

# Concrete Jungle

House at Jalan Chempenai

Text by Gwen Lee  
Photography by Kent Soh / Courtesy of WHBC Architects

Awarded Gold in the Single Residential category of this year's Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (PAM) Awards, this stunning house in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is the brainchild of the husband-and-wife team at WHBC Architects. *Gwen Lee* reports.

## PROJECT CREDITS

**Architect:** WHBC Architects  
**Developer:** Mr. Chan Chee Leong  
**Contractor:** CHB Construction  
**Civil & Structural Engineer:** Ir P. Krishnakumar, Projurutek Sdn. Bhd.  
**Land Area:** 975 m<sup>2</sup>  
**GFA:** 697 m<sup>2</sup>  
**Completion Date:** December 2012



Nestled among the lush foliage and mature trees of Damansara Heights, a concrete box stands out starkly against the pitched-roofs and painted façades that dominate the architectural language of this affluent neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur. Like a monochromatic manifestation of a Mondrian grid-based painting, this three-storey family house is majestic and forbidding in its silence. Yet move a little closer and one will see that its presence on site is not as uncompromising as was first imagined.

Across the deliberate openings made in the concrete car porch canopies, two *Albizia* trees extend their trunks towards the sky when they could have been easily felled to make way for this manmade plane. Algae stains colour the boundary walls like green paint on grey. Likewise, the façade shows signs of weather. Little by little, the house is being colonised by nature. And unlike its immaculate cousins in a Tadao Ando monograph, this concrete box looks right at home in the sweltering tropical heat.

The visitor's approach from the road recalls a trek into an indigenous settlement. With the house raised from the ground to keep the dampness and pests at bay, entry is via a sloping bridge that cuts through a grove of native trees whose greyish trunks seem to be colour-coordinated with the façade. At the entrance, one continues the journey past a guest lounge and bedroom, down

a walkway flanked by a staircase and courtyard before the building opens up suddenly into a large living area. Here, the polished concrete floor gives way to an expanse of water, which stretches out across the horizon even as the verdant land falls away beneath it. This carefully choreographed sequence—from the darkened, restricted enclosure to the bright, airy embrace of nature—recalls Frank Lloyd Wright's intention to draw the inhabitants of Fallingwater out into the woods. Here, however, WHBC Architects make it their own by framing this panorama with a geometric concrete wall on the right.

The concrete egg-crate structure serves a dual purpose. Wrapping around two sides of the house, it acts as a shading device to filter the rays of the harsh tropical sun, while allowing daylight to penetrate the interiors. Its pleasing geometry buffers the occupants from the natural elements while accentuating Mother Nature's organic forms within its many framed windows. The rigour and beauty of repetition is Kahnesque, and indeed Ang BC, one of the founders of WHBC Architects, admits to being a fan of the American master.

Perhaps, in this century, there is no other place to be than Asia if an architect were a lover of concrete. Malaysian architects, in particular, benefit from the economic conditions that have made wet works, such as in-situ concrete, a cheap and viable building technique—much to



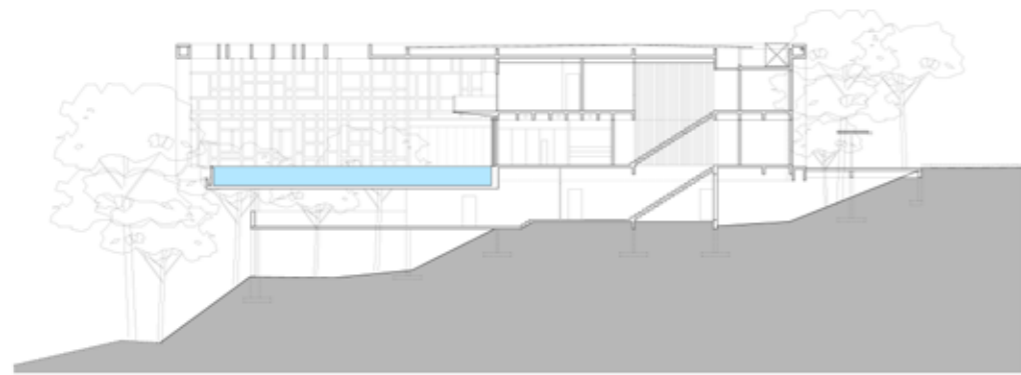
1  
Entry into the house is via a sloping bridge that cuts through a grove of native *Albizia* trees.

2  
Openings were carved out of the concrete car porch canopies to accommodate the existing trees.

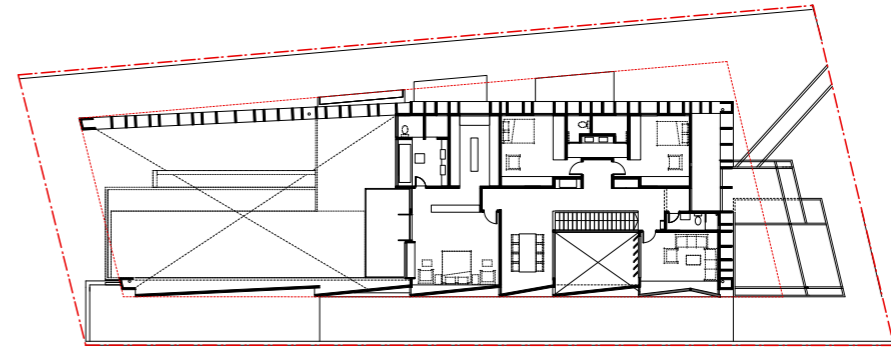




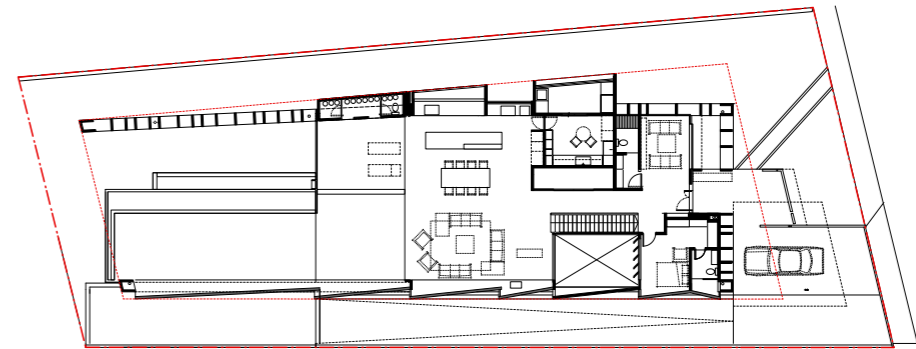
ELEVATION



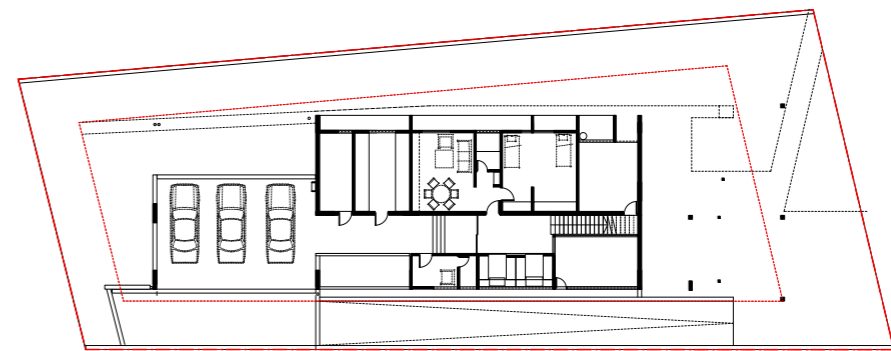
SECTION



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



LOWER GROUND FLOOR PLAN

## Little by little, the house is being colonised by nature.

the envy of their European and North American peers. WHBC Architects, who often settle on their materials palette based on practical considerations such as time, cost, and the availability of skilled labour, have taken full advantage of this to build up a portfolio of concrete architecture over the years. At Jalan Chempenai, the cast in-situ structure is clearly a culmination of their past experience. The mass, a rectangle, is beautiful in its proportion and porosity. Due to its proximity to the trees and the unforgiving humidity, the concrete has taken on a coat of green. The architects, however, are unconcerned with this lack of pristineness. "We hope the concrete will blend in among the landscape, like a piece of rock," they say.

The interior planning and design of this "rock" is simple. The ground floor, where the family congregates, enjoys a sleek modern aesthetic. On the left of the living space, a simple shelving system lines the wall and doubles as both the bar area and a library. On the right, an open kitchen anchors the space, its glossy white shelving accentuating the textured concrete walls hiding the pool bathroom.

On the upper floor, the rooms are designed to have controlled views out into the garden. There are three bedrooms upstairs, with the master bedroom having a view overlooking the pool from its private

balcony. At the opposite end, next to the staircase landing, a media room seeks relief from the main road via a screened view into a small courtyard—the same one the visitor encounters upon entering the house. Making full use of the sloping site, the architects have tucked the service and utility spaces in the lower floor, alongside a generous maids' bedroom and lounge area. A garage for three cars sits beneath the partially cantilevered pool deck, hidden away from view.

The architects have deliberately kept the colour and material selection simple as they felt that a neutral scheme would best complement the building as it ages. Like the façade and structure, the internal walls and ceiling are kept as unfinished off-form concrete. On the ground and lower storeys, the flooring is also of concrete, but polished to a glossy effect. In contrast, walnut timber differentiates and adds warmth to the bedroom floors. The only display or concession to luxury is the use of Arabescato marble as the edgings on the concrete stair treads, but even this is barely conspicuous.

With a modernist's sensibility and acute sensitivity to site conditions, WHBC Architects have struck gold with this tropical modern house. ▀

For more information, visit <http://whbca.com>.



3 The egg-crate structure acts as a shading device to filter the rays of the tropical sun, while allowing daylight to penetrate.

4 View of the living and pool area.

5 Textured concrete walls next to the kitchen hide the pool bathroom.