Tan Kay Ngee is following the footsteps of his grandfather who ran a business from the shophouse where he lived, says ARTHUR SIM

The gallery on the ground floor of Mr Tan's three-storey building throw up some pleasant surprises. You get fist-hand experiences on how these traditional houses work. For example, the pitched roof really has hidden tropical qualities. The air in the space created by the roof acts as a buffer against the heat and adds a cooling effect to the house. Normally, a concrete flat roof will absorb heat from the sun. “I search to understand materiality,” Mr Tan says, explaining that when plywood has been used as a veneer for surfaces, the sheets of plywood have been selected and placed selectively for grain and color. “It’s like a work of art in itself.”

“Designing a house is the smallest architectural brief, and most complex, because everything has to work together. The internal courtyard and the extra floor levels on the three- storey building throw up some pleasant surprises. ‘You get fist-hand experiences on how these traditional houses work. For example, the pitched roof really has hidden tropical qualities. The air in the space created by the roof acts as a buffer against the heat and adds a cooling effect to the house. Normally, a concrete flat roof will absorb heat from the sun.’” Mr Tan explains.

With a large built-up area of about 4,600 square feet spread out over three floors, Mr Tan had a lot of space to play with. But most of the architectural insertions are there to emphasise the traditional shophouse. These, like the internal courtyard, work to drive fresh air throughout the building. The architectural language that Mr Tan is most familiar with tends to industrialism. Mr Tan, who was part of the design team for the Singapore Management University campus (SMU), adheres to a design ethos which he describes as “architectural minimalism”. This is a school of thought that tries to understand materiality. “Designing a house is the smallest architectural brief, and most complex, because everything has to work together. The internal courtyard and the extra floor levels on the three-storey building throw up some pleasant surprises. ‘You get fist-hand experiences on how these traditional houses work. For example, the pitched roof really has hidden tropical qualities. The air in the space created by the roof acts as a buffer against the heat and adds a cooling effect to the house. Normally, a concrete flat roof will absorb heat from the sun.’” Mr Tan explains.

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1. Lean of natural light. This is supplied by internal courtyards and extra floor levels.
2. Books. Tan Kay Ngee says he can live without TV, even in Singapore, but can
3. Music. The fastest way to set the tone to a space.
4. Natural ventilation. Who needs air-conditioning when natural ventilation is free?
5. Gardens. Also a resident of London for many years, Mr Tan says that to see tropical plants, he has to go to Kew Gardens.
6. Art. Everyone needs to be inspired.
7. Entertaining. The architect likes to mix people from all walks of life and see what happens.
8. A quiet place to sleep. With offices in Singapore, London and Istanbul, Mr Tan is prone to jet lag so the bedroom must be really peaceful.
9. An orderly mess. Not one to live in a clip-wrapped environment, Mr Tan doesn’t mind a bit of chaos at home.
10. A sense of history. Everything looks better with a slight patina of age.

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