

# 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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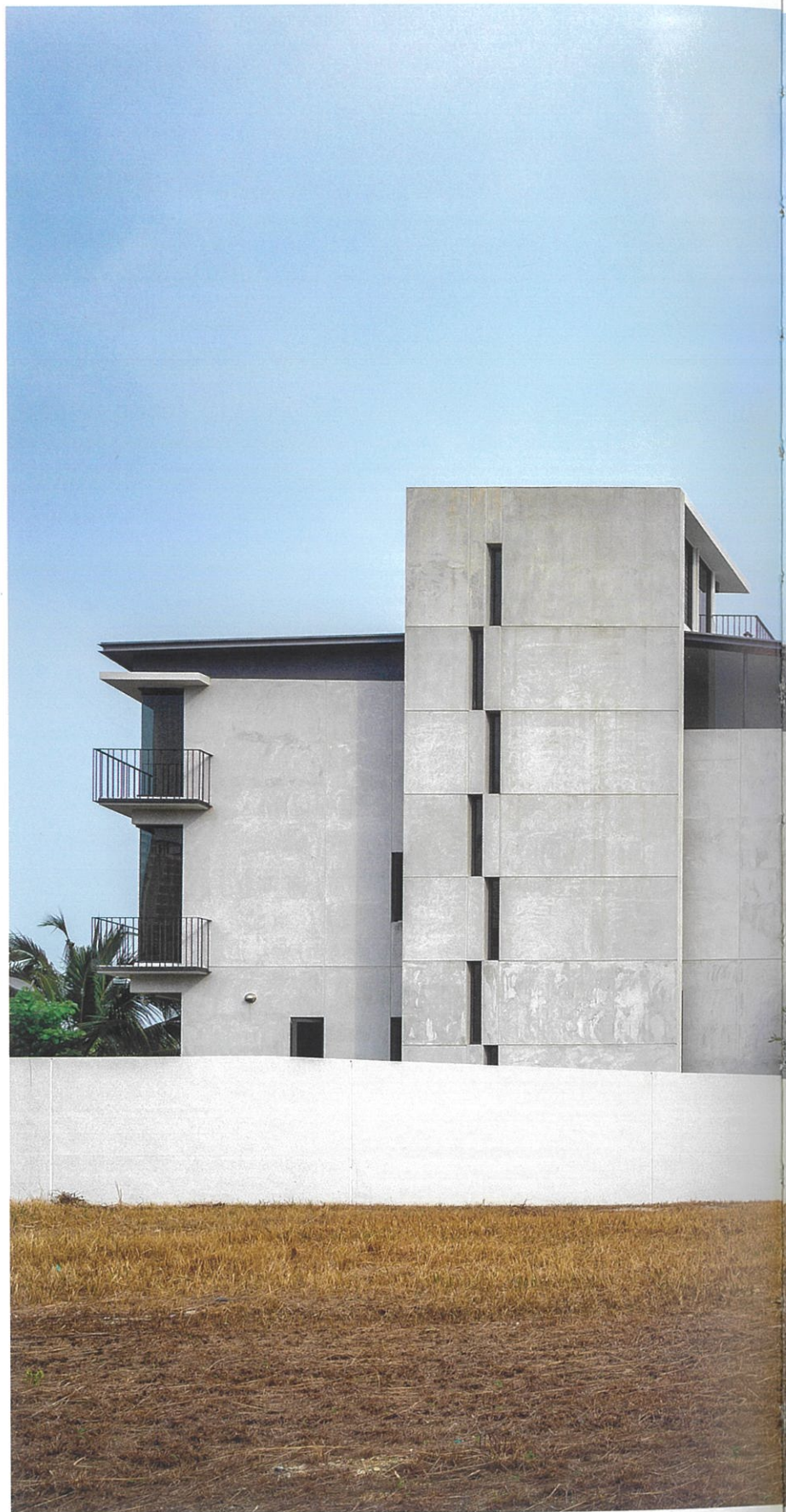
# RAMP HOUSE

**LOCATION**  
PENANG

**ARCHITECT**  
AR. WEE HII MIN  
OF MIN WEE ARCHITECT

**ARCHITECT OF RECORD**  
AKITEK PERMATA

**YEAR** 2017









“WHAT IS THE point of buying a plot of land, and then covering it to the setback lines with a building, leaving very little outdoor space to be enjoyed? If you fill the site with floor space you might as well live in an apartment.” This, essentially, was the thinking behind the Ramp House, whose owners, Datuk Sri Tan Hui Jing and Datin Sri Joanna Lim, wanted an open-to-sky courtyard at the core of their new home. In 2010, they bought a rectangular plot of land, approximately 15m wide by 44m long with 2m setback required to the side and 6m at the rear, in an upmarket enclave of Penang – close to the foreshore, with views from the roof of Gurney Drive.

Then began, an extensive search for an architect. They looked at the work of several Singaporean architects and concluded that Singapore houses are generally ‘loud’. They considered the houses by a number of prominent Malaysian architects and found their work ‘a bit raw’. They finally looked at PAM Award winners and liked the work of Design Network Architects (DNA) based in Kuching. Ar. William Khoo responded to their enquiry and subsequently the project was taken forward by Ar. Wee Hii Min.

A conversation with the client started after a presentation by Min Wee at DATUMKL. The conversation continued with a site visit and briefing on the local planning guidelines which are different from those in Sarawak, where there are wider building setbacks and houses are limited to two storeys. Akitek Permata were brought on board to interpret the regulations.

Min Wee worked with the client to ascertain their optimum space requirements in order to carve out a courtyard to provide internal views and opportunities for natural ventilation and lighting. The courtyard at the centre of the house means that the building is naturally divided into front and rear blocks. The front block contains the more public spaces, such as the entry and living room, with the master bedroom at the uppermost floor. The rear block contains more private rooms, such as the family dining area, children’s bedrooms and family spaces. Typically, the two blocks would be connected by a corridor or a bridge, with a staircase linking the floors. However, from the architect’s conversations with the owners, he felt that they would accept something different.

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The northwest elevation of the Ramp House anticipates another house being built on the adjacent site and politely turns its back to an intruder

v

The southeast facing elevation with public and private accommodation dispersed around a central courtyard

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The 80m long ramp narrates the story of the family from the entrance to the most private spaces at the second floor













The master stroke was a proposal by Min Wee that the two blocks should be linked by a series of ascending ramps located on the northwest side of the dwelling in the manner of the promenade architecturale at Le Corbusier's modernist Villa Savoye in 1931. To enable this to work, the rear block was raised half a storey above the front block, making it possible to link them through a series of five ramps - each 16m long at a gradient of 1 in 12. The spaces and rooms of the house are essentially enlarged landings at the termination of each ramp, where family life takes place. In this manner, one only has to ascend half a storey to get from the front to the rear block and similarly from the rear block to the front block. The ramps commence at the entrance lobby and narrow from 2.5m to 0.8m as they ascend. In total, their length is 80m. The geometry of the ramps introduces a scintillating pattern of light and shade as the sun shifts from early morning to late afternoon. Natural ventilation is introduced through glass louvres.

Whilst the ramps are an unusual mode of circulation, in the opinion of the architect, "they define the mood of the house and its occupants - one of unhurried calm." The calm is emphasised by the landscaped courtyard and pool at the centre of the house which provides internal views from all the rooms within the house and allows windows to be open to let in natural ventilation and light, without compromising the occupants' privacy.

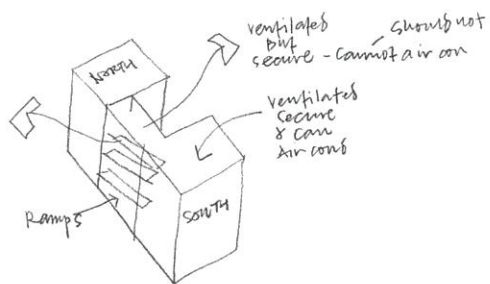
The unique qualities of the house are ultimately defined by the ramps, which choreograph a journey through the house linking the

internal spaces and the activity nodes. They appear to have unintended benefits. Elderly relatives are able to easily negotiate the different levels of the house, the children use the ramps as a 'highway' for their replica cars and the aging family dog is seemingly relieved not to have to climb stairs. A dramatic circular staircase does provide a sculptural focus en route and a swift alternative direct route from the dining area to the children's rooms.

The exterior of the house is restrained in its finishing, with cement plaster and paint revealing little and, intentionally, remaining a little mysterious. An almost solid wall faces northwest towards the adjoining plot which will eventually be built upon. The interiors employ a monochromatic palette of plastered walls painted white with white marble floor.

All the principal rooms face the central courtyard and the pulse of the dwelling is the family dining room looking southwest over the timber deck, soothed by the sounds and smells provided by water and landscaping.

The layout of this house was primarily a reaction against the maximisation of the built up area and storey heights normally adopted by home builders in Malaysia. The project, conceived in Kuching by Min Wee, benefited from the expertise of Penang-based Datin Teng of Arkitek Permata who was responsible for the submission process, Teng Pe Yang designed the landscaping and Eow Wan Lin completed the interiors. The roles of the team members and the client often overlapped throughout the duration of the project.



↳  
The ramp is at the centre of family life, connecting the numerous functions

↳  
The ramp is a relatively easy means of access for children, elderly relatives and a wonderful means of exercise

>  
The central courtyard that forms the outlook of the principal rooms of the house







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The living room and a conversation space overlooking the central courtyard

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A promenade architecturale is at the core of many great houses, including the Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier (1931)

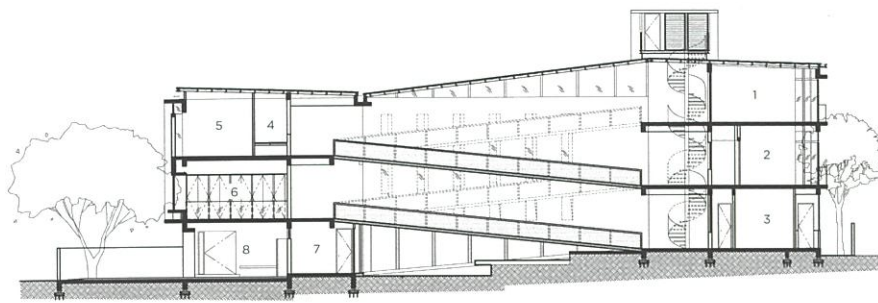


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A circular staircase provides a short cut from the family room to the dining room









SECTION

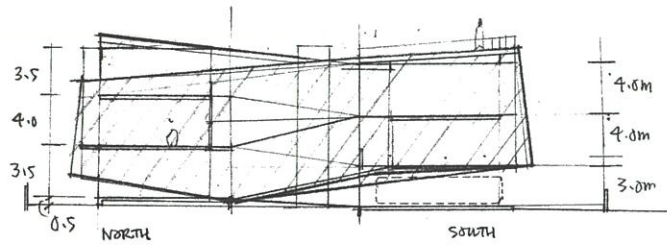
0m 5m 10m

- 1 BED 4
- 2 BED 2
- 3 WET KITCHEN
- 4 STUDY
- 5 WADROBE
- 6 LIVING ROOM
- 7 GUEST ROOM
- 8 CAR PARK

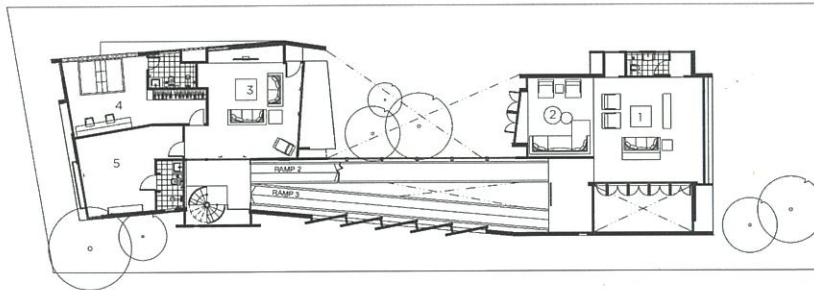


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The entrance  
façade viewed from  
the southwest

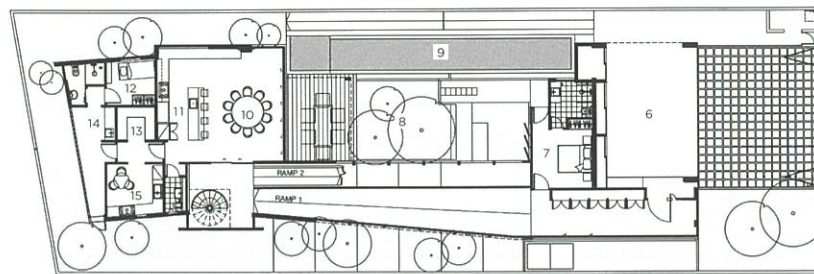
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A visitor to the house  
encounters a gentle  
slope of 1 in 12 to reach  
the kitchen/dining area



CONCEPTUAL SECTION SKETCH



FIRST FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR

0m 5m 10m

- 1 LIVING ROOM
- 2 CONVERSATION
- 3 FAMILY
- 4 BED 1
- 5 BED 2
- 6 CAR PARK
- 7 GUEST ROOM
- 8 COURTYARD
- 9 SWIMMING POOL
- 10 DINING
- 11 DRY KITCHEN
- 12 MAID'S ROOM
- 13 PANTRY
- 14 LAUNDRY
- 15 WET KITCHEN



