

# THE TROPICAL MALAYSIAN HOUSE

ROBERT POWELL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIN HO

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The world is at a critical juncture, with a 'climate emergency' declared by numerous responsible world authorities, species extinction on a huge scale, and depletion of potable water supplies, compounded by problems such as the inward migration of rural populations to cities already bursting at the seams, and pollution. These are problems that are relevant to Malaysia and unless seriously addressed by politicians, developers, architects and building contractors, the country will, along with many others, go beyond a 'tipping point' where the quality of life will seriously decline.

The houses illustrated in this book will not solve these problems but there are lessons that can be learned from the design solutions.

Volume 1 of The Tropical Malaysian House included just three houses outside the capital Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor. In this new publication - The Tropical Malaysian House Volume 2 - the author and photographer go 'outstation', in pursuit of new examples of tropical living. Sarawak has proved a rich source of recent dwellings, mainly in close proximity to Kuching. Other exemplary tropical homes were found in Penang, Malacca, Batu Pahat and Johor Bahru.

The list of architects, designers and house owners in Volume 1 and Volume 2 reflects the rich mix of ethnicities in Malaysia with Malay, Chinese (Hakka/Teochew, Fuzhou, Hokkien and Cantonese), and Indian/Sri Lankan, mixed with people of Dayak/Iban, Bidayuh, and Melanau origin, supplemented by others of Singaporean, Indonesian, French, Irish, Swedish, American, Australian and German origin. Their different cultures find their way into the evolving form of the Tropical Malaysian House - a form that is no longer, if it ever was, an expression of one race or one community.

**FRONT COVER**

Denai 10 House by  
Razin Architects

**BACK COVER**

Meditation Pavilion  
by Inchscape





**ROBERT POWELL** (left) is an architect, city planner, author/editor and critic. He was, from January 2016 until November 2019, Professor of Architecture at Taylor's University, Selangor, Malaysia. Prior to that he was Head of Masterplanning with Llewelyn Davies Yeang, London, UK. Previously, he was Associate Professor of Architecture at the National University of Singapore (1984 to 2000). He is the author/editor of 39 books, principally on architecture in Southeast Asia including *The Tropical Asian House* (1996), *The New Malaysian House* (2008), *The New Sri Lankan House* (2015) and *The Tropical Malaysian House Vol. 1* (2019).

**LIN HO** (right) is an accomplished professional photographer. He has specialised in the architecture and interiors genre for the last 20 years. Lin Ho has collaborated with renowned international and local architects, interior designers and reputable property developers. He is also a frequent contributor to international architecture publications, in both print & digital media. Previous book projects include *The Tropical Malaysian House Vol. 1*, *The Straits Chinese*, *The Residences of HRH Sultan Azlan Shah* and *Tropical Garden Design*.



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# KERANJI HOUSE

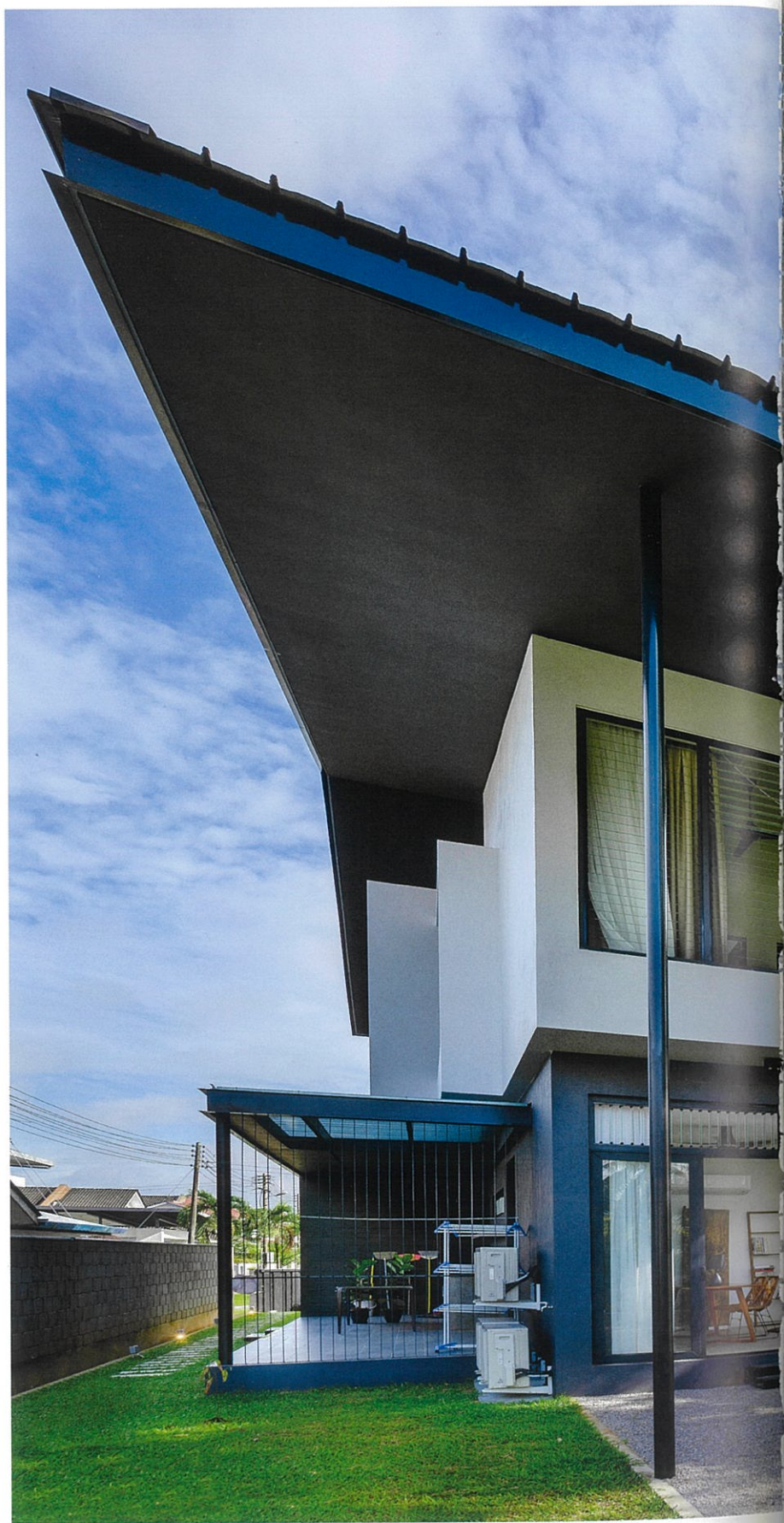
**LOCATION**

KUCHING, SARAWAK

**ARCHITECT**

AR. ARLENE CHEW  
OF SML ARCHITECTS

**YEAR** 2019









**THE KERANJI HOUSE** is located on the west bank of the tidal Sungai Tabuan, a minor tributary of the Sarawak River. The site has two existing mature acacia trees and a rain tree, while on the eastern boundary there is a wonderful flame of the forest tree. The owners of the house are accountants by profession and originate from the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia. They currently reside in Kuala Lumpur, but having previously lived and enjoyed working in Sarawak from 1999 to 2004, they are planning ahead, for their eventual retirement. They have two children in their 20s and seven rescued dogs and cats. Their brief to the designer, who they found through a mutual friend, called for, "a climate responsive house, that must be easy to manage, with nooks and corners for their pets".

The architect, a Kuching-born Hokkien/Teochew, Arlene Chew, is a graduate of Melbourne University School of Architecture (1999). She attributes her understanding and adoption of sustainable architecture to Professor Allan Rodger. She was also influenced by the work of several Malaysian architects during her student years including Jimmy Lim who designed a number of iconic house in the 1990s including the Precima House, the Eu House and the Walian House and later the Salinger House. In Australia she was inspired by the work of Glenn Murcutt and Gregory Burgess.

Chew interned with arkitek KDI during her university days but joined Hwong Arkitek upon graduation. She had been initially attracted to study architecture out of a love of houses, indeed her parents' house was designed by Ar. Wee Hii Min and Ar. William Khoo who, at that time, were also with Hwong Arkitek after leaving arkitek KDI. They, together with Hwong How Hing, formed Design Network Architects

(DNA) while Chew was there in 2000. Ar. Wee Hii Min was her mentor.

Subsequently, she set up her own practice SML Architects in 2015, operating from a shophouse in Upper China Street in Kuching. The firm operates under the umbrella title of The Design Collective, which also includes Min Wee Architect, (See the Open House II, page 202 and the Ramp House, page 92).

For Chew, relating to the client is an extremely important first step in design and prior to accepting the appointment she asked, "How do you live?" After visiting them in their current house in Kuala Lumpur she concluded, happily, that, "We aligned, finding a common interest in nature and in animal welfare organisations." The man of the house is a Council Member of the Outward Bound Trust of Malaysia and loves his weekly Hash run, while his wife is a keen supporter of the Trap Neuter Release Manage (TNRM) society in Kuala Lumpur.

The south facing house is orientated perfectly in relation to the sun path, with the sun rising and setting on the shorter east and west facades. The orientation also responds to the predominant wind direction from the southwest and northeast. The 'front' of the house, curiously, 'turns its back' on the immediate housing area, presenting an unrevealing façade in the form of a permeable brick *jali* to the neighbouring dwellings, while simultaneously opening up to the garden, where the two acacia trees are given, 'room to breathe', with adequate space for future root growth. Thus, there is duality in the design. The entrance façade projects the image of a very private, exclusive place but once past the entrance door the house opens out. The house is not ostentatious and materials include local Belian timber and local facing bricks.



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The south facing Keranji House is built around a magnificent acacia tree

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The house viewed from the southeast across Sungai Tabuan, a tributary of the Sarawak River

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The north facing façade conceals the activities of the owners behind a permeable brick outer 'skin'

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A textured brick wall indicates the house entrance











The plan of the house is conceptually two pavilions, one public and one private. At ground level they are arranged around a central kitchen and an outdoor dining space, orientated towards the acacia trees. The upper floor is entirely private with a wide, south facing family room that separates the parents' domain from the children's. The family room appears to reference the first floor loggia (gallery) with a view of the garden, which was a common feature of colonial mansions and plantation houses throughout Malaysia. A good example is the upper floor of Burkill Hall in the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

At ground floor level, the central kitchen, flanked to the east by the living and formal dining pavilion, and to the west by a study, is relatively narrow. The first floor gallery, accessed by an open-riser staircase, overlooks the kitchen. Chew has designed the house to create a "free flow of space," where one is drawn, unconsciously, to the outside - the shaded verandah - that in-between space that is the essence of a house in the tropics. It is here that one senses the pulse of the house.

The house has impressive natural ventilation with perfect orientation to reduce solar gain, aided by the position of openings, brick *jalis*, breezeways, vertical metal louvres, openable glass louvres and

sliding glazed doors, beneath a wide overhanging roof, encouraging air flow via the Venturi effect. The house operates well without air conditioning although it is provided in the bedrooms. The house also has solar panels for hot water provision.

The owners confess they have yet to experience their new residence during the *landas* (northeast monsoon) season traditionally a time of extreme rainfall. But, steep Klip-lok metal roofs with concealed gutters discharge rainwater to the ground via chains, and there is provision for a rainwater storage tank to be installed at a later date. The couple currently have a vegetable garden at their Kuala Lumpur home and when, eventually, they decamp to Kuching, their intention is to create another vegetable garden. Then, perhaps the rainwater harvesting tank will be commissioned.

Arlene Chew is a keen advocate of the view that a house should be designed from the inside out, explaining that, "The spaces are the top priority. The form will manifest itself after resolution of the programme." Consequently, the interior spaces of the Keranji House are 'just enough', meaning not excessive. It is a comfortable house designed for a relaxed retirement.



The house looks out to the garden with a broad timber terrace facing the acacia tree



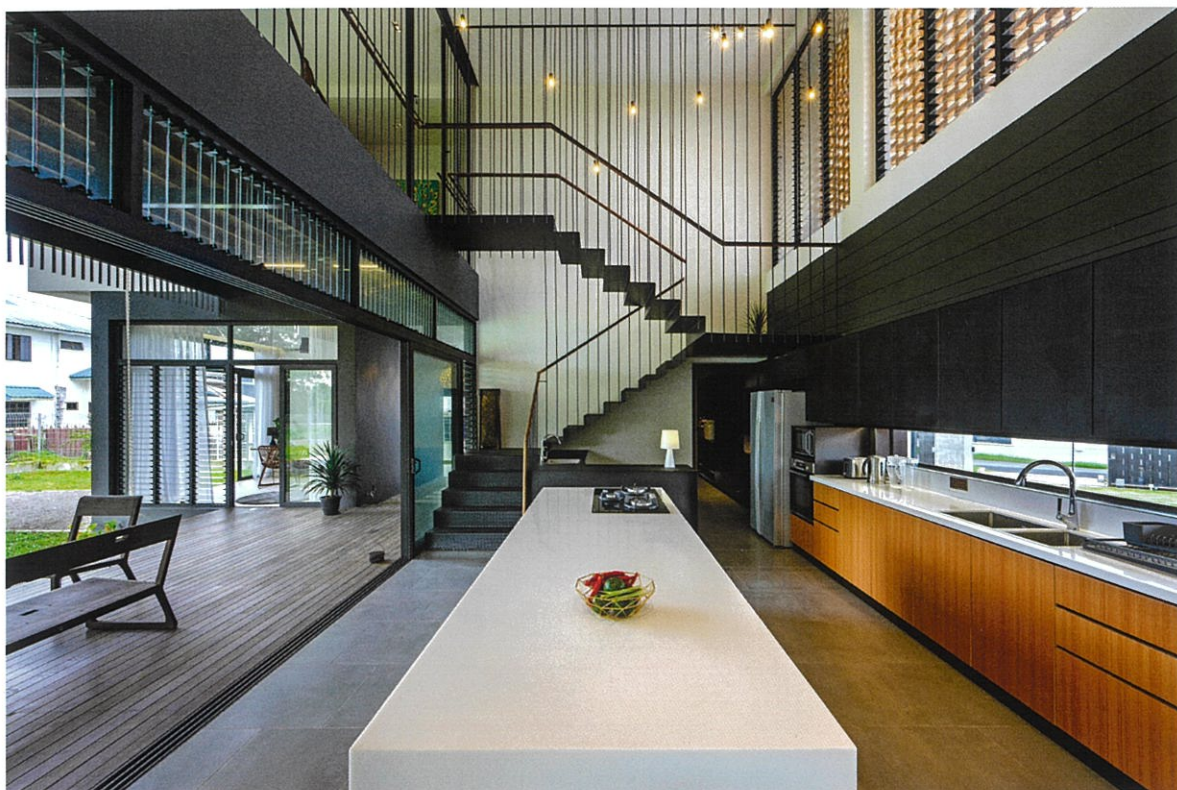
Wide overhanging roofs ensure the dwelling is shaded and cool



Sliding, glazed doors enable the living room to be opened to the garden







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 The double height  
 kitchen area  
 encourages cross  
 ventilation



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 The juxtaposition  
 of big and small  
 opening contributes  
 to natural ventilation  
 by the Venturi effect

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 A folded steel  
 staircase is  
 suspended from  
 the roof









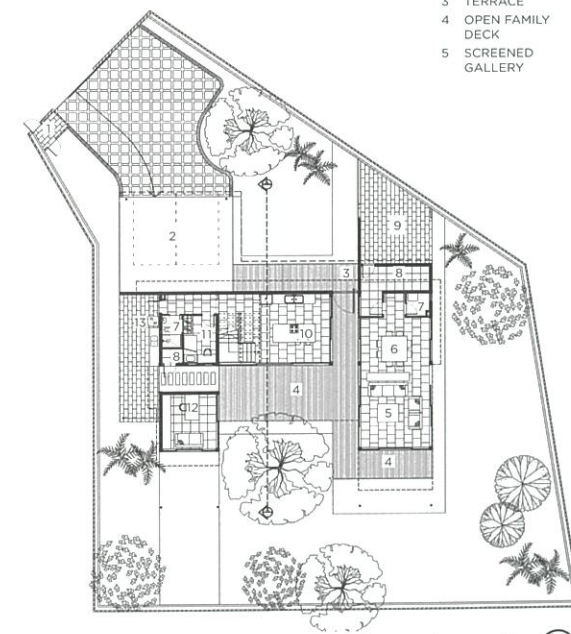
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The family deck replicates the first floor loggia (gallery) in old plantation houses from which the plantation manager overlooked his domain

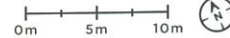
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An external brick 'jali' shades and cools the inner walls of the north facing façade

- 1 ENTRANCE
- 2 DOUBLE VOLUME KITCHEN
- 3 TERRACE
- 4 OPEN FAMILY DECK
- 5 SCREENED GALLERY



GROUND FLOOR





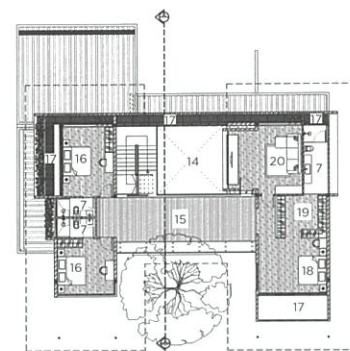
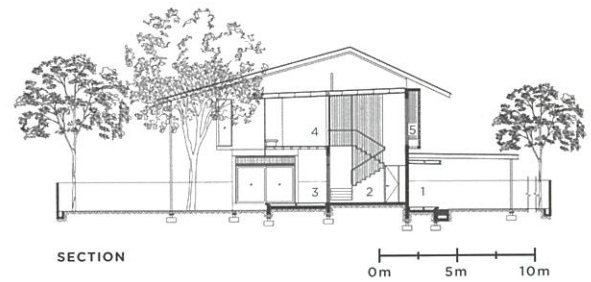


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- 1 BIN CENTRE
- 2 CAR PORCH
- 3 ENTRANCE
- 4 CONVERSATION TERRACE
- 5 LIVING
- 6 DINING
- 7 WC
- 8 STORAGE
- 9 PRIVATE YARD
- 10 KITCHEN
- 11 MAID'S ROOM
- 12 STUDY ROOM
- 13 LAUNDRY
- 14 VOID OVER KITCHEN
- 15 OPEN FAMILY DECK
- 16 BEDROOM
- 17 SCREENED GALLERY
- 18 MASTER ROOM
- 19 WALK-IN WARDROBE
- 20 FAMILY ROOM