The artistic house of Karen Ho, a former brand and marketing pro now involved in non-profit work with Unifem, reflects her personality, writes CHEAH UI-HOON

WHEN Karen Ho found out from a friend that a house at Chip Bee Gardens was going to be available, she just couldn’t resist taking over the corner unit on Jalan Kelah Asap. Especially when the previous tenant had been a landscape artist, and had created simple but lovely garden spaces in front and at the back of the house.

“So I just bit the bullet and took it. It was too good of an opportunity to pass up,” she says, even though the lease for her previous apartment wasn’t up yet.

She moved into the 1960s, Jurong Town Council-owned house with the said friend, Loreta Bertocchi — who runs Juiced Rawbar at Republic Plaza — just about three weeks ago.

Even though it has been less than a month, the house looks pretty much like a home now. A well-organised one as well — lots of white in the background, “loved” furniture, interesting art — but warm, given the comfortable eclectic blend of furniture and art in the house.

“You know how a house reflects its occupants? This is one prime example, given Ms Ho’s involvement with Unifem (United Nations Development Fund for Women).

Singapore has yielded two successful fund-raising dinners, with the third one coming up in November (that’s in fact, a ready “platform” for future dinner parties, especially since Ms Ho started putting together a wine and dinner social scene for professionals aged from 25 to 45 years old).

“Our first one in July was so successful that we will hold two this month!” she says. The aim is to get 15 men and 15 women together, by invitation only, for a social evening at private dining rooms of restaurants.

Already, Ms Ho has friends in Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur who’ve keen to extend DinnerNmore in their own cities, “which is great for Singaporeans who are frequent travellers,” she thinks.

Coming out of her sabbatical now, Ms Ho looks back at the past two years with satisfaction. “I had wanted to get involved with non-profits, so that exposure with the children (in Cambodia), with Unifem was good. And I managed to have a more balanced life as well — spending more time with family, doing things I enjoy and learning new stuff.

The next “task” that has come her way is working with a Singapore company to help them take their brand global. “It was a toss-up whether to go back into the corporate world and work for a multinational corporation, or do something more personal, like working with a local company. But I decided to go for the personal.”

New beginnings and new digs. Ms Ho is ready to move into her next career phase now, but just like her house, there is more balance — a bit of breathing space, not unlike the garden of the house.

The back of the garden — paved Bali-style and surrounded by greenery with strategically placed lights — is, in fact, a ready “platform” for future dinner parties, especially since Ms Ho started putting together a wine and dinner social scene for professionals aged from 25 to 45 years old.

“I just couldn’t resist the house, and the media as the one who has put Unifem’s annual fund-raiser, which raised $93,000 in 2005 and $130,000 in 2006, and the target is $160,000 this year.

The brand and marketing professional had quit her job a few years ago when she decided that it was too demanding. She was the Asia-Pacific head for an e-commerce business unit of an American IT company. “The business grew a lot, but I was in Singapore for an average of 1.5 days a week. I loved the work but it does take its toll, so she planned her sabbatical.

For her sabbatical, she had pledged to get involved with non-profit work. Something she had always wanted to do. A diver, she spent two months in Yucatan, Mexico with non-profit work, something she had always wanted to do. A diver, she spent two months in Yucatan, Mexico with non-profit work, something she had always wanted to do.

She and housemate Ms Bertocchi have kept the garden spaces in front and at the back of the house!

The sound-scape is quite different for example, when she hears a gate opening, to find out that it’s her neighbour’s. And then during the interview, we thought we heard a coconut crashing to the ground. “It could well be, because we do have coconut trees at the back of the garden!”

Since moving in, she has also discovered that Jalan Kelah Asap is very much a family-oriented street compared with, say, Taman Waria, which sees more artists as residents. She and housemate Ms Bertocchi have kept the house’s décor simple and uncluttered. White tablecloths and armchairs set the tone for the living room, encircled visually by a maroon-painted piece of wood with a large Chinese character carved into it. The cabinets are also oriental in style, and two silver dragons dominate a sideboard of artefacts next to the main door.

An old dining table takes centre court at the dining area of the house, and a recent art acquisition is a piece of India embroidery, derived from a traditional wedding suit. The main change to the house is the creation of a glass-panelled patio door, where a window used to be, which leads out to the back garden.

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