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The master bedroom of Ar Almar's weekend home. - Pages 22-31



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a
heavenly
weekend
retreat

The effect of the wood-stone combination was solidly imposing yet welcoming, undoubtedly placing this weekend home in the luxurious category.

THE TREND OF HAVING A WEEKEND RETREAT IS CATCHING ON IN MALAYSIA. NOWADAYS, MANY AFFLUENT MALAYSIANS, WHETHER IT IS FOR THEIR LOVE OF MOTHER NATURE, OR FOR THAT OH-SO-DELICIOUS FEELING OF NOSTALGIA, HAVE WEEKEND HOMES, USUALLY BY A BEACHFRONT OR IN THE COUNTRY, WITH TREES AND LUSH PLANTS SURROUNDING THEM. TYPICALLY, THESE HOMES ARE OFTEN MADE EXTRA SPECIAL BY THE USAGE OF WOOD, IN WHATEVER AMOUNT, TO RELIVE THE WARMTH OF BEING IN PHYSICAL CONTACT WITH A MATERIAL THAT HAS ACCOMPANIED MAN IN ITS JOURNEY OF CIVILISATION SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL. AR. ALMAZ SALMA SHARES HER DEEPEST THOUGHTS ON RE-CREATING SUCH AN EXPERIENCE IN BUILDING HER ECO-FRIENDLY HOME DEEP WITHIN A FORMER RUBBER PLANTATION IN KUANG, SELANGOR.



Planks that were 13 inches wide and 5 inches thick with lengths of at least 15 feet were used as flooring in the house.

In the rush of morning traffic, the journey from Kuala Lumpur to Kuang town took about forty minutes. Passing through fast-developing areas and established housing estates, one can hardly expect to come across a village that is so close to such places, and yet untouched by the development surrounding it. The minute we crossed the housing estate-village boundary, noise pollution from cars and trucks audibly reduced by two decibels. Mobile communication coverage was quaintly patchy in some parts, and the journey through single country lanes was reminiscent of scenes from "Little House on the Prairie."

Lot 2788, Lorong Orkid. That was the only address given to us. Thankfully, it was easy enough to find. Lot 2788 greeted us with a gravel driveway, complete with a little roundabout sporting a grown raintree within it. The house has a high-ceilinged porch in front of it, solidly supported by 12-foot tree trunks. A quick glance of the tastefully combined wood and stone architecture was enough to pique one's interest. The effect of the wood-stone combination was solidly imposing yet welcoming, undoubtedly placing this weekend home in the luxurious category.

The two-acre property sits on a piece of land that slopes downwards, with the entrance being the highest point. Maximizing on this highest point, the owner has constructed a watchtower, also of wood-stone combination, that also houses the property's water tank. Towering majestically over the property, it also provides a perfect hideout at the top, with a 150-square foot area complete with a kitchenette and a few lounge chairs.

As soon as we entered the house, it was obvious that the plunge pool had been designed as the central feature of the house. Flanked by the kitchen, dining, lounge and the corridor leading to the sleeping quarters, each living area benefits from the refreshing sound of water gushing from three spouts into the plunge pool. The extensive use of wood was obvious: from the solid flooring to structural columns and beams, louvre and full-length Rumah Melayu (Malay house) windows, decking and outdoor furniture, to the wood-crystal chandelier hanging above the dining table.

"My daughter designed this chandelier, and we bought these crystals online to go with the wooden chandelier," gushed Almaz proudly. The design was passed to Almaz's carpenter who produced the basic form, and then mother, son and daughters had a fun time decorating it with pieces of crystals strung and placed around the chandelier.

What was amazing is the size of each plank used as flooring in the house. These days, we hardly come across planks that were 13 inches wide and 5 inches thick with lengths of at least fifteen feet. We thought, "Where did she get these beauties?" It turned out that she was lucky enough to find a contractor who sources for such materials to be recycled from old buildings that are to be demolished.

Up above, the exposed chengal structural beams serve both form and function in a network of very good joinery work, providing a visual feast of lattice-like pattern from certain angles. There are adequate lighting and fans, but not an exposed wiring in sight. Almaz was certainly quite careful in choosing service providers. And the result speaks for itself: apart from charm and warmth, the place also exudes a strong sense of fine craftsmanship, the love for which is something that Almaz and her contractors have in common.

"I love working with wood and I think that it is the most versatile and eco-friendly building material ever. Incorporating a sustainable living concept into modern living is not rocket science. It just involves a little bit more careful planning in the conceptualisation stage,"
- Ar. Almaz Salma.

“Wood is the only sustainable material that you can re-plant and re-grow after felling the trees. With proper sustainable forest management policies in place, regeneration of the forest should not be a problem.”
- Ar. Almaz Salma

“Every piece of wood you see here is recycled wood. Both my carpenter and I were very concerned about wastage, so shorter pieces of naturally durable species like chengal and merbau were turned into outdoor furniture,” she explained.

It is certainly gratifying to see old wood being ingeniously re-used in modern designs. Almaz admitted that the house is partly meant to be a showcase of what one could achieve by incorporating a traditional material like wood into fresher designs for contemporary, sustainable living in a tropical setting. The adjustable louvre wooden windows let in as much or as little sunlight as the owner wants. Picture full-length windows surrounding the plunge pool bathe the living areas with natural light, and protect the interior from inclement weather without sacrificing natural light when it rains. In the modern-equipped kitchen, a specially-commissioned piece of polished granite sits atop a solid wooden base, and doubles as both a breakfast table and an extensive worktop. There is plenty of space for alfresco outdoor entertaining, thanks to decking placed around parts of the house, as well as space below the house.



All the three bathrooms, cleverly grouped together in one part of the house, and separated partly by a wooden 'fence', benefit from an indoor garden, extending further the unique experience of communing with nature in one's daily living.



Every piece of wood used in the construction of the house is recycled wood.



Adjustable louvre wooden windows let in as much or as little sunlight as the owner wants.

Interior furnishing is kept to a minimum, with lime green curtains to liven up the living and dining areas, and paintings of various flowers by Almaz's own daughter to give the weekend abode a fresh, modern feel. This is deliberately done to encourage guests to feast their eyes on the lush greenery outdoors, perfectly framed by each wooden window.

All the three bathrooms, cleverly grouped together in one part of the house, and separated partly by a wooden 'fence', benefit from an indoor garden, extending further the unique experience of communing with nature in one's daily living. The guest bathroom-cum-powder room boasts beautiful decorative tiles salvaged from an old house in the state of Malacca, also Almaz's source for the antique wardrobes, beds and lounge furniture sitting in the house.

A rainwater harvesting system collects and stores water for flushing the toilets and watering the plants in Almaz's extensive garden thriving with fruit and flowering trees, as well as herbs and medicinal plants. Water for consumption is pumped from a well dug 200 feet into the ground, and stored in a tank enclosed within the watchtower.

At the far end of her garden, beyond her chicken coop, goat-house, horses' grazing paddock and composting site, are a few merbau, chengal, nyatoh and kembang semangkok trees that she has planted for an experiment.

"I don't think I, or even my children, will be able to harvest them within our lifetimes. So, let's just say they are more for my grandchildren! I actually planted them because I wanted to see what they look like and to document their growth. I saw the Jati Emas (teak) flower with gold-coloured petals, and my Cengal pod burst, baring their orange insides, with dangling purple seeds. They were gorgeous and so, so beautiful. Experiencing all these make me appreciate my timber trees even more as I see the tree flourish with colour and life."



The plunge pool had been designed as the central feature of the house.



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It is heart-warming to see someone who lives by her principles of sustainable living through and through. But, we thought: Wherefore art the PV cells for generating electricity in this sun-drenched country?

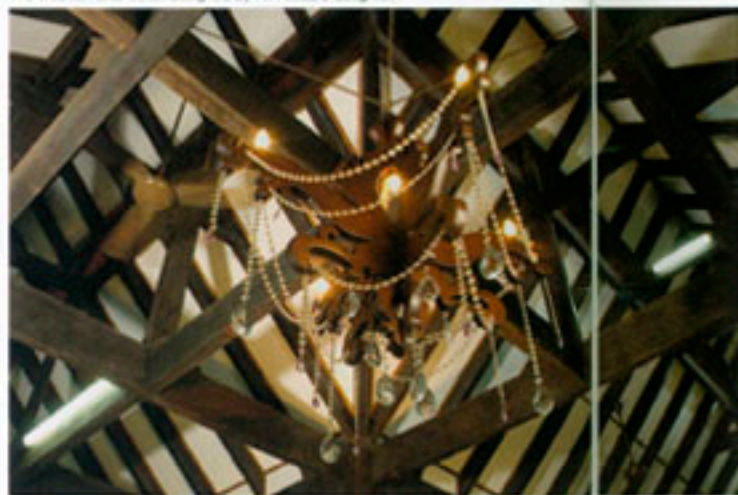
"I have steered clear from PV Cells for the moment, as the cost of installation is unjustifiable, given that this is only a weekend home. I have solar panels to generate hot water but not electricity. We do not use that much electricity, anyway, as the design and timber material cool the house naturally," Almaz said.

Many owners of similar homes with timber-incorporated designs share this advantage. The savings are made in the long run, as even big bungalows ultimately use very little electricity for cooling the place down in Malaysia's hot and humid weather.

"I love working with wood and I think that it is the most versatile and eco-friendly building material ever. Incorporating a sustainable living concept into modern living is not rocket science. It just involves a little bit more careful planning in the conceptualisation stage," explained Almaz as we ended the interview. ♦

editor's note: more photographs of Ar. Almaz's house can be viewed at MTC's website (www.mtc.com.my)

The wooden chandelier designed by Ar. Almaz's daughter.



interview with Ar. Almaz on sustainable design and construction

TM: In this day and age, many people shy away from using timber in constructing their homes. What motivated you to build a home that is largely wood-based?

AS: I love wood. I collect anything made with wood - pens, vases, coasters, chests, cutlery, tin mining trays, furniture, anything. I know the cost to build a timber home could have been exorbitant but I befriended my contractor, the late Mr. Chris Oh, who was equally passionate about building in timber and he said he could source the timber for me. So began my quest of turning a dream into reality.

I first lived in timber government quarters from 1969 - 1972 in Tanjung Aru, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The whole family loved that house that has since been demolished. It was raised above the ground and had a wide verandah that spanned the length of the house. A huge garlic vine plant covered the verandah, providing ample shade, while a massive bougainvillea overhanging the entrance enhanced the beauty of the doorway into the house. There were large windows to ventilate the rooms. We never used air-conditioning then. It was absolutely lovely. I suppose those memories experienced by a child of eleven have stayed on. Maybe my fondness for memories of that house has urged me to build a similar house to re-create the senses I felt then.

TM: We were informed that it took you 3 years and 6 months to build this place, and it involved two phases of construction. Could you please elaborate more on this?

AS: In 2003, we cleared the land of rubber trees leaving just a few along the perimeter and started to build the water tower and viewing deck and the caretaker's house. Water supply was so bad, my contractors had to collect rainwater to do concreting work, so we engaged Drilco Technologies to dig a well for us. We then proceeded to build the water tower which not only houses the water tank with water pumped up from the well but would also provide space for us to monitor the work progress and generally relax to have some nasi lemak. We built the caretaker's house so that we had a washroom to use. We started planting grass and trees such as Chengal, Merbau, Nyatoh, Kembang Semangkok, Damar Minyak and Jati at the furthest end of the plot, fruit trees in the middle and fragrant flowered trees like Kenanga, Cempaka, Tambun, Tanjung and Pulai around the house. I also planted species that we rarely see these days such as Asam Gelugor, Asam Jawa, Petai and Kapok. I wanted the trees to have achieved a certain height by the time the house was ready so as to provide shade and prevent erosion. The trees also help to cool the air before one enters the house. Early in the morning you can actually see mist hanging low over the trees. After completing the water tower and caretaker's house over a period of one year, the contractors began to work on the main house. The main house itself took two and half years to build.

TM: How has the use of wood contributed to your overall concept of an eco-friendly home?

AS: Wood is the only sustainable material that you can re-plant and re-grow after felling the trees. With proper sustainable forest management policies in place, regeneration of the forest should not be a problem. Wood is also the only building material that can be recycled. As such, I believe that using recycled wood counts in being eco-friendly and being kind to the environment. It's all about utilising our resources intelligently.

TM: How did you source for your recycled wood? Given the cost of using wood, would you recommend this as an option for people interested in building similar homes?

AS: My contractor did all the sourcing for me. The timber came from an old KTM (Malaysian National Railway) store, old government quarters and a sawmill that was closing down. There are people out there who purchase old buildings and salvage the usable materials to sell for a living. Yes, I would recommend this as an option as the timber is really well aged. However, you might have to put up with some imperfections due to the timber's historical past of having had dowels inserted or joists slotted into it. Plus, some of it might be really rough. But all these details add to the charm of that timber. If only the timber could talk, imagine the tales it could tell. ♦