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East meets West in a Chinese-American banker's Hong Kong apartment

Previous homes in China, the US and Spain influenced the redesign of bright, welcoming, highly personal flat



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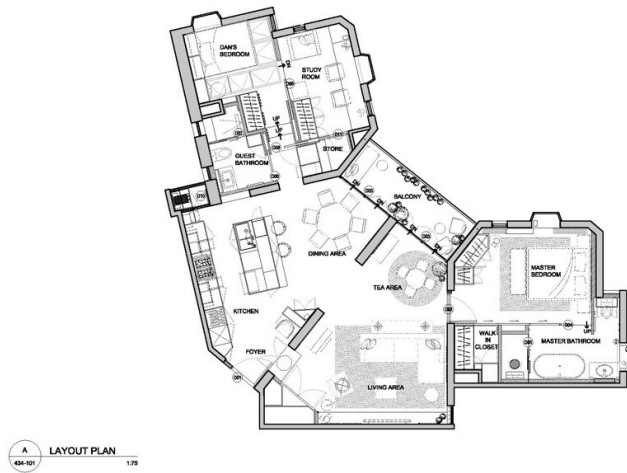
Jennifer Cao's flat in the Mid-Levels, designed by Liquid Interiors. Photography: Tracy Wong and Eugene Chan

First impressions are important but, when it comes to Hong Kong property, so is the ability to see potential. Take this 35-year-old Caine Road unit, now a light-filled, two-bedroom flat designed to be inviting for family and friends.

“The first time I came in here, it was so dark and noisy that I wasn’t sure how to turn it into a place to call home,” recalls mother-of-two Jennifer Cao, who has also lived in New York, Shanghai and Spain. The well-travelled Chinese-American banker nonetheless bought the flat three years ago and embarked on what she describes as a “transformative journey”, overhauling the 1,367 sq ft space, which she shares with a teenage son (her eldest is at university).

Wanting the unit revamped with reminders of her past, Cao sought an East-meets-West style incorporating keepsakes. She also wanted fewer but more usable rooms, maximum natural light and a convivial ambience.

“She wanted something more social,” says Rowena Gonzales, founder of design studio Liquid Interiors. “When people come in here, everyone can just hang out.”



The flat’s generous living areas, which open onto a balcony, were just the ticket. Vaguely polygonal in shape, but divided in the middle, one half accommodates a kitchen and dining area, the other a living room and cosy “tea lounge”. A balcony ties both sides together at the front.

To improve the flow, the kitchen was opened up to allow free movement to the adjoining dining area. Natural light through the balcony doors helps to illuminate back corners. Brass accents and Spanish hand-painted accessories add zest to a clean, white space delineated by a patterned tile floor.

“I lived in the United States for 17 years and the kitchen was always the centre of the home,” says Cao. “I wanted to bring that Western way of living here.”

As for the nod to Spain, Cao is the board chair of the Spanish Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong.

“Traditional Spanish architecture puts a lot of emphasis on arched doors. So we used solid oak instead of wood veneer for all the doors to make it feel more authentic,” says Gonzales.

The arched theme is continued in one of the bathrooms and the glass doors leading to a balcony.

“Adding an arch inside the square-edged frame [of the balcony doors] makes a huge difference to a typical outdoor space,” she says. “It helps pull the look together and connects indoors and outdoors.”



What I love about this place is that it looks like a real home. It shows her personality and people love the stories that you can see through all the things that have been collected

Rowena Gonzales, founder, Liquid Interiors

The fusion of styles continues on the balcony, which boasts views of the Edwardian classical building housing the Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum in a leafy setting. Chinese ceramic stools sit on a mosaic floor with a Spanish vibe.

“I’m all about mix and match,” Cao says. “I like collecting things wherever I travel and buy pieces that speak to me.”

Chinese collectibles, including teapots, chairs and vases, marry comfortably with the ornate tiles and arches for a distinctive look throughout.

“What I love about this place is that it looks like a real home,” Gonzales says. “It shows her personality and people love the stories that you can see through all the things that have been collected.”

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From the original five tiny bedrooms (including a helper’s room), the private areas flanking the living zone now accommodate one bedroom at either end, in addition to a study-cum-guest room (on the son’s side). Cao’s suite, off the living area, doesn’t stint on space. But owing to its proximity to the street, measures were needed to ensure the room invited sleep: concealed above a walk-in wardrobe are air-purification and noise-reduction systems.

Then there is the en-suite bathroom, entered via arch-moulded wooden sliding panels. A claw-foot tub and a shower with a mosaic mural are the highlights of this room, which enjoys a green vista.

Old is again combined with new in the bedroom proper. An Ethan Allen headboard Cao has had since the 1990s anchors her bed.

“There were a lot of pieces with emotional meanings from my life that I wanted to blend into this new place,” she says.

Her home does just that.

Additional reporting by Jennifer Chan.

Photography by [Tracy Wong](#) and [Eugene Chan](#).



Photo: Tracy Wong

Kitchen Defining the kitchen are encaustic cement floor tiles (HK\$13,000/US\$8,200, shipping included) from [Mosaista](#), in Madrid, Spain. The kitchen island and cabinets (HK\$340,900 in total) and tap (HK\$5,610) were supplied by [Patata Kitchen](#). Adding brass highlights to the white kitchen are two [Gubi Semi Pendant lamps](#) (HK\$3,591 each) and the bar stools (HK\$1,950 each), sourced through Taobao.

Oak flooring throughout much of the flat (HK\$917 per square metre) came from [Scheucher Holzindustrie](#), in Austria.



Photo: Tracy Wong

Balcony The mosaic feature (HK\$16,000) on the floor was inspired by a design found on Pinterest. The tiles were supplied and installed by the contractor, Ming Lee (tel: 9199 4003).



Photo: Tracy Wong

Tea lounge A pendant fixture (HK\$10,420) by Gubi hangs over an [Ethan Allen](#) rent table with inlaid leather top (about US\$3,000). By the wall is an antique lamp acquired at an auction in New York. The solid oak arched door (HK\$29,000) was built by Art San Woodworks (344 Lockhart Road, Wan Chai, tel: 2838 5908) and the oil-brushed aluminium balcony doors, by [Chase Aluminium Windows Engineering](#), cost about HK\$89,000 for the set.

The round Dimas rug (HK\$6,127), with handmade leather patches, came from [BoConcept](#); the Chinese porcelain stool (HK\$2,000) from a store in Shanghai; and the Chinese chair (one of a pair) and Chinese display cabinet were from an auction house, again in Shanghai. The artwork on the wall, by French artist [Simon](#), was inspired by a poem by Tao Yuanming (AD365-427). Below it is an expandable Ethan Allen side table (US\$300) and a copper candle stand (US\$50) from [TJ Maxx](#).



Photo: Eugene Chan

Dining area The extendable dining table (HK\$10,000) was from [Joineur](#) and the leather chairs (HK\$2,098 each) were from BoConcept. The oil painting of a girl, by Spanish painter Gregorio del Olmo (1921-1977), was bought in Madrid. The Multi-Lite pendant (HK\$10,420) was from Gubi.



Photo: Eugene Chan

Lounge The sofa (HK\$37,000) was from BoConcept and the glass coffee table (HK\$3,500) from [Home Essentials](#). The big plant pot, rug and table lamp behind the sofa moved with Cao to Hong Kong. The black-and-white oil painting depicts the Bund in old Shanghai. A metal cubes sculpture from BoConcept sits on a custom-made television console (HK\$30,000), designed by Liquid Interiors and made by Ming Lee.



Photo: Tracy Wong

Main bedroom The Ethan Allen night stand cost about US\$800 and the 90s Ethan Allen headboard about US\$1,500. Behind the bed is a wall covered in wallpaper from Goodrich Global (9/F, Tower 1, Cheung Sha Wan Plaza, 833 Cheung Sha Wan Road, Cheung Sha Wan, tel: 2668 5757). The lamp was a gift.



Photo: Tracy Wong

Main en-suite bathroom Above the Kohler bathtub (HK\$48,300), with Kohler tap and wall-mounted handles (HK\$11,190), all from [Arnhold](#), is a drypoint etching of a ballerina, by French artist Louis Icart (1888-1950).



Photo: Tracy Wong

Guest bathroom The tap (HK\$4,460) was from Arnhold. An Ethan Allen corner shelf (US\$400) displays a handmade copper vase (US\$80) from TJ Maxx. The vanity cabinet doors are adorned with blue tiles (HK\$9,860 for about 75cm x 55cm) from [Omega](#).

Tried + tested



Photo: Tracy Wong

Window dressing To hide an ugly aluminium window frame that detracted from the Spanish flair of the guest bathroom, Rowena Gonzales, of [Liquid Interiors](#), created a faux pane that sits in front of the opening. The wooden piece was custom made for HK\$2,900 by Philippines' [Pacific Traders](#). The metal screen (250 yuan/US\$36) was sourced through Taobao.