

# House On A Hill



FACED WITH AN ODDLY SHAPED PIECE OF LAND, ERODING FAST DURING THE RAINS AND WITH A STEEP SLOPE, ARCHITECT KEN YEH WORKED WITH NATURE, MITIGATING THE HARSH TROPICAL CLIMATE AND EXPLORING LOCAL MATERIALS AND CRAFTS

By Rubini Kamalakaran **Photography** courtesy of Ken Yeh



# Homes

**W**ith a trapezoid shaped land, half of which is part of a hill, there was nothing much left to do but to find

a good architect and that was exactly what the head of this household did. In a scene akin to the proverbial joke “a man walks into a bar”, it was “a man walks into an interior designer’s office in Ipoh and asked who is the best architect in the city?” in this case. The joke was, “the best architect in Ipoh” is actually based in Sydney, Australia. But if any architect knew how to deal with a land as it is – trapezoid, half of a hill and all – Kenneth Yeh of Marra + Yeh Architects Design Studio was the man. Precisely, one of the first things the architect told the homeowner was that they were not going to level the land, meaning they were going with the piece of land as it is. “He bought a land on a hillside didn’t he, so maybe he wanted the hillside,” reasoned Yeh. It was the only assumption (if not a great design idea) that went into the design of the home; because designing houses that are both prosaic and poetic for which he is known takes a lot of time – in getting to know the client, their needs and how they envision living. The same amount of time went into familiarising with the land – understanding the microclimate and such.

“When we started this project, I spent many days just sitting on the land, feeling the path of the wind, noticing the breezes.” It helped with figuring out how to manipulate nature’s attributes – using the knowledge to design the house in such a way that it channels the wind coming from different directions, at all times of the day. “So even when there’s not much wind there’s a breeze inside the house, it is always cool and comfortable.”

The completed house sitting on 10,000 sq ft of land, has a built-up of 5,000 sq ft. “We wanted to have the feeling of living inside/outside, not being shut out by nature and the garden,” explains the owner. Because of that, the architect incorporated a lot of glass in the home from windows to glass doors. “They use the outdoors a lot, you see the house is very open and all the doors can be opened up and they actually live like that hence the generous outdoors we maintained,” shares Yeh. In the process of designing the home as well as getting to know the lay of the land, Yeh made sure to educate his clients about the materials that go into their home from timber to marble. “We took them to the marble quarry to show them the process, how it’s cut, how it’s polished, the different finishes and colours. Similarly, we took them to a sawmill to see how they turn a tree into timber. A lot of timber was used in the house. The social context of this building is that of a



**PREVIOUS PAGE:** The house is designed in such a way that gives the feeling of living both inside and out

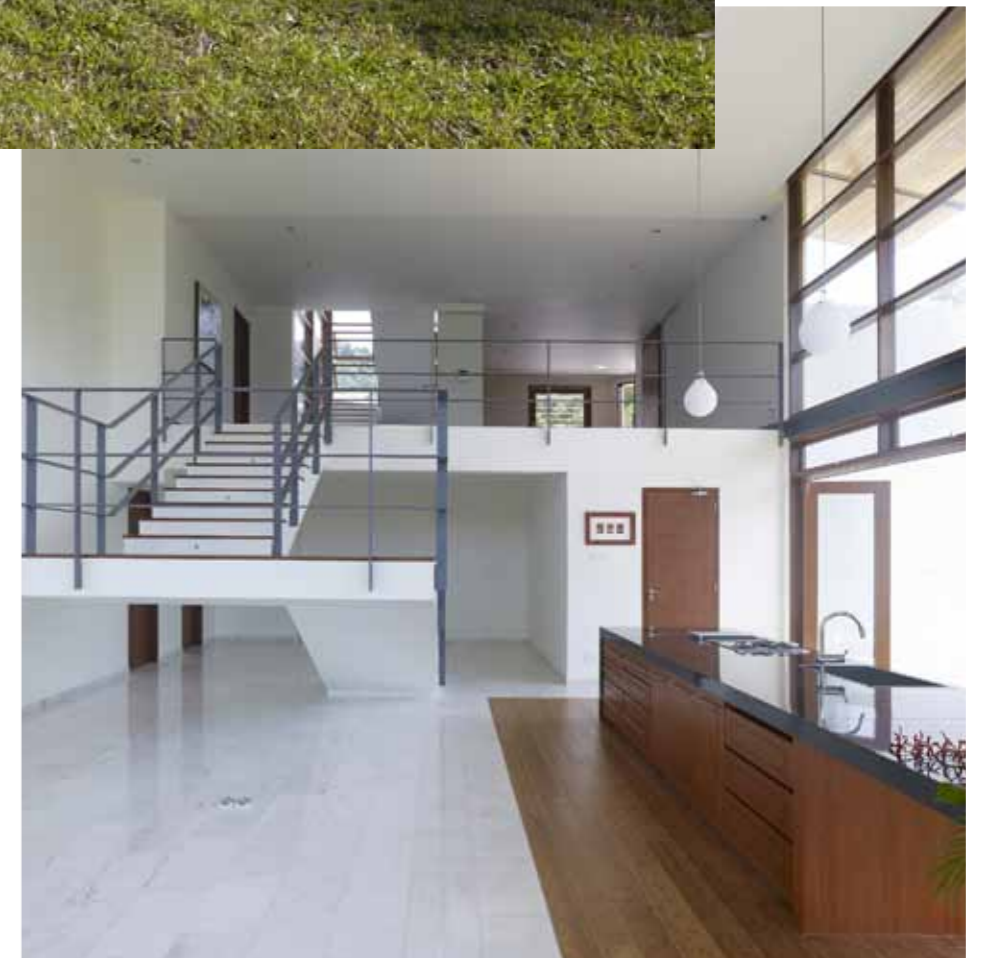
**FROM TOP:** The house acts like a wind instrument as it is located on a slope between a hill and a pond; The size of the house is quite deceiving from the street but once people step inside, the reaction is nearly always “wow”, says the architect

**OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:** The house incorporates a lot of glass especially on the ground floor which allows the owners to open up the house to the outdoors; Architect Ken Yeh with his business partner Carolina Marra



society that is very aspirational where homes are routinely traded for larger and more luxurious ones. Being cognizant of this we are keen then for the owners to understand the philosophy of being environmentally conscious of the environmental waste that comes from trading up.”

Using nature’s attributes to complement its function is a major feature of the home. Yeh says, “The house acts primarily as a wind instrument. Located on a slope between a hill and a pond, it catches cool morning breezes falling downhill and evening breezes flowing in the opposite direction, evaporating from the pond and back uphill. Internal thermal mass, marble floors and aerated concrete walls, capture the cool of the breezes, particularly through night flushing when both temperature and humidity drop.” There’s much that can be learned from studying colonial buildings, Yeh shares. “It’s a wonderful example of people being resourceful and inventive in difficult





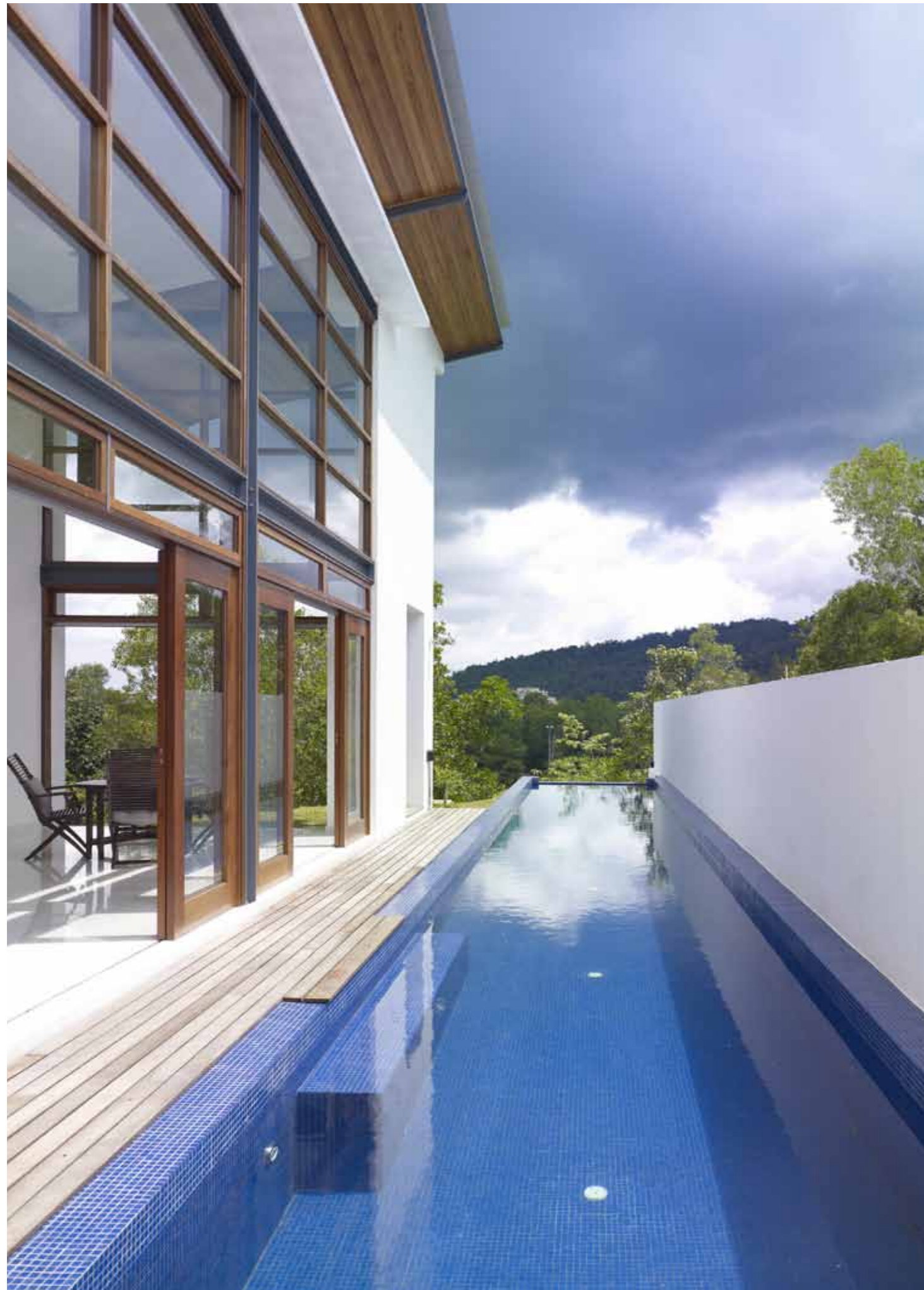
circumstances. These buildings are a fusion of British know-how with local craft and response to the tropical climate.”

Speaking of local crafts, a majority of building materials was sourced locally, like the statement piece lamp that hangs above the stairway. “We designed the lantern but we commissioned a local craftsman who does the lion heads used in lion dances to craft the lamp for us.” For various aspects of the design the architect resourcefully found craftsmen that were either dormant or in decline: the last woodworkers trained under a Shanghainese guild system were enlisted to build the timber components; a precision metal machinist fabricated several ironmongery components. The only materials that come from more than 250km was the roofing which was from Australia due to the durability and longevity as well as the small quantity of bamboo flooring from China, again for durability and environmental reasons. The latest technology wasn’t left out from the equation. In the case of this

**OPPOSITE:** The owners enjoy being outside a lot so the spacious interior opens up to the large outdoors  
**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The fascinating lamp designed by Ken Yeh and crafted by a craftsman who makes lion heads used by lion dancers; Ken Yeh; House disguised by greenery; Marble clad bathroom

**“These buildings are a fusion of British know-how with local craft and response to the tropical climate”**





**OPPOSITE:**

The wading pool just outside the living area

**CLOCKWISE FROM**

**RIGHT:** From the stairs, the owners can see the road outside – in a way it’s the owners’ surveillance point; Shower room; The house uses mostly local materials like marble from Ipoh, timber from Perak, bricks from the local kilns



house, the architect installed an indirect evaporative cooler, the first installation in Malaysia that uses 80% less electricity than an air conditioner.

Because of the unconventional methods and the level of detailing required, the house took 25% more time to build than a conventional building. “Ironically it costs 30% less than a comparable house

built by developers within a golf course development.” Ultimately, the most special thing is that the owners are really happy to be home, they enjoy it and they feel comfortable and at ease. “For them it’s not a showpiece but a place where they can be themselves. That’s important to us, that the house can engender these feelings in the people who live in it.”