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# Renovator's *delight*

Attracted by the breezy urbanity of Singapore's **TIONG BAHRU**, an expatriate couple have refurbished a 1980s apartment with style and sensitivity to what works in a tropical climate.

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TEXT PAUL MCGILLICK | PHOTOGRAPHY BRETT BOARDMAN



In 2008, Mimi Daraphet, an Australian architect, and her partner, Dan Foreman, a New Zealand product and interior designer, moved to Singapore to gain experience in the Asian market. That was their first journey.

Their second was the acquisition of an apartment in Tiong Bahru in 2011 along with the four years they have since devoted to refurbishing it. Both now work for Arup Singapore – Mimi as an architect specialising in sustainability and facades, and Dan as their Lighting Leader. So, they were the perfect team for this renovation.

But, as we all know, designing a place is the easy bit. Then comes the build itself. In Mimi and Dan's case, as expatriates, just getting to purchase the apartment was a challenge. Non-citizens are restricted in what they can buy in Singapore. But Mimi and Dan had lived in Tiong Bahru since arriving in Singapore and were determined to stay there.

So, there's a back story and that back story begins in Tiong Bahru, one of Singapore's most charming and historically rich quarters. Formerly, home to many cemeteries (*tióng bahru* means 'new cemetery' in Bahasa Malaysia), it became home to what is now Singapore's oldest housing estate, begun before WWII. Its mix of art moderne housing blocks (with their rounded balconies, spiral staircases, flat









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of the space.*

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rooves, light wells and connecting green space) and Straits Chinese shophouses now make it much sought after – an appeal enhanced by the imaginative adaptive re-use of many of its heritage shopfronts.

After a year of “stalking potential homeowners or renters around the neighbourhood”, Mimi and Dan were able to buy a walk-up apartment in a building dating from the 1980s, opposite some typical conservation art moderne buildings in Yong Siak, a lively precinct of bookshops, boutiques, a French patisserie, coffee shops and restaurants.

The apartment was one of nine in the building, sitting above three commercial spaces, including a yoga studio. At 160 square metres it was unusually large in a conservation context (they are normally 112-140 square metres). It is a through-apartment with a light well to one side. Together these features facilitate enough cross-ventilation to minimise the need for air-conditioning. Originally, the apartment contained three bedrooms, before the living room was converted into two more bedrooms. Given there were just the two of them with the occasional family member or friend staying, Mimi and Dan decided to make it into something “they would prefer to live in”, so they knocked down the walls, made it open plan and integrated the courtyard with the restored living/dining/kitchen space.



“As Aussies living in Asia,” says Mimi, “our brief was simple: to create an indoor-outdoor space that utilised natural ventilation.” The other aim was to use materials suitable for a tropical climate. “We chose Burmese teak, seasoned but left raw,” says Mimi, “for its high oil content and its extreme stability against wear, damp, decay, termites, acid and alkali.” Other materials included white laminated plywood, polished concrete flooring, copper and brass.

The ceiling is just the concrete slab with exposed beams and they have made a feature of the copper pipes – for both wiring and water – which become a kind of abstract artwork, emphasising the linearity of the space and so creating a sense of depth and space. It also sets up an intriguing dialogue between an industrial character, the highly finished joinery and the mix of materials.

The kitchen, a ‘dry’ western one, has been moved away from its traditional Asian place at the back to become part of an integrated living/ dining/ courtyard space. A guest bedroom and ensuite is beyond the kitchen on the Yong Siak side, while two other bedrooms are positioned at the other – quieter – side of the apartment.

However, these two rooms function as two home offices, effectively two wings with the ‘master bedroom’ in the middle and the ensuite behind the bedhead.

Unsurprisingly, as design professionals, Mimi and Dan had clear views from the start as to what they wanted. This became central to their ‘second journey’ – the drawn-out process of getting the job done.

Mimi explains that, in Singapore, contractors prefer to work for a design firm rather than directly with the client. Clients have a habit of being ‘emotionally involved’ in their projects and can be ‘demanding’, when contractors (let’s face it – anywhere in the world) prefer to stay in their comfort zone doing what they always do and with the materials they know.

So, the contractors Mimi and Dan approached initially were alarmed to find they were both client and designer. “The challenge,” says Mimi, “was finding contractors and the materials we wanted to use which was different to what was considered normal renovation in Singapore. We went through four electricians before finding an ex-plumber who found joy in running electrical cabling through copper pipes.”

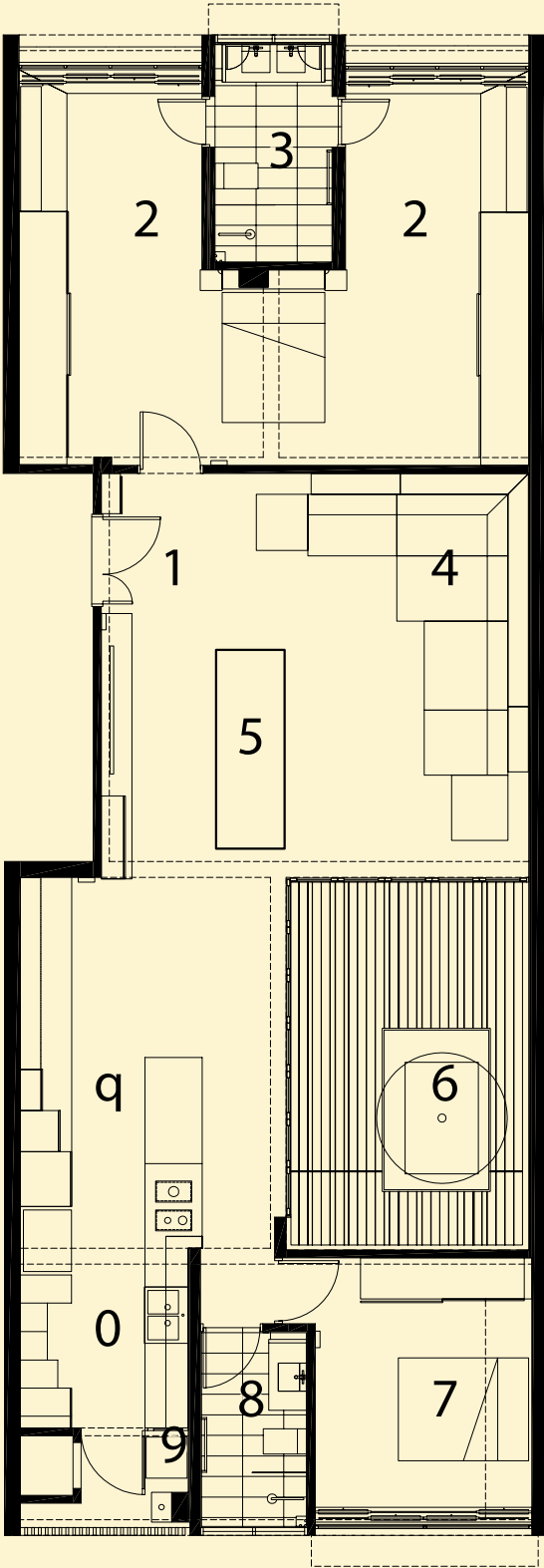


ABOVE | THE CENTRAL VOLUME CONTAINS AN ENSUITE AND ACTS AS A BEDHEAD SEPARATING THE TWO HOME OFFICE SPACES. OPPOSITE | THE DETAILING IS A BEAUTIFULLY RHYTHMIC BALANCE OF FORMS AND MATERIALS, INCLUDING A RE-IMAGINING OF THE TRADITIONAL WINDOW SHUTTER.









- 1 ENTRY
- 2 BEDROOM/STUDY
- 3 ENSUITE
- 4 LIVING
- 5 DINING
- 6 COURTYARD
- 7 GUEST BEDROOM
- 8 BATHROOM
- 9 LAUNDRY
- 0 PANTRY
- q KITCHEN

“With one working bathroom, half a kitchen and a laundry,” Mimi continues, “we moved into the spare bedroom at the back end of the apartment. We then observed its light and the subtle effect of the seasons in Singapore. Completing and refining the design took another two years before we embarked on an extensive tender exercise.” This was Phase 1 – demolition and getting the infrastructure right.

Phase 2 involved getting the joinery right, which required a contractor prepared to pay attention to the detailing. Mimi recalls that they spoke to ten contractors, but “many were put off by the fact we were a couple and that it was too detailed and too different for them to handle”. Having found one – and two project managers and one month over time – they completed Phase 2.

At the end of their journey, Mimi and Dan have what they regard as a unique apartment in the Singapore context, especially given its location. However, it has to be said that, in the quest for liveable and affordable homes, architects in Singapore are re-thinking old stock – often in the resurgent older preserved precincts like Joo Chiat, Gelyland and Katong – in brilliantly imaginative ways.

But this apartment is a hidden gem amongst all the other gems of Tiong Bahru.



DROP BOX

DESIGNER Mimi and Dan Foreman  
BUILDERS Interior Crafts, Delco Art Interior Singapore  
ENGINEERS Alan Yap Engineers & Associates (demolition works)

MIMI DARAPHET AND  
DAN FOREMAN  
*mimindans@gmail.com*

FURNITURE  
Mags sofa and Ray coffee table by Hay, Harper armchair by Jordan, Burin side table by Viccarbe, Swan chair by Fritz Hansen, T12 dining table by Hay and Noor dining chairs by RBM all supplied by BW Furniture.

LIGHTING  
Lighting control system by Lutron. Ceiling lighting is Compass by Flos in teak. Bedside and desk lighting is Kelvin LED by Flos. Under shelf concealed lighting is Vario LED flex Venus from LED Linear. Courtyard up lighting is FINO LED luminaire from acde lighting. Courtyard planter lighting is copper spike light by Lumascape.

FINISHES  
Custom polished concrete floor with black and white aggregate and home-made natural finish comprising of tung oil, carnauba and beeswax. Copper pipe conduits with bronze connectors sourced locally. Joinery in Formica laminate and plywood with edges finished in natural beeswax. Timber benchtop, shelves, deck, and pergola in

seasoned Burmese teak from Calvary Carpentry unfinished and sanded to a smooth texture.

FIXED & FITTED  
Kitchen appliances throughout by Bosch. Soft-close joinery hinges by Blum. Kitchen sink from IKEA. Roulette consolidated brass tapware throughout from CB Ideal. Toilet by Toto. Door hardware is FSB 1106 levers and roses in raw brass from Halliday+ Baillie. Pressomatic Keyless Lock front door hardware. Front door handles are raw brass sourced locally. Bifold door + windows by GH Engineering. Haiku ceiling fan from Big Ass Fans. Luxbar u-shaped closet rod with LED from Ardee lighting. Custom plantation shutters by Delco Art Interior.



