a courtyard just behind it.

The main house is U-shaped around a central garden courtyard, which separates the spacious living and dining areas from the kitchen.

Mr Tan says that the design of the main house hints at the personality of the client, someone who values privacy but is open and very welcoming at heart.

The presence of the courtyard is inspired by traditional Hui-style homes, which would usually be a single compound centred on an inner courtyard. In this home, the client has planted several bonsai trees which were imported from Taiwan. The three bedrooms on the second floor come with views of the courtyard.



For Mr Tan, one of the highlights in designing the home is the creation of a gallery space for the client's collection of Chinese paintings and artefacts. The space is minimalist, with the artefacts, some dating back to the Han and Tang dynasties, lined up on a glass ledge that is naturally lit from below.

Mr Tan also introduced little details around the home that have Chinese aesthetics but done with tropical living in mind. For example, the bifold doors in the living and dining areas are more slender compared to conventional ones, and are similar to the width of a vertical Chinese scroll painting or a Ming dynasty table. The doors can be folded away so that the home can be naturally cooled when required.

In line with the Hui-style practice of using stone as building material, Mr Tan also used stone for parts of the home. In this case, he picked Ahlat stone, a light weight, porous, chocolate-brownish lava stone from the Van Lake region of Turkey. The stone has a natural cooling quality that reduces heat in the home.

Keen-eyed observers will notice that much of the furniture is Western-styled, Mr Tan picked out. He deliberately avoided filling the home with only Chinese furniture, "because that would be too much."

He adds that one of the challenges in any architectural job is "how to bring out the essence of the central aesthetics, but not to copy or overdo it."

Besides well-designed aesthetics, the trick to designing a home is also to make it usable and easy to maintain, says Mr Tan. "More importantly, the client has to enjoy the space."