

THE BUSINESS TIMES

# Weekend

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## DREAMS OF BLACK & WHITE

The colonial  
house that  
David Liao  
built

### SERIOUS GOURMETS

Foodies who  
jet the globe  
to dine

### The Weekend Interview WAHYUNI HADI

Executive Director, Singapore  
International Film Festival



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This may look like a classic black and white home, but it was built from scratch.

David Liao: "Homes these days are too modern."

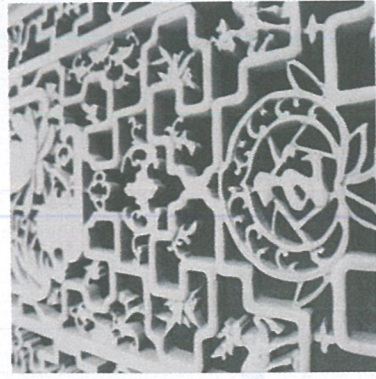


PHOTOGRAPHY YEN MENG JIIN

# Black, White & Beautiful

The old colonial homes that David Liao remembers fondly from his boyhood determined how his own home should look, as he tells Tay Suan Chiang.

## WeekendDesign



Right: Intricate carvings in the living room.  
Below: The generous corridor leading to the bedrooms.



IF people dream in colour, David Liao's must be in black and white. It certainly explains his fascination with colonial black and white homes, to the point that as soon as he had a chance to, he built one of his own.

Mr Liao, 63, grew up near the former British Naval Base in Sembawang, where there were plenty of black and white homes, belonging to the naval officers. His own family lived in an attap-roofed house and later, a corrugated iron roof house.

During the school holidays, the teenaged Mr Liao would earn pocket money working with a contractor to repair the bamboo chick blinds on these old colonial bungalows, and giving them fresh coats of paint.

"Somehow, being close to those black and white homes influenced my choice of home now," he says. "Homes these days have too much glass and are too modern, which I don't like."

Mr Liao's dream is now a reality. But rather than move into an existing black and white house, he had one built from scratch.

"The existing ones are too run down and require repair work," says the retiree, who still sits on the board of Lianbee-Jeco, the distributor for Braun Büffel, Pierre Cardin and Renoma.

He approached several architects with his plan, and found that he shared a chemistry with architect Aamer Taher. "We speak the same design language," says Mr Liao.

He took Mr Taher to the Singapore Botanic Gardens to show him the preferred type of landscaping and to Corner House, a conservation status black-and-white, which used to house the Gardens' assistant director, EJJH Corner until World War II, for inspiration.

The result is a two-storey, L-shaped house off Holland Road, done in contemporary, black and white style. One wing is where the foyer and Mr Liao's bedroom is, while the other wing houses the living and dining areas, and four bedrooms.

The elements of a black and white house are still present: the broad verandas, balconies, the use of natural ventilation, and the deep overhanging eaves. But since this is a home for the family of today, modern amenities, including air conditioning, a 2.5m lap pool, a lift, an

underground karaoke room and an outdoor shower have been put in. And of course, those black and white bamboo blinds are ever present, not only for adding to that nostalgic touch but serving their real purpose of keeping the sun out.

Even the guest house, with its own private fish pond, exudes the same charming colonial feel.

The old black and white houses tend to be in areas with lush greenery, and while Mr Liao's home is not in some forested area, he wants to recreate the same feel and is picky about the types of plants that he has. "Only tropical plants please," he says. He himself does the gardening, and even plants his own fruits and vegetables.

While the exterior of the house is distinctively black and white, the interiors are contemporary Chinese, to reflect another side of Mr Liao's growing-up years.

The father of two teenage girls is Chinese-educated, a believer in Buddhist philosophies and a strong supporter of the Chinese arts scene, especially the Esplanade's Chinese programmes.

"It is only natural to inject my Chinese roots into the home," he says. He worked with designer Tay Hiang Liang of Design Basis for the interiors.

In the living and dining areas, the Chinese elements can be clearly seen in the design of the sliding doors. The ones in the living room have intricate carvings, typical of antique Chinese doors. They were sprayed cream to complement the modern style of the living room. The doors, meanwhile, hide the TV set.

Another set of Chinese inspired sliding doors separate the dining from the living room.

Mr Liao's two great loves – furniture and art, also have Chinese elements in them.

He travels to China to shop for antique pieces, like the day bed that sits on the verandah on the second floor. He has an opium bed that's currently in storage since he has yet to find a place for it.

His art collection is by Chinese artists or have some form of Buddhist influence in them. One of his favourite pieces is Autumn Lotus by Henri Chen. "Don't ask me to explain why I love this piece, I just do," he says.

In the foyer is a piece of the character Wu or Enlightenment, and elsewhere in the home, there are art pieces with Buddhist philosophies on them, including a commissioned piece of the Goddess of Mercy. "I'm still trying to achieve that Zen state of mind," says Mr Liao.

He may be living in his dream home now, but he says he isn't completely satisfied yet. "Tanglin is my desired location," he says.

Not that he's planning to move anytime soon. "But I wouldn't rule it out, if the right opportunity comes along."



The main building as seen from the guest house.