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What are the architectural elements that have shaped house design today? We delve into seven ways that designers are putting a fresh spin on these soothing havens

By Luo Jingmei

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“My house is my refuge, an emotional piece of architecture, not a cold piece of convenience,” declared Mexican architect Luis Barragán, perfectly encapsulating the reason we spend so much thought and investment on our ideal home. The style, form and choice of materials of a house not only cater to our changing lifestyles and new technology; they can provide ample room for experimentation.

Guided by awareness of the ongoing environmental damage and the Covid-19 pandemic, architects have received increased requests for features such as balconies, naturally ventilated spaces and indoor plants. “The post-pandemic world is starting to realise how impactful nature is. In the past, where spaces had very clear boundaries between nature and the built environment, very few experienced how calming it is to have nature within the house,” says Lim Shing Hui, founder of L Architects.

Another emerging trend is that of multigenerational homes; cultural influences, an ageing population and increased housing prices are among the contributing factors. “In many ways, our Asian cultures’ strong emphasis on filial piety and the primacy of family encourage us to fortify and value their intergenerational family ties, particularly the parent-child relationship,” says Lim Cheng Kooi, principal director of AR43 Architects. Here, we profile some of the trends we believe we will see more of.



1. FORM: STEPPING UP

Beyond their utilitarian function, staircases are also excellent vehicles for architectural expression. “What better opportunity than an element that can be appreciated on every floor, to enhance the spaces with a three-dimensional focal point,” says Maria Arango of ArMo Design Studio, a firm she co-founded with her husband Diego Molina last year after designing more than 100 houses for local multidisciplinary design firm Ong&Ong.

That is not to say one can ignore aspects of safety. For instance, in designing spiral metal staircases, one needs to ensure the steps are not slippery when wet, and factor in proper widths and the provision of handrails.

“There is a need from both ourselves and our clients to understand that staircases will be used on a daily basis, that not everything on Pinterest—no matter how exciting it is—will suit their lifestyle,” says Arango.

In A Solid Plan’s Envelope House, the staircase is the literal heart of the family home, linking the private spheres of multiple generations while providing verdant views. “Beyond its sculptural form, it is really the movement of users along the staircase that provides interest. Along this staircase, one walks in between trees, beside branches and under foliage, like on a treetop walk,” says Quack Zhong Yi, a partner at the firm.

This page: Terraced steps lead to the ground floor of a house designed by Park + Associates; a spiral staircase in a home by AR43 Architects

Opposite page: The recessed handrail and natural stone elements are among the beautiful features of this staircase in a project by Ong&Ong, led by Diego Molina and Maria Arango who now helm ArMo Design Studio

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2. FORM: EDIBLE GARDENS

Pandemic lockdowns have made many more hands-on with gardening and cooking. Some homeowners looking to incorporate such green elements have turned to firms such as Edible Garden City, to provide the expertise needed in growing a vegetable and herb garden.

"Many clients are avid gardeners who enjoy the process of nurturing a plant from seed to maturity, and sharing the processes with family and friends," shares Sarah Rodriguez, Edible Garden City's head of marketing.

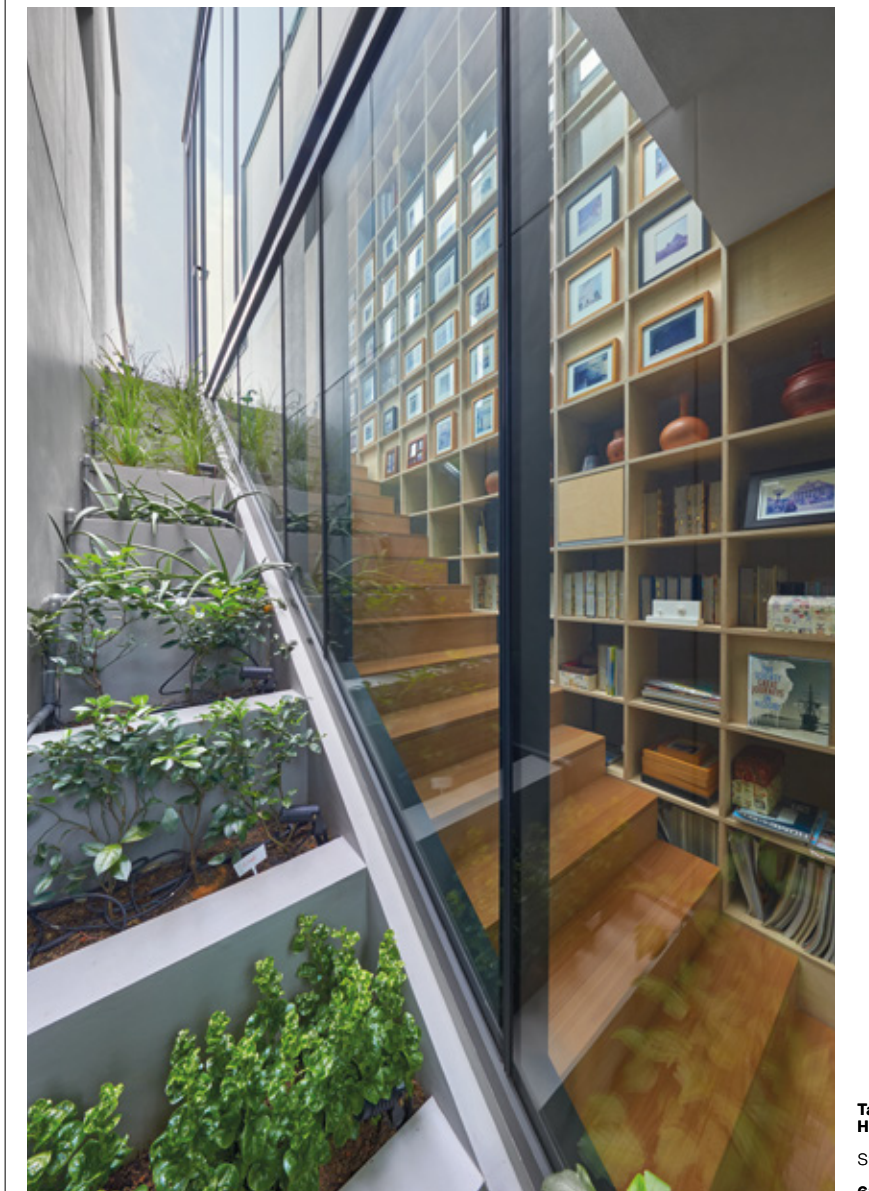
Some tips she gives include evaluating the available space, figuring out how much sun the area receives and understanding realistically how much time and effort you would like to put into nurturing the

plants. "Homeowners who can give their plants ample light and who prefer to be more hands-on could opt for fruits and flowering varieties like butterfly pea flowers, eggplant and lady's finger. For those who only have the option of semi-shaded areas and may be too busy to check on their plants daily or every other day, they might prefer hardier varieties like aloe vera or Brazilian spinach."

For design inspiration, look to the terraced spice garden in architect Rene Tan's family home. Aside from the usual requirements, a can-do experimental spirit is as crucial. "You need a willingness for trial and error when some plants thrive and others don't," quips Tan, the co-founder of RT+Q Architects.

This page: Envelope House by A Solid Plan is a multigenerational abode with a triple-volume indoor garden and a staircase that traverses the foliage; RT+Q co-founder Rene Tan's home features a terraced garden beside the main staircase and shelves lined with memorabilia and books

Opposite page: In House with Shadows by RT+Q, the swimming pool and landscaped areas help to cool the environment in the two-storey abode; a Good Class Bungalow designed by AR43 Architects features spaces perched above a water feature on the ground floor



3. STYLE: ALL IN ONE

When AR43 Architects' principal director Lim Cheng Kooi designed his first house almost 30 years ago for a multigenerational family, there was a lot of scrutiny on the many bedrooms and duplication of common spaces such as living rooms, kitchens and dining rooms. Not so now, as such designs have been gaining popularity. "In fact, some owners are building their houses in anticipation of their future generations all staying together under one roof," says Lim.

The design of these spaces requires a keen understanding of the owners' lifestyles and common interests, such as hobbies like cooking or baking, the frequency of dining together, and the kind of entertainment they enjoy. A common blueprint is to have the different generations live in their own

wing, but come together in central communal spaces for meals and events.

It is as important to factor in the needs of the elderly and young children. These include the installation of home lifts to aid mobility concerns and controlled access to areas such as the pool or ponds. "Home lifts have become an indispensable part of such house designs, making issues like mobility less of a concern," says Christina Thean, director of Park + Associates.

Such practical solutions can be incorporated in a discreet and elegant manner, notes Quik of A Solid Plan. "For example, seating can be provided at staircase landings and doorways, bathrooms can include ledges instead of grab bars, and benches installed in the shower stalls."

PHOTOGRAPHY MASANO KAWANA. HOUSE WITH SHADOWS BY RT+Q ARCHITECTS; KHOO GUO JIE (A SOLID PLAN PROJECT); JASPER YU (RT+Q ARCHITECTS' HOUSE OF SPICE)



Clockwise from top left: House Apartment by L Architects features an ingenious mix of pivoting doors; sliding doors maximise the use of space in a home by UPSTRS.; this apartment by JOW Architects offers the owners extra flexibility with the use of space in the open-plan living and dining room and the kitchen



4. FORM: MOVING PARTS

Sliding doors and folding panels can change the character of your home and make your spaces more multifunctional. "These elements allow the flexible segregation of spaces in a less intrusive manner. Sliding panels take up less space, and can be concealed within millwork to be holistically integrated into the design," says Joseph Wong, principal director of JOW Architects. Sliding panels can also induce better cross ventilation between rooms, adds Lim Shing Hui, founder of L Architects.

Lim Cheng Kooi of AR43 Architects offers some suggestions for their proper application. "Sliding panels are often designed as an integral part of the overall spatial elements, so we must consider aesthetically where to position them and how to tuck them away neatly. A good sliding or pivoting mechanism should also be specified for easy handling, safety and maintainability for the user."

For more design inspiration, look to an apartment designed by UPSTRS_. Sliding panels in fluted glass amplify light and the sense of space between the bedroom and bathroom, while a moving bookshelf cleverly conceals a staircase.

"Sliding panels can be concealed within millwork to be holistically integrated into the design"



PHOTOGRAPHY KHOO GUO JIE (L ARCHITECT'S PROJECT)
WONG WEILIANG (UPSTRS - PROJECT)



From top: In the Window House designed by Formwerkz Architects and Super Assembly, 80 windows create a layering of views throughout the abode; House 11 by Park + Associates features an array of split levels and staircases that connect to the mezzanine areas and bedrooms



5. FORM: CREATIVE DIVISION

In 2015, changes to the Urban Redevelopment Authority's guidelines did away with predetermined storey heights; each floor could be of varying heights, so long as the overall height complies within the permissible building envelope.

"Floors can be staggered to be interconnected and high-volume spaces can be created; this potentially allows for the creation of more inventive spaces if the motivation is not about maximising floor area," says Alan Tay, who is one of the founding partners of Formwerkz Architects. Thean of Park + Associates agrees: "You can get a much more engaging relationship between spaces both visually and physically."

At the same time, Victor Lee, co-founder of Plystudio Architects, cautions against unnecessarily adding intermediate floors without considering the overall proportion and usability. "We believe that house design should embody a balanced approach to spatial and architectural design rather than maximisation to a point where it does not add value to liveability and a sense of homeliness. The design process should be one of optimisation instead."



Clockwise from top: For the West Coast House, Meta Architecture used Dryvit to create subtly shimmering cladding in the kitchen; a colourfully eclectic mix of upcycled doors and windows forms an eye-catching sight in the Heng House by Goy Architects; the bamboo screens used in this house by Wallflower Architecture add a rustic touch to the facade



6. MATERIAL: NEW TEXTURES

New materials in the market have given architects room to experiment. For the design of the West Coast House, Adrian Lai of Meta Architecture used Dryvit ETICS (External Thermal Insulation Composite System). The durable and lightweight composite material mimics the appearance of stone while having the malleable qualities of concrete; the architect also took advantage of these versatile qualities by creating fluted profiles on the facade.

Some architects incorporate a mix of recycled and natural materials in their projects. For the Heng House, Goy Architects handpicked and restored antique Javanese timber doors and windows; these became part of the house facade as well as internal partitions in the abode.

In another project, Wallflower Architecture's elegant use of bamboo on a house's facade gives it a rustic quality. "Bamboo is light, therefore easier to transport and install compared to hardwoods," says Robin Tan, co-founder of the firm. Additionally, their unique air pockets in the hollow stems make them poor conductors of heat and hence excellent sunscreens.

7. STYLE: GOING GREEN

If installed and taken care of properly, green facades can do much for a house. "Alongside their biophilic effect, they are nice to look at, and add value to the living experience," says Victor Lee of Plystudio Architects. He adds that harnessing greenery as a solar buffer—such as at a west-facing facade that bears the brunt of strong sunlight—is a good passive design strategy in response to the tropical climate.

To ensure your green facade thrives, ease of maintenance needs to be considered right from the start. "You need to plan for a good water-feeding system—for example, self-irrigation systems via a timer—because you might not have time to water it manually. In fact, the drip-line system helps to save more water compared to self-watering. I also select trees that don't shed a lot, as well as those with bigger leaves as it makes maintenance a lot easier," adds Lim Shing Hui of L Architects.

Choosing the right plants can contribute to a healthy and thriving green facade. "Most flowering trees actually do not do well in partial light conditions," Lim reveals. Additionally, slow-release fertilisers can last for months without the need to fertilise weekly.

Designed by L Architects, the House of Trees features a verdant facade that also shields the interior from the brunt of strong sunlight

