

Yang Yeo and his girlfriend Ching lan relax on the back stoop of their renovated Singapore shophouse—an archetypal building type in this busy port city. “Shophouses brought back memories of our childhood,” says Yeo. The street-facing façade (opposite) gives away little of the changes within.

Straight and Narrow

Behind an unassuming 19th-century façade in Singapore's Joo Chiat neighborhood, Ching Ian and Yang Yeo's renovation of a typical shophouse venerates tradition while looking squarely to the future.

Project: Ching Ian/Yang Yeo Residence

Architect: Chang Architects

Location: Singapore, Republic of Singapore





Ian and Yeo's house was uninhabitable when they purchased it in 2002. Three months later, the roof caved in. The translation of the sign above the door of the couple's renovated house (right) is "peace." Once inside, visitors are greeted by three ten-foot-tall hand-carved antique panel doors.

The first thing you notice as you approach Yang Yeo's newly renovated 85-year-old shophouse in Singapore is the large wooden plaque adorned with two gold-painted Chinese characters affixed above his doorframe. Hanging a door plaque is an old Chinese custom, a ritual blessing to ensure that only good things come in. The characters above Yeo's door mean "peace."

Entering Yeo's house is a ritual itself. From the busy street in Singapore's Joo Chiat neighborhood, you pass over a threshold that seems to lead into another century, into a narrow vestibule dominated by a screen made of three ten-foot-tall hand-carved antique panel doors (discovered by Yeo on an antiquing expedition in Beijing). Two smooth wooden benches are tucked nearby, to make shoe removal easy. Barefoot, with the nubby texture of a pebbled concrete floor to soothe your soles, you follow your host around to the other side of the screens, anticipating some Oriental palace beyond. But behind the ceremonial entryway, there's a big surprise. The interior of Yeo's house is a thoroughly minimal space of concrete floors, mirrored cabinets, low-slung furniture, dramatic glass-railed balconies, and a roof that opens to the stars.

Shophouses like Yeo's are a staple of Southeast Asian urban architecture, but they're especially linked with Singapore, which got its start as a trading port in the early 1800s. By the middle of the 19th century, Singapore was booming and Chinese merchants crowded into the tiny city (the island is only 266 square miles in its entirety). The shophouse was a "modern" solution to the problem of how to both live and do business in a place where space was at a premium: a narrow, long, multistory building in which the ground floor was the

public business premises and the one or two floors above were private dwelling spaces.

Yeo's house, like many in Singapore, had fallen into disrepair and was no longer being used for any business. Three months after he purchased it, in 2002, the roof caved in. This didn't bother Yeo, since he was planning to replace it anyway. Besides, he and his longtime girlfriend, Ching Ian, were too besotted with the idea of shophouse living to let a collapsed roof deter them. "When you buy a shophouse in Singapore, you really have to be in love with the idea of this style of living," says Yeo.

He explains why: Singapore is one of the most intensively planned cities in the world, and over 85 percent of Singaporeans live in public housing, which is priced at all levels, mostly new, and of high quality. (In fact, Yeo's Harvard-trained architectural consultant, Teng Wui, lives in a public housing flat.) The public housing schemes offer hefty financial incentives for couples to buy in, and Yeo and Ian "were very, very close" to purchasing a newly built condo, Yeo remembers. "But we snapped out of it when we saw this place."

Yeo, 38, an executive creative director for an advertising agency, and Ian, 33, a media buyer, both grew up in Singapore, but had lived abroad in London for a few years. Choosing an old Chinese-style shophouse for their first real home (they'd moved around like nomads—six places in nine years) wasn't just an aesthetic decision for them, it was a sentimental one. "Shophouses brought back memories of our childhoods, of open back doors and neighbors and relatives wandering in and out of the kitchen and cooking and eating and coming and going whether you liked it or not," Yeo says, with a laugh. ▶

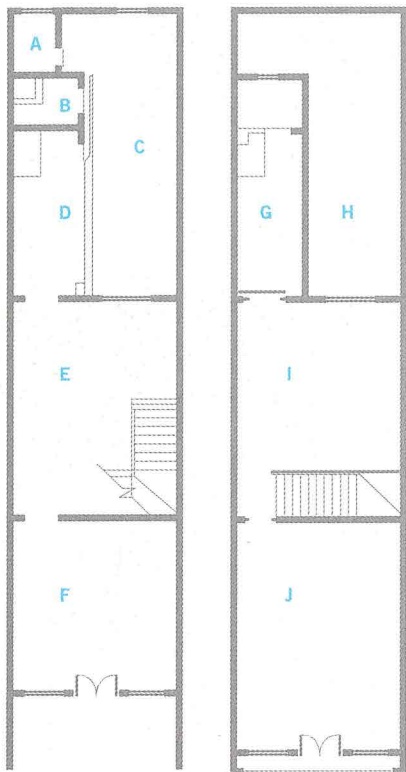


Because the house is narrow and long (16 by 68 feet), the design team decided to create a huge open-air space to light the interior naturally. Two retractable motor-driven canvas canopies (opposite) shelter the space during Singapore's frequent rains. The dining table is a little over 13 feet long and was custom made for the space. It can seat up to 24.



“Shophouses brought back memories of our childhoods, of open back doors and neighbors and relatives wandering in and out of the kitchen and cooking and eating and coming and going whether you liked it or not.”—Yang Yeó





Ching lan/Yang Yeo Residence Floor Plan
Renovations shown in yellow

Before

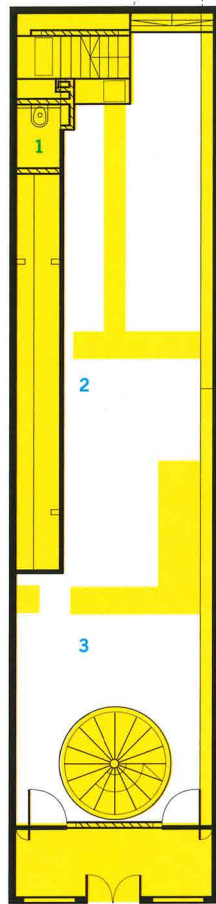
- First-Floor Plan**
 A Store Room
 B Half Bathroom
 C Courtyard
 D Kitchen
 E Dining Room
 F Living Room

Second-Floor Plan

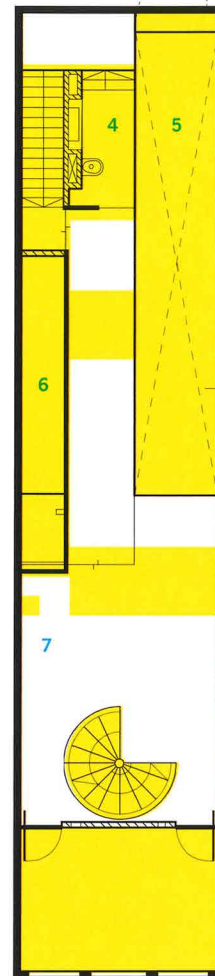
- G Bathroom
 H Courtyard
 I Bedroom
 J Bedroom

After

- First-Floor Plan**
 1 Half Bathroom
 2 Kitchen
 3 Social Space



- Second-Floor Plan**
 4 Bathroom
 5 Courtyard
 6 Wardrobe
 7 Lounge



- Mezzanine**
 8 Deck with Hot Tub
 9 Roof Garden / Toilet
 10 Courtyard
 11 Bedroom



They wanted to bring back their childhood, but they didn't want to do a restoration that was about nostalgia. They wanted a home that reflected their very contemporary modern taste. (Yeo is a fan and avid collector of Japanese pop culture and design.) And so, together with their team—architect Yong Ter, architectural consultants Teng Wui and Andrew Lee, and project manager Edwin Foo—they spent nearly two years discussing and hammering out their vision of how to reinvent a shophouse for two very contemporary Singaporeans.

Some of the choices for their renovation were not theirs to make. The government of Singapore is unique in Asia for its aggressive policy of conserving traditional architecture and preserving neighborhood character. Most renovations of older houses must be reviewed and passed by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore's master-planning board. In the Joo Chiat neighborhood, where Yeo's house is located, traditional shophouses may be renovated on the inside, but must

keep all the street-facing details intact. And so the chipped pink-and-green ceramic roses that adorn the white façade of Yeo's old house had to be restored and repainted to match old photographs of the house.

But the interior offered limitless possibilities. The old shophouses, architect Wui explains, present formal and structural challenges. They are quite narrow and very deep—Yeo's house is about 16 by 68 feet. The original houses usually were a progression of small, often dark rooms, designed so that light comes in through the front and back windows, and through a narrow airshaft located about three-quarters of the way back. In order to break that pattern, and to create a more open living space, the team decided on a radical move: to leave the roof completely open from the beginning of the original airshaft to the back of the house.

"We love to eat and to entertain, and what that did was make the kitchen/dining area into an open-air space, completely open to the natural environment," enthuses ▶

Yeo descends the spiral staircase while Ian relaxes on a pair of Cappellini Superlight 750 sofas designed by Barber Osgerby. The Gwapa lounge chair and ottoman in the corner were designed by Marcel Wanders. **➤ p. 238**







The kitchen (opposite and above) was custom made by a local carpenter due to its unconventional scale. The appliances consist of a De Dietrich oven, Amana refrigerator, and Imperial microwave.

➊ p. 238

Yeo. (Well, not completely open—since Singapore has frequent tropical rains, the house’s “sky window” can be easily and quickly sheltered by two retractable motor-driven beige canvas canopies that open high above.) That cooking/dining space is the heart of the house, dominated by a dramatic, 13-foot-long table from Indonesia made from a single piece of teak. Here, relatives gather to chat and hand-roll noodles at Chinese New Year, and Yeo and Ian’s two cats, Nunu and Rascal, loll and wait to be scratched.

When guests drop by—just like in Yeo’s childhood home—they wander in through the open back door, which is 25 feet high and more like a wall. “It represents a transformation of scale,” says Wui, contrasting it to the smallish rooms of the original house. “You have a giant table, a giant door—and Yeo’s giant personality.” The openness of the vast, long space is the way that Yang and his team reinterpret and pay homage to the commercial function of the traditional shophouse’s ground floor.

A steel spiral staircase just inside the vestibule leads upstairs into the private spaces. On the second floor is Yeo’s study and a hangout room for media; the third floor is devoted to the bedroom and to the house’s most decadent gesture—an outdoor bathroom that’s like a large patio, built on a wooden deck, complete with open-air toilet and a whirlpool bathtub. It’s a luxurious take on the traditional tropical Singapore outhouse. On both floors, balconies offer vertigo-inducing views down into the grand ground-floor space, and upwards to the open sky.

Yeo and Ian have lived in their shophouse for a year, enough time to decide it is perfect—for now. (For later—when they have a family—they’ve purchased another shophouse, which they intend to renovate in a more child friendly way). “Through working with the team on this house renovation, Ching and I found out more about ourselves as well,” Yeo reflects. And, in the process, they created a house that tells the story of not only who they are now, but where they have come from. ■