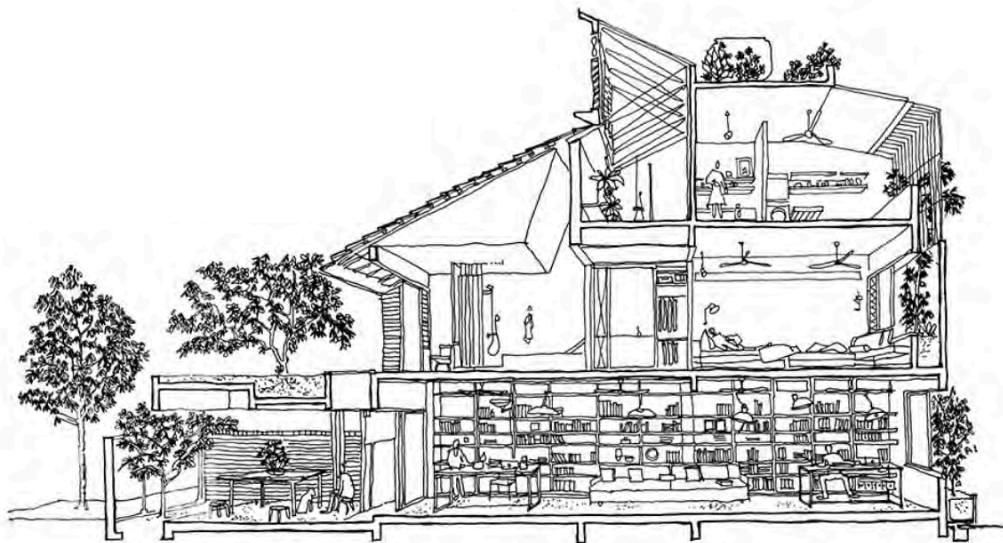


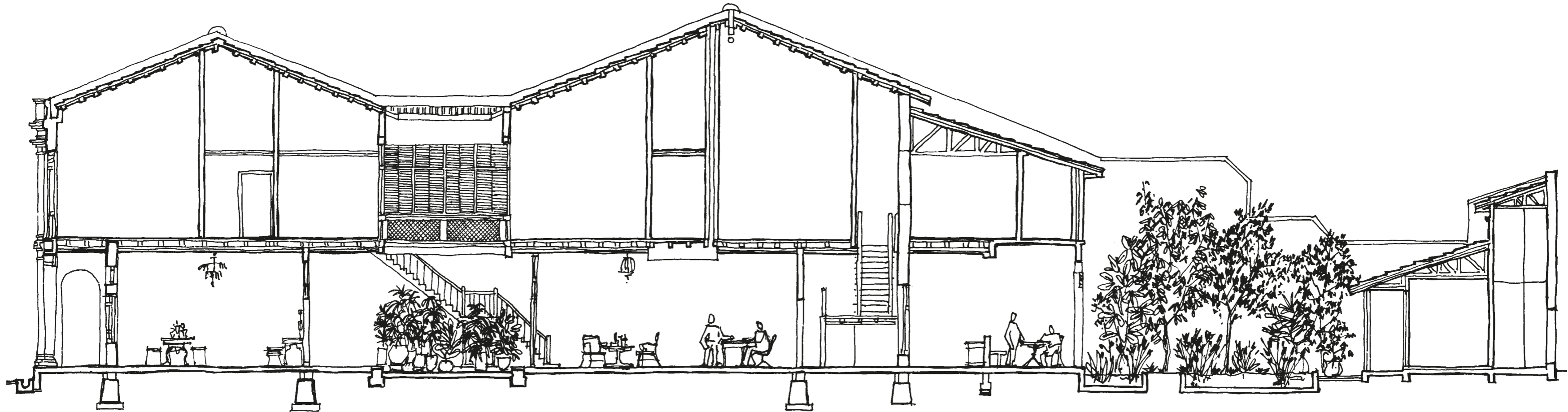
Terrace Transformations in the Tropics



Chris Ong House

George Town, Penang
Location

Ar. Au Tai Yeow of Architect T.Y. Au
Architect



18' x 175'



← The living room has a fascinating assemblage of artifacts proclaiming the owner's passion for his Peranakan heritage

—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.

In 2006 he returned to Penang to take care of his mother and bought a house in Lebu Muntri 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 Muntri 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,

↑ The Chris Ong residence is a terrace house in the UNESCO World Heritage City of George Town, Penang. It has been restored to its imagined grandeur, when built circa 1890



← The two upper pictures illustrate the elegantly restored main staircase

↙ Timber shuttered openings on the first floor landing overlook the open-to-sky lightwell

→ View from the lightwell towards the living/dining area. The original floor tiles have been restored



referred to colloquially as shophouses. The former use of Chris Ong's Transitional Style (c. 1890s) 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 Lebuhr 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.

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 a 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 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 mesmerizing 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."

→ The restored reception area viewed upon entry from the five-foot way

↘ The living area viewed from the home office with the open-to-sky lightwell beyond. The plan displays a hierarchy of privacy

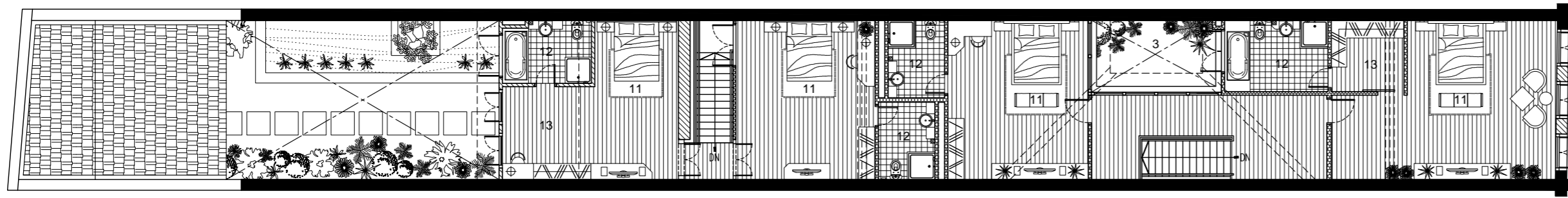


←← View of the rear garden court constructed in the aftermath of a Japanese bomb that destroyed the rear of the house in WWII

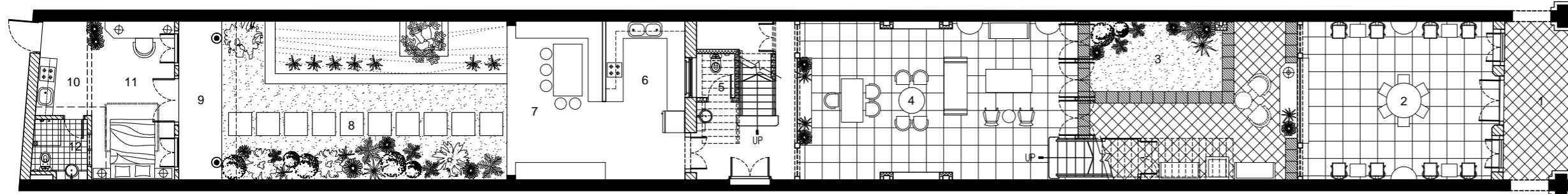
← Terrace looking out to the garden. A delightful place for an informal breakfast



First Floor



Ground Floor



Legend

- 1 Five-Foot Way
- 2 Reception
- 3 Air Well
- 4 Living/Dining & Home Office
- 5 Powder Room
- 6 Kitchen
- 7 Breakfast Terrace
- 8 Garden Court
- 9 Verandah
- 10 Pantry
- 11 Bedroom
- 12 Bathroom
- 13 Dressing Area

- a Staircase
- b Decorative panels
- c Glass screen
- d Wedding night ensemble
- e Ong House
- f Living area
- g Decorated sanitary ware
- h Heirlooms

