

MALAYSIA

# Flatler Homes

Creative Landmarks  
Celebrating heritage and sustainability in design







# Treasure Trove

The characterful home of Georgetown Heritage & Hotels Group founder, Chris Ong, holds a secret in every nook

*By Professor Robert Powell. Photography by Lin Ho*





Left to right: The staircase has been restored to its former glory; Antique intricately carved doors open up to the internal courtyard

Chris Ong was born in George Town, Penang and attended St. Xavier's Institution in the city. His Straits Chinese family's association with George Town stretches back six generations. At 18, he entered Melbourne University and upon graduation went into the investment banking business in Australia. It was a profession he pursued successfully for 20 years and in that time he bought and restored houses in Fitzroy and Carlton, filling them with Peranakan furniture and artifacts bought at auction in Richmond salerooms. He acquired a considerable number of beautiful objects, and attributes his good fortune to the fact that many Malaysian Chinese had moved to Australia following the race riots in Malaysia in 1969 and more followed after 1975, spooked by the fall of South Vietnam and the advance of the communist regime. In the course of time they disposed of exquisite items and his vast knowledge of Peranakan antique furniture and porcelain was acquired as he scoured the salerooms in the city.

Chris was in his early 40s and in a senior position in a major investment bank when it was acquired by Westpac which provided the incentive to change tracks and he moved to Sri Lanka. He and an Australian business







partner acquired the historic Galle Fort Hotel, a 13-suite boutique hotel within the fort, which they revamped and managed profitably. It was his first taste of the hotel business. The architect they hired for the hotel refurbishment was Channa Daswatte, a protégé and assistant of Geoffrey Bawa.

### HOME COMING

In 2006 he returned to Penang to take care of his mother and bought a house in Lebu Muntiri close to his grandfather's former home. He sold the hotel in Sri Lanka in 2008 and acquired property in George Town that was subsequently developed as the entrancing Seven Terraces Hotel and the equally captivating Muntri Mews Hotel. Chris is the CEO of the George Town Heritage Hotels (GTHH) Group.

But it is his own house that I now turn my attention to. Anecdotal evidence suggests Lebu Muntiri was named after the 19th century Mantri of Larut, Ngah Ibrahim. Before WWII most of the terrace houses in the street were residential. After the war, wealthy Straits Chinese families moved west, to the beach and the suburbs, away from the congested town. Cars made commuting easier and the terraces became commercial properties, referred to colloquially as shophouses. The former use of Chris Ong's



**This page from top:** Priceless mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture and tapestries are a feast for the eyes; Houses such as these used to have two sets of staircases in the house

**Opposite page from top:** Ong's extensive collection of Straits Chinese antiques are showcased throughout the house; The dramatic scarlet bedroom is congruent with the flamboyant style which the wealthy Straits Chinese families lived





Left to right: Even the most functional objects from that period like sinks were adorned with floral motifs; The open kitchen is ideal for Asian cooking

Transitional Style (c1890s) terrace house was as a grocery store. He set out to restore it to a condition that approximated to his grandfather's house at 81 Lebuh Muntri.

In the spirit of restoration, the layout of the house has been returned to an earlier state, prior to its use as a grocery store, with new additions where necessary. The lightwell has been reopened to the sky. A new garden court has been created at the rear of the house, an area that was destroyed by a Japanese bomb during WWII. Structural repairs have been carried out to other areas of the house disturbed by the bomb blast. Staff accommodation has been built at the far end of the courtyard. Most importantly, bathrooms have been added at first floor level and a powder room at ground floor level involving the careful integration of modern fittings with water supply and sewage pipes.

## REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

The plans for the house restoration were prepared by Ar. Au Tai Yeow who graduated with a B. Arch from Washington State University School of Design and Construction at Pullman in 1990. He returned to graduate school and was awarded an M. Arch from Washington University, St. Louis in 1991. From 1995-1997 he worked for John Tang & Associates in Hong Kong and established Architect T.Y. Au in 1998. The Chris Ong house, he recalls, "was in a very bad state," but there were no major changes to the floor plans. Timber floors have been retained at first floor level. The original back staircase has been restored. The kitchen is quiet but in an earlier era it would have been buzzing with cooks and amahs. Now it is the place to sit, looking out to the pond and

"A new garden court has been created at the rear of the house, an area that was destroyed by a Japanese bomb during WWII"







**This page:** Lush plantings line the path to the back door

**Opposite page:** A dining nook facing the garden and water feature

garden. There is much to be learned from the late 19th/early 20th century terrace house in terms of its response to climate.

Yet beyond the physical building work the most spectacular transformation is the integration of Peranakan carved and gilded timber screens, lacquered wooden doors and the exposure of original floor tiles, together with the authentic period furniture, porcelain and other memorabilia. The numerous family portraits from the late 19th and early 20th century portray life as it was with large families and many children and amahs. In the old days when the houses were residential, a *pintu pagar* (a half door) prevented passers-by from looking in while allowing ventilation when the

main door was open. This was a common feature of terrace houses in Emerald Hill, Singapore built in the same era. Today the entrance door is securely padlocked.

Restoration is just one branch of the more inclusive word - conservation. Other approaches are 'preservation' and 'adaptive reuse'. The house is a mesmerising reincarnation of a former era - of an imagined past. Chris Ong is hugely knowledgeable about porcelain and Straits Chinese architecture and interiors. He is steeped in Peranakan culture and has a palpable passion for its preservation and continuity. He says of his house, "This is me. It is what I am passionate about - my heritage. It is my brand."