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# A gem of a home

Unique items breathe life and character into Stephen and Florence Tan's house, reports **CORINNE KERK**

**S**TEPHEN and Florence Tan have been married for almost 13 years. But it was only in May this year that the couple – together with their three children and two domestic helpers – finally moved into a home they could call their own.

Not that they were living in humble surroundings before. The young family had been living in a separate landed property within the same compound as Stephen's parents' home in an exclusive Holland Road neighbourhood.

It was a comfortable and convenient arrangement, so they weren't even house-hunting when they chanced upon a newly built three-storey semi-detached house in Seletar Hills estate late last year.

"One day, we decided to take a drive and saw a 'For Sale' sign here," says Florence of their new pad. "We like this neighbourhood because we have friends who live around here and Stephen's cycling group also passes by these parts a lot. It's more peaceful, the traffic is less heavy and it's safer for the kids."

It was the first house they looked at and it was love at first sight.

"We love it because of the high ceiling and air well," explains Florence. "The air well (which goes all the way to the third floor) gives a spacious feeling, yet it connects every part of the house, which is important if you have many children because you really don't want to be disconnected from them in the house. The floor-to-ceiling glass windows let in a lot of natural light and bring the outdoors in, which is really beautiful."

The house is also surrounded by a perimeter pond which they find relaxing and gives the home "a tropical resort touch". And with six bedrooms, it offers adequate personal space for each family member.

Then there's the uniquely Singapore schooling-cum-commuting factor. The couple's son, Sylvester, 12, is heading to Maris Stella High, which is easily accessible via the Central Expressway. Elder daughter, Siobhan, seven, is attending the nearby St Nicholas Girls' School, which is also where their third child, Chloe, two-and-a-half, will eventually go.

That pretty much sealed the deal. Structurally, the 4,000-plus sq ft house already offered them everything they wanted in terms of space and layout.

So the issue was about turning it into a home for the busy couple, who run the Charlotte (Ehinger-Schwarz 1876) German jewellery brand in Singapore.

Their brief to interior designer, Terri Tan of Designworx, was to achieve a "timeless" look that is practical, clutter-free and aesthetically pleasing.

## Sufficient storage space

Because Florence is a self-confessed neat freak whose hectic lifestyle demands minimum tidying up and maximum efficiency, there is sufficient built-in storage for storage – from the walk-in wardrobe in her bedroom and shoe cabinet concealed under the stairs, to the shelving on the upstairs landing for Stephen's large collection of books and a space-saving CD cabinet in the entertainment room downstairs.

Even their study can comfortably seat four to five should the need arise, adds Stephen, who also challenged the designer to hide all wires and cables.

Because they felt built-in cabinets were too restrictive and heavy-looking, they opted for mostly custom-designed, movable pieces of furniture which allow for more flexibility and still suit the room sizes.

The couple also wanted Oriental touches in their home, and this came in the form of Chinese chests of drawers which they modernised by topping off with black glass.

Since the Tans are in the jewellery trade, their designer felt they should have a chandelier "so the sparkle will remind us of our gems and diamonds". "But I didn't want a typical chandelier, which is everywhere these days," says Florence.

The solution? A gorgeous Italian chandelier made of almost 100 hand-blown Murano glass bubbles lit by a built-in LED that changes colour. It hangs by the corner of the living area, where it's unobtrusive, yet remains a conversation piece.

With the house painted in subtle earth tones accented by wood – including the "frame" that separates the living from the dining area – it is ultimately the combination of unique, individual items that breathe life and character into the house.

For instance, selected pieces of sculpture and art are pulled together to tell a cohesive story in the Tan household. A Family of 5 stone statue – given a coat of silver paint – set upon a lighted stand under the chandelier is a conversational item that ties in with a statue of a couple looking skywards that stands by the pond outside.

These, in turn, are referenced with a painting from Sunjin Art Gallery called *Tranquillity* by Indian artist P Ganesa, which, to the couple, represents the ownership of their first home.

## Decorative pieces

Other objects precious to them include a "Florence" lamp shade and the *Lady at the Well* statue by the late master sculptor, Giuseppe Armani – wedding gifts from a German business associate which are certified limited-edition pieces.

Since gemology is their business, it's not surprising that the Tans also have a collection of decorative pieces made from natural gems such as agate, chalcedony, amethyst and petrified wood, which they bought from Ildar Oberstein – a German town well-known for being a gem-cutting centre.

Then, of course, there are plenty of family pictures – especially of the Tan children – dotted around the house, with an electronic photo album starting over 200 family pictures taking pride of place next to the staircase landing.

From work and play to recreation and rest, the uses for different areas of the house have clearly been carefully thought through. But the patio – in which a set of comfortable outdoor lounge furniture from Marquis Living invitingly awaits – gets the couple's vote for their favourite spot.

"It's in a cosy, heavenly part of the house and we love sitting right here listening to the sound of sprinkling water and admiring the lot in our pond," says Florence. "We love to unwind here with a glass of wine and just chat, or curl up with a good book. Stephen likes to let Sam, our Pembroke Gorgi, out, and Sam then willingly becomes his footrest, and sometimes also enjoys some of Stephen's beer!"

When the couple have parties – with eight housewarming parties since their move in May – the house is perfect as kids can play table soccer on the second floor family area or Playstation in the entertainment room downstairs while the adults chill by the mini bar or on the patio.

The Tans, who are Christians, are also looking forward to Christmas, when they will host more parties for their staff, family and friends.

"Our parties always end up bigger than we planned because we have so many friends and people we care about," says Florence. "I think we are very blessed this way. All this togetherness, I think, fosters the true spirit of Christmas."

And, of course, a warm and welcoming home always helps.



**Space and light:** Stephen and Florence Tan with (from left) Chloe, Siobhan and Sylvester in the patio, their favourite spot; (clockwise from below left) view from outdoor patio of lot pond and the dining room; the gorgeous Italian chandelier, which hangs by the corner of the living area, where it's unobtrusive, yet remains a conversation piece; the master bedroom. From work and play to recreation and rest, the uses for different areas of the house have clearly been carefully thought through.

