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HARMONY HAVEN

FOR FARAH AZIZAN'S FIRST PROJECT
UNDER HER OWN FIRM, STUDIO BIKIN,
THE ARCHITECT FOUND HER FEET WITH A
SERENELY REALISED RENOVATION.

Story by Choo Ai Ling
Photos by Erna Dyanty

Project: Bukit Antarabangsa
Architect: Studio Bikin
Location: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Relaxing on the front porch (above), Gail and Liew are thrilled to finally have the house of their dreams after not having renovated for 12 years.

Bukit Antarabangsa is an ordinary suburb just on the edge of Kuala Lumpur, where the façades of the houses have not changed drastically from the mass-housing template established there in the 1980s. The architecture is neither cutting-edge nor lovely, but its unobstructed view of the KL skyline means the city feels conveniently close while the leafy, breezy cul-de-sac makes it also seem just contentedly far enough away that it's easy to understand why Gail Leong, Liew Jun Keong and their two children, Hay Men, 15 and Shan Nan, 8, have made it their home for almost a dozen years.

Recently, however, the couple began to feel that their modest double-storey mid-terrace home was long overdue for a makeover and when Leong quit her job to become a full-time homemaker, it served as a catalyst for the overhaul. "I've always hankered for a home with an airy loft-like feeling but wasn't keen on moving, so we decided to just renovate," she explains.

The couple share a love for the natural, unfinished architecture personified in the projects of renowned local landscape architect Seksan Ng, and were driving around the area where Seksan's Sekeping Tenggiri retreat is located when two houses under renovation caught their attention. Coincidentally, both projects

belonged to Farah Azizan, Seksan's protégé who was in the midst of starting her own practice, Studio Bikin. Leong and Liew were so impressed by what they saw that they came back the next day to inveigle Azizan's contact from a contractor at the site.

Once the couple and architect met, Azizan got down to the process of redesigning the home to better suit the needs of the family. "Basically, we gutted everything because the original house layout was incredibly badly designed. There were columns running everywhere, the toilets were inconveniently located and the house was cramped and dark," she recalls. To remedy this, the house has been extended all the way to the rear boundary with most intermediate walls removed so the living room stretches all the way to the kitchen in one uninterrupted vista. The back extension adds a small timber decked courtyard to the kitchen space with space for two full sized trees in its soaring double volume height. Natural light filters into the kitchen and children's bedroom upstairs in the gaps between the stacked prefab subsoil pipes, which also function as the barrier between the house and the back alley. Upstairs, the master bedroom was also stripped down to one large space and the balcony was converted to

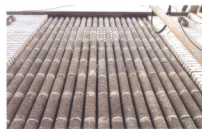


Gail's favourite part of the house is the kitchen (top), where she enjoys whipping up meals for the family. Son Hay Men's bedroom (centre, left) now overlooks the courtyard, where trees grow, while a cosy nook on the ground floor (centre, right) doubles up as a guest bedroom. The master bedroom (bottom) is a serene space, decorated in shades of white.



Although Azizan designed the sleek master bathroom (opposite) with plenty of glass and open areas, the couple's privacy is preserved by a screen of plants and stacked topsoil pipes. The same stacked pipes are used as fencing (left) and on the facade of the house (left, bottom), where they resemble bamboo stalks.

Many of the vintage pieces throughout the house (below) have been in the couple's family for generations.



into a small outside patio where various plants have started to flourish. "I wanted them to have a nice private garden so they could have something green to look at to look at from their sunken bathtub," Azizan enthuses. For the children's rooms, she rearranged the spaces so they each have small, attached bathrooms and sufficient space for a double bed and workstations.

Although Azizan's pedigree shows through her use of the humble materials so beloved by Seksan, her talent is evident in the deft way she experiments and manipulates the materials in an approach that is her much very own. Case in point is the prefab subsoil pipes on the façade and the back elevation. "These pipes are usually laid horizontally in golf courses but when I tried stacking them up, they worked effectively for my purposes," she says. "I am trying to get away from this whole red brick and vent block 'style' because I think it has become a bit of a cliché. The problem is people use them not for function but for decorative purposes - they don't know why they are using it, which makes it look very cheesy." Additionally the stacked pipes have the appearance of looking like bamboo, which imbues the house with a soothing atmosphere and the look Azizan was striving for: "The Liews are really »





Ground Floor

First Floor

Bukit Antasabangsa Floor Plan

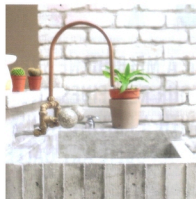
- | | | |
|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| A Patio | G Daybed area | M Bedroom 2 ensuite |
| B Carport | H Toilet | N Master Bed Room |
| C Garden | I Courtyard | O Open Wardrobe |
| D Living Room | J Laundry Utilities | P Open Bathroom |
| E Dining Room | K Prayer Altar | Q Garden |
| F Kitchen | L Bedroom 1 ensuite | |

calm, meditative people and I wanted to give them a house that reflected their way of life." This serene palette continues with the pale bricks - naturally white due to their compressed limestone content - used wherever the house was extended. "Seksan was cycling one day along Jalan Cochrane, where they were tearing down old government quarters," Azizan explains. "He proceeded to salvage windows from the site and asked if I was interested in the bricks. My contractors and I went over and had to deal with the local gangsters to get the bricks here but it was worth it when you think of the history."

Nifty details can be found throughout the house. "The addition of a loft meant that it needed a ladder, so I designed these funky steep stairs because we hardly had any space," she says. The ladder in question has smaller half-steps so that the climber doesn't have to take such a high (and possibly scary) step up. The unique water feature in the front gardens was a collaboration between the architect and her plumber: "The couple had requested a water feature but I wanted something that would suit this

raw style, and my plumber (who is a designer in his own right) designed this almost vintage-looking series of pipes and concrete knobs." Azizan is quick to explain that most of the budget went not so much into the materials but details such as those and casting and concrete works. "People are always surprised that this raw style is still expensive even though we're only using bricks and concrete. But for this look to work, you need to spend money on the form work and the labour that determines the quality of the finishing," she expounds. "Which is why I choose to work with certain materials and why I choose to work with certain contractors who can then really work with the materials we've got."

Indeed, the family has embraced their new home wholeheartedly, with their old furniture fitting perfectly into the space. "The only new additions are the two antique fans in the living room," says Leong. "Azizan has transformed this house into a unique sanctuary that feels like a resort. Now every day is a holiday and I don't have to go anywhere to feel completely relaxed." ■



A steep ladder (opposite) is made more reassuring for climbers by the use of half-steps.

A small kitchen window was placed in the party wall shared with the next-door neighbours (top), who are firm family friends, so the families can exchange food.

Azizan's intricate concrete work can be seen throughout the house, such as in the sinks (above).