

TWO CONVERSIONS/ RESTORATIONS FROM SINGAPORE

TAN HOCK BENG

Singapore architect Richard Ho has established his reputation through a series of exquisite renovations to old shophouses that have been conserved. These works succinctly illustrate Ho's design philosophy as well as an evolving, but clearly eloquent materialist aesthetics.

Ho set up his practice in 1991 upon his return to Singapore after several fruitful years of work experience in Austria and Italy – the last two years being in Milan with Aido Rossi. The young practices overriding concern is in “using architecture as an expression of the continuity of the history of civilisation the memory of cities and man's unending endeavour to be in harmony with his soul and the world he lives in.”

This deeply felt conviction manifests itself in all the firm's projects, but is especially poignant in the way Ho deals with the renovations of several shophouses. Issues of tradition and innovation, continuity and change, conservation and adaption are

explored and tackled through architectural moves that are both radical but ultimately sensible, and minimal yet highly effective.

In his Town Plan of Singapore in 1822, Stamford Raffles had allowed for a linear arrangement of shophouses of specified widths linked by a colonnaded 5-foot way. Subsequently influenced by the needs of the local populace the built-form that emerged became a dominant urban typology that characterised the towns of British Southeast Asia.

The typical features of a shophouse include brick walls with high ceilings, roofs with secondary jack-roofs to allow hot air to escape and airwell to provide light and ventilation, and a shop-front at the first storey for the occupants to ply their trades. The early prototypes of these buildings were purely utilitarian structures, and it was only in the early 1900s that elaborate architectural motifs from European, Malay and Chinese architecture were introduced in an ornamental and

In city with a comprehensive and considerable stock of old buildings, restoration and adaptive re-use has become part of the vocabulary of development.

In Singapore, the distinctive shophouses that resulted from Sir Stamford Raffles townplan of 1822, was an obvious response to the tropical climate. Their typical features include brick walls, with high ceilings, roofs with secondary Jack-roofs to allow hot air to escape and a shop front on the first storey.

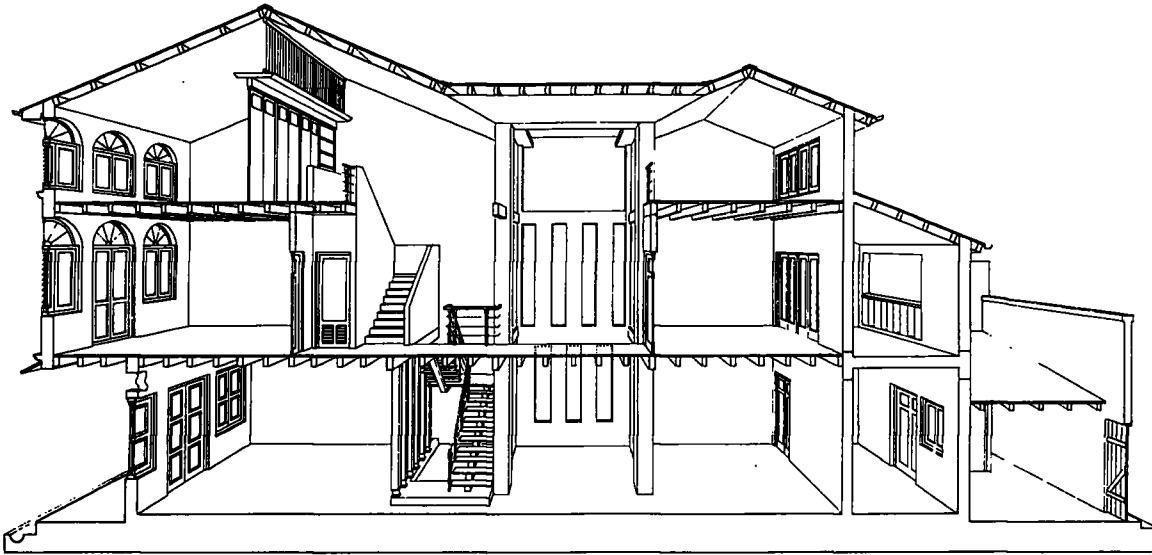
Several years ago, the urban redevelopment authority's of singapore began a conservation effort, which has resulted in many new conversions and restorations.

unrestrained manner to the front facades.

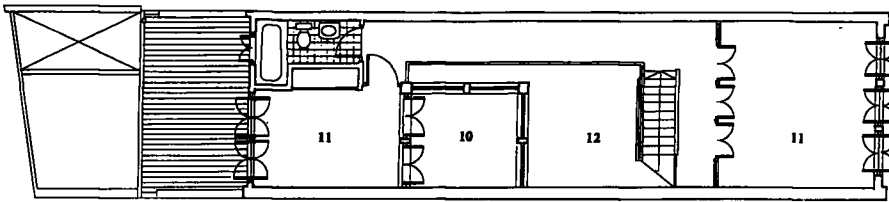
Although the conservation and restoration of areas rich in historic architecture is essential in providing tangible links to Singapore's heritage, the allure of shophouses as an alternative housing type is probably due to their limited numbers. However, the “yuppified” status of shophouses generally attract owners and architects who appreciate the unique spatial qualities inherently present in these structures.

Richard Ho has personally re-designed a number of these shophouses. His first was No.12 Koon Seng Road, which won the Singapore Institute of Architects' Design Award in 1995. This was followed by a few more units in the Blair Road Conservation Area. Everton Road and recently, another one at No. 130 Emerald Hill Road.

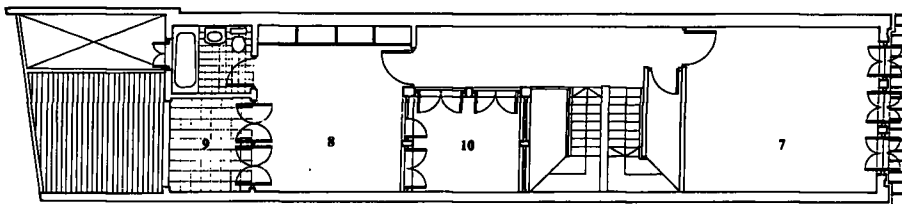
These shophouses have been gutted and given a new lease of life through clever manipulation of planes and



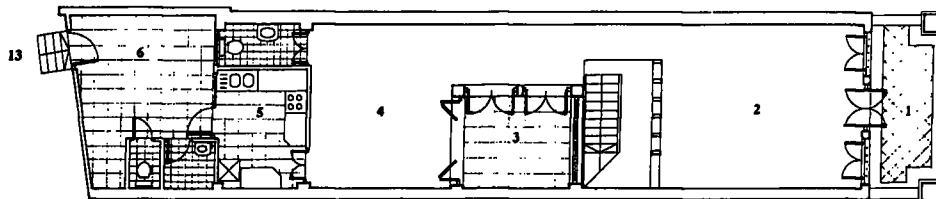
26 EVERTON ROAD



THIRD STOREY



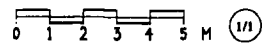
SECOND STOREY



FIRST STOREY

26 EVERTON ROAD
LEGEND

- 1 : FIVE-FOOTWAY
- 2 : LIVING
- 3 : COURTYARD
- 4 : DINING
- 5 : KITCHEN
- 6 : UTILITY
- 7 : FAMILY LOUNGE
- 8 : MASTER BEDROOM
- 9 : TERRACE
- 10 : VOID OVER COURTYARD
- 11 : BEDROOM
- 12 : VOID OVER STAIRCASE
- 13 : BACKLANE



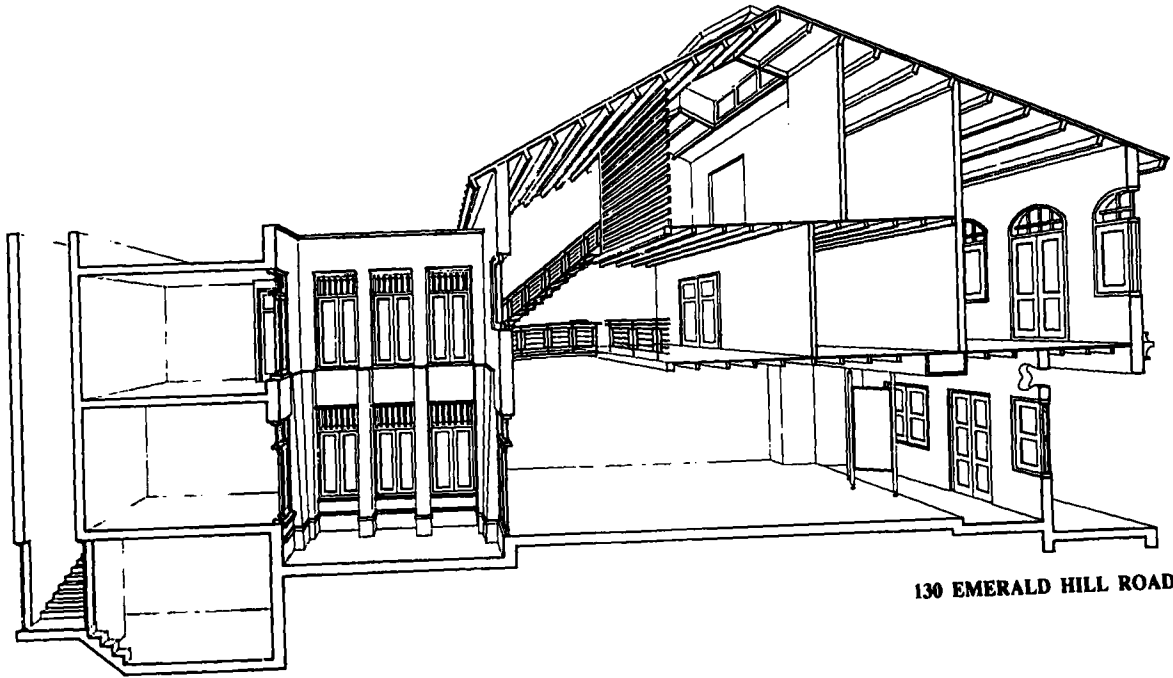
vertical elements. They pay respect to the past in the internal ordering of space – one that centres around the courtyard typology – while having an integrity wholly its own. The external fabric of each house, including the

front elevation and rear extension, remains intact because of the authorities' imposed guidelines. Internally it was however radically re-configured one where the courtyard is reinterpreted and combining yet

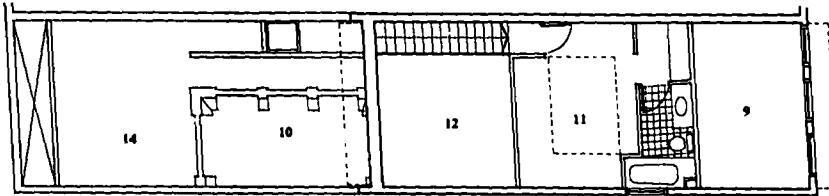
separating the public and private realms.

Several key ideas and enlightened strategies persist throughout the various schemes. The internal volumes become

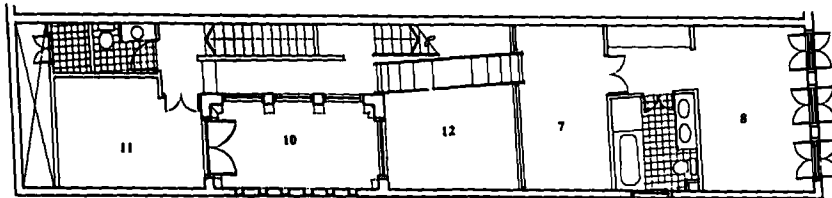
130 EMERALD HILL ROAD



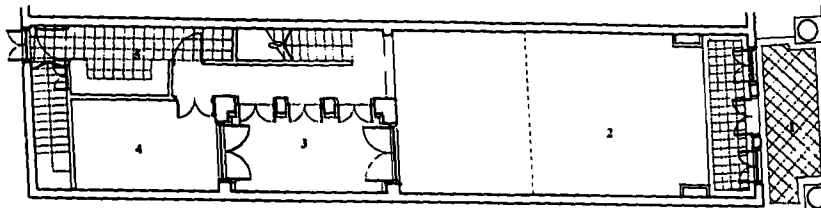
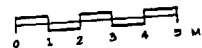
130 EMERALD HILL ROAD



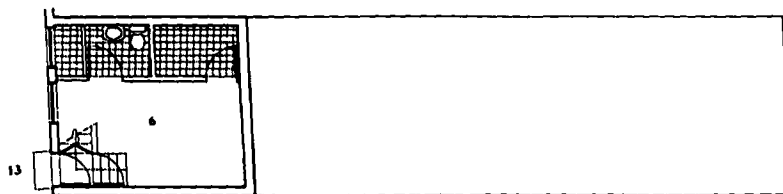
ATTIC



SECOND STOREY



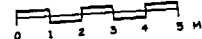
FIRST STOREY



BASEMENT

130 EMERALD HILL ROAD
LEGEND

- 1 : FIVE-FOOTWAY
- 2 : LIVING
- 3 : WATER COURTYARD
- 4 : DINING
- 5 : KITCHEN
- 6 : UTILITY
- 7 : FAMILY LOUNGE
- 8 : MASTER BEDROOM
- 9 : VOID OVER MASTER BEDROOM
- 10 : VOID OVER COURTYARD
- 11 : BEDROOM
- 12 : VOID OVER LIVING
- 13 : BACKLANE
- 14 : ROOF GARDEN



light-modulators, the focus of which is always a lightwell. This is an important pivotal point in the house. It is also the most dramatic part of the design providing soft, diffused natural light to the floors.

The sense of transparency becomes heightened through deliberate placement of planes and lines of sight within such a spatial matrix. Spaces are layered in an intricate manner by the insertion of walls and openings. These become "frames" that accentuate the distance between subject and object yet enhancing the overall sense of depth. For instance, in No. 130 Emerald Hill Road, Ho has deliberately dramatized the depth by the placement of the staircase in such a manner that it allows the entire length and width of the ground floor of the original portion of the house to be fully appreciated. The dining room is intentionally located at the rear to further accentuate the depth of the house.

In most instances the staircase leading to the private spaces above also becomes an important architectural feature of the space. The entire vertical circulation route hence revolves around the lightwell, which combines with the staircase to form an intricate means of creating spatial delight.

The triumph in these shophouses lies in their discipline and total lack of contrivance—the architect doing only what is essential in creating an internal environment that is functional and delightful without resorting to neither "exhibitionism" nor nostalgia for an imagined and bygone lifestyle and electric ornamentation found in many other conserved shophouses.

A rigorous attentiveness to detail is obvious. The use of steel and glass also





registers a sleek contemporary touch to an otherwise predominantly timber palette. But the qualities that register most vividly are the simple pleasures of space, light and materials – fundamentals of architecture that are all too often drowned by the incessant chaotic clutter of contemporary works. This desire to eradicate the cacophonous is a consistent thread throughout Ho's portfolio of projects, ranging from furniture design to larger scale development. One can only wait with abated anticipation to see the realisation of Ho's other projects in the near future.

Without doubt, the humble and essentially utilitarian shophouse continues to provide a constant source of inspiration to new contemporary designs. However they are certainly not monuments to be either replicated or preserved. Ho clearly demonstrates, through these projects, that tradition is an evolving, as opposed to static, notion. To create a richer future, we must neither embalm nor replicate the past. The challenge in conservation lies in steering a delicate course between maintaining the essence of traditional forms and accommodating new spatial and functional dimensions that are essential in any dynamic society.

