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## Standing Out In Singapore

### MANSION W12



# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ASIA EDITION

VOL. XXXVII NO. 40

(India facsimile Vol. 4 No. 101)

FRIDAY - SUNDAY, OCTOBER 26 - 28, 2012

WSJ.com

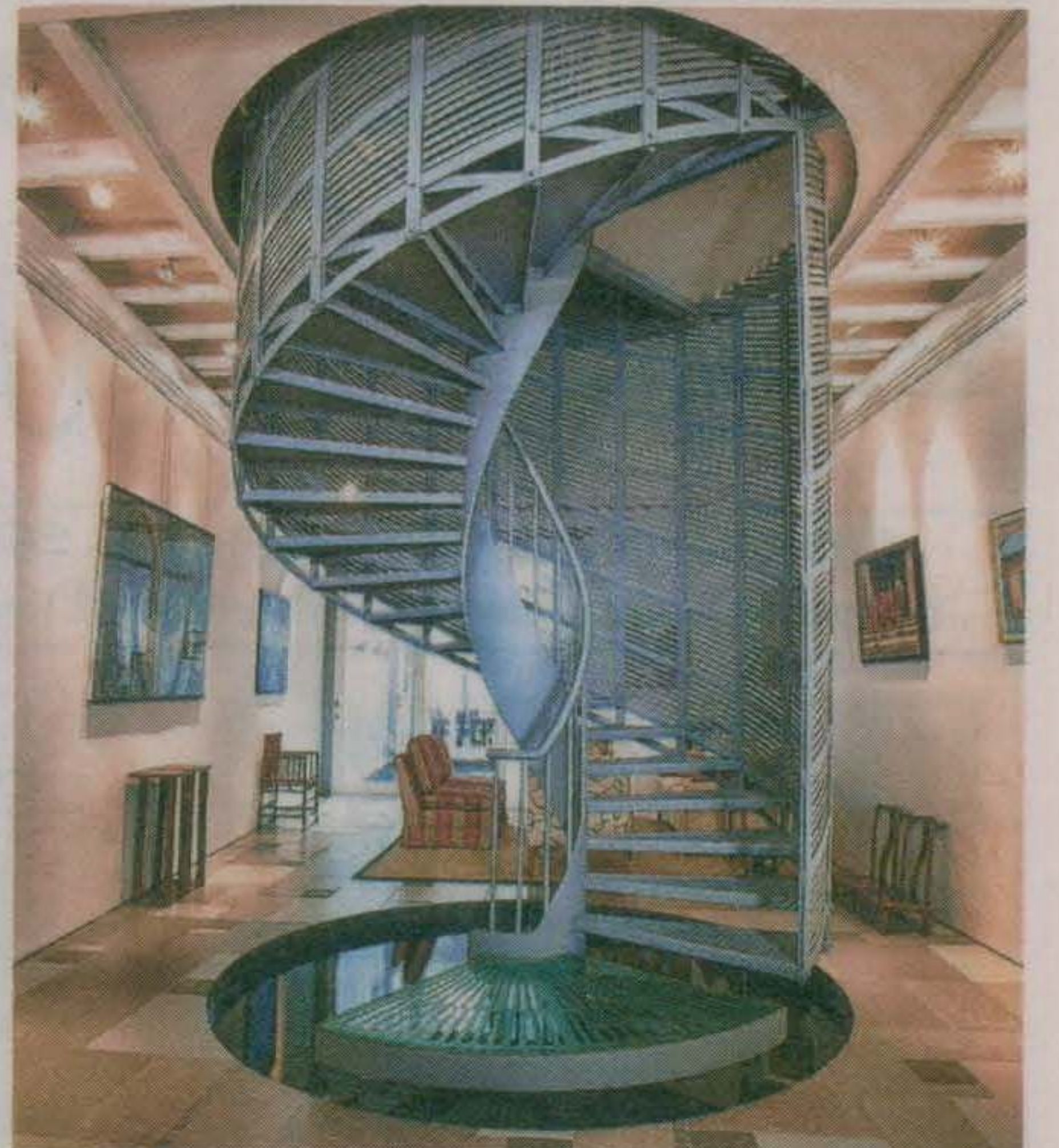
W12 | Friday - Sunday, October 26 - 28, 2012

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## MANSION



A row of shophouses in Singapore, including units 5 and 19, left and right, respectively, took on distinct looks after different architects applied their visions to them.



Nicky Loh for The Wall Street Journal (5)

# Saying No to Sameness

A Singapore street's shophouses get customized makeovers

By JUSTIN ZHUANG  
Singapore

When the owners of a row of shophouses in Singapore's Geylang neighborhood renovated their properties, they could have easily wound up with another block of cookie-cutter residences.

But Karen Tan, a family friend of one of the owners, convinced them to instead do something experimental: Hire seven different local architects to turn each three-bedroom home into its own showpiece.

"We tried to do something a bit more sensitive," says Ms. Tan, who took on the initiative as a way to launch her development consultancy, Pocket Projects. "Instead of eight identical residences, each one became an exercise in exploring the potential of a shophouse."

With their high ceilings and long walls, the shophouses were also ideal for exhibiting art, and she felt this would attract tenants to an area long known as Singapore's red-light district. "You need to create something unique to entice people to stay in

Geylang, and people who have an inclination towards the artistic probably are able to appreciate this area," Ms. Tan says.

"It was key to find architects that could come up with something different from the other," she adds. "The idea was externally, it looks all the same, but behind each door it's a different sort of world."

The architects preserved the 1920s-era façades of the houses, focusing their efforts on the interiors. For Unit 15, Lekker Design stripped things down, giving it an airy openness typical of gallery spaces. Zarch Collaboratives outfitted Unit 17 with a black industrial aesthetic reminiscent of "Tron."

Zarch's principal Randy Chan says the architects departed from the typical courtyard found in Singapore's shophouses. "It was built for the art-fact lover, which is why we created many shelves. The dialogue was about engaging the old and the new, using the shelving to unify," he says.

Each architect worked with a budget of 500,000 Singapore dollars (roughly US\$400,000) and was asked

to retain a handful of traditional features, such as the houses' timber floors and tile.

Lekker Design's architects had vowed not to work on a shophouse because they had already done so many, but they changed their minds after learning about the other Singaporean architects involved.

"We were certain that this would not be just another row of luxe shophouse conversions, but a set of designs with something to say, which is not always the case with Singapore architecture," says director Joshua Comaroff. He estimates the firm's Unit 15 design typically costs between S\$800,000 and S\$1.2 million to create.

The last home to be completed, Unit 13, hosted an exhibit by Mark Ong, a local designer who has customized sneakers for NBA star Kobe Bryant and Linkin Park's Mike Shinoda. This month, the shophouses opened for tours as part of the World Architecture Festival held in Singapore.

These events help market the homes that are still for rent, says one owner, Low Seow Juan. "Some of the houses were rented to people who came to view the exhibitions." (Rents run from S\$8,000 to S\$11,000 a month, much higher than the S\$2,000 they commanded prior to the renovations, Ms. Tan says.)

Ms. Tan says she hopes visitors see the neighborhood's culture and heritage—which includes longstanding religious organizations and historical architecture—over its less savory aspects. She also notes that Lorong 24A, the street where the shophouses are located, has never been part of the red-light district.

"It's really quite an interesting mix, which you can't find anywhere else in Singapore," she says. "I thought this project could also raise the public awareness of Geylang, and this street, and break some stereotypes."



"This would not be just another row of luxe shophouse conversions," says Joshua Comaroff of Lekker, which worked on the design of unit 15, top. Above, a view from the street, and unit 21, below.



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