

LAYER UPON LAYER

Transformed from a mid-century ruin to a spectacular modern family home, the Ant Farm House retains chapters from its own history in its design. ▶

The Ant Farm House is an outrageously proportioned addition to a run-down stone house. The newly added spaces are 80cm-1.8m wide and two stories tall. The new house functions as a structural envelope that improves the seismic resistance of the original house.

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Photos by Benjamin Tsuo, Scott Morgan
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Project: Ant Farm House
Architect: Xrange Architects
Location: Taipei, Taiwan

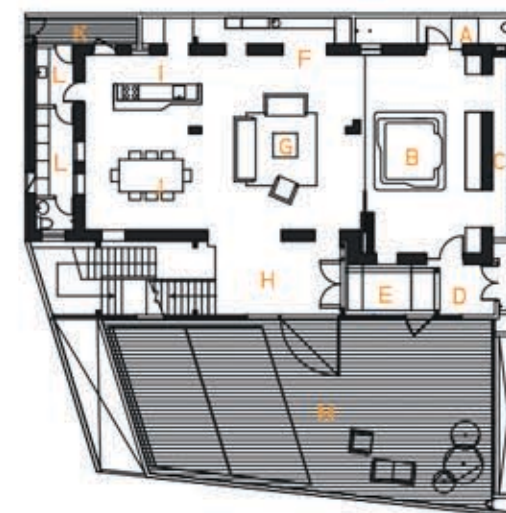
The seven-meter-high cross-hatched wooden doors to the study have authentic Porsche GT3 exhaust manifolds as door handles. Quirky elements like these, and the antler chandelier, display the owners' love for eccentric details.



Ant Farm House Floor Plan

First Floor

- | | |
|------------------|---------------|
| A Guest Bathroom | H Foyer |
| B Den | I Kitchen |
| C Library | J Dining Room |
| D Dog House | K Backyard |
| E Study | L Service |
| F Pantry | M Deck |
| G Living Room | |



It was on the way home from a family dinner in Yangmingshan National Park that husband and wife Royce Hong and Grace Cheung found the site for their new home, almost 10 years ago. The first property the realtor took them to was located on a steep mountainside road in Taiwan's capital city, Taipei. Despite it being "quite spectacularly in ruins", Taipei local Hong and Malaysian-born Cheung saw potential in the property, which was perched right on the edge of the forest preserve. "I really loved it because you don't see houses with such a long front nowadays," says Cheung. Hong, a sports car enthusiast, was sold on the parking space: "When I saw this house I saw the potential to have my own garage, which is rare in Taiwan."

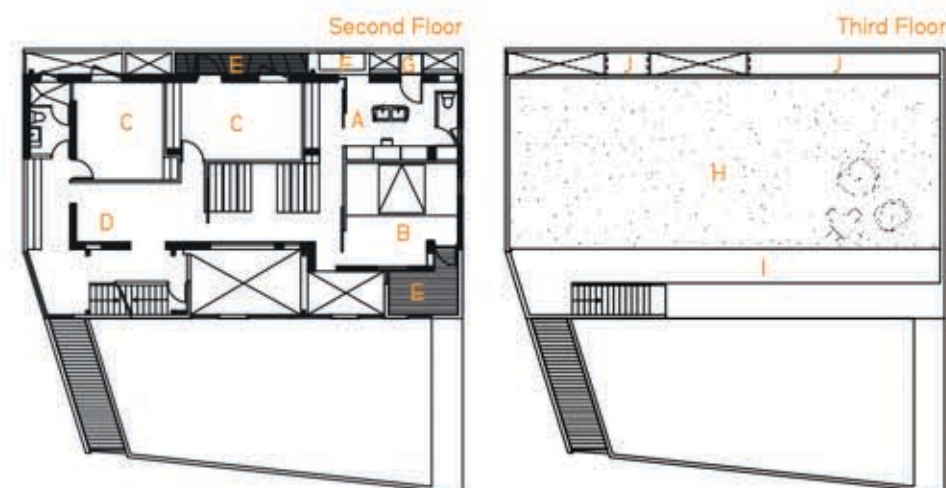
The two storied, 60-year-old house had already been renovated three or four times, the couple estimate. "I think the original house was only half the size and one floor," says Hong. "Along the way they added to it, sometimes illegally, and it became a hodgepodge." Instead of simply knocking the building down, Cheung, who is principal architect of award winning Taipei-based architectural firm Xrange Architects, stripped

the solid stone block and concrete house back to a rectangular shell. Instead of filling in the holes left in the original structure when doors, windows and air conditioning units were removed, she incorporated them into the new building as display spaces and entrances. "I actually quite like these holes; [they create an] interior elevation that otherwise would never have existed," says Cheung. She then designed the two huge frames that today encase the 500sqm of floor area in steel and glass.

The frames, each 7m tall, add 2.5m of floor space to the front of the original building and between 70 to 80cm to the sides and back. New household functions - bathrooms, a laundry, pantry, study, library, a room for their bulldog, Roy - were built into this open space. "We didn't really want to design with rooms in mind, but more like spaces where we can hang out," says Cheung. "There are a lot of little corners, but it was important for me that everything flows well." She chose to wall and roof most of these additional areas in glass: "The space is so deep inside the house, so I decided to have just glass on top to bring light down there. [It's] never oppressive." »



From street level, the house appears closed and monolithic - it's only when the visitor advances closer that the warmth and light of the home is revealed.



Ant Farm House
Floor Plan

A Bathroom	F Master
B Master	Shower
Bedroom	G Master Tub
C Bedroom	H Green Roof
D Gym	I Deck
E Balcony	J Glass Roof



With the birth of the couple's first child, Roxi Aura, 18 months ago, Ant Farm House underwent some childproofing. Whereas the first renovation was completed in ten months, this time around, the renovation took about a year; the family moved back into their modified dwelling at the end of 2012. "We're pretty much still living the same way, but there are things that you have to pay attention to," says Cheung.

Most of the second stage renovations were confined to the second floor of the home. Hong's office became Roxi Aura's bedroom, and the couple's dressing area was converted into a playroom. The guest bedroom morphed into Hong's office, and a Murphy bed was installed to accommodate guests. The door to the office is barn style: Hong can close the bottom half to ensure privacy without entirely shutting himself off. The shared bathroom on the second floor was refurbished in white "because it used to be quite moody, all brown, rustic tiles, not quite suitable for kids," says Cheung.

In the bathrooms, Italian designed taps were replaced with German hardware, which, according to Cheung, are "well designed, well built and have a very strong system of parts". Downstairs, the kitchen island was extended and the wood that covered the front deck, which had started to splinter, was replaced. A few boards of the old decking were repurposed into a hut for Roxi Aura to play in. The sliding roof that was built into the original balcony and opened to reveal the cars parked in the garage beneath went with the old decking. Steep staircases were blocked with custom designed safety gates filled in with springy webbing sourced from a mountain climbing supply store. ▶

A lightwell from the top deck (opposite, top right) looks down into the garage. The dining table is custom-made from a tree root (opposite, top left) and the nooks on the wall are openings from the original house. The bar (opposite, bottom left) connects the foyer to the deck (this page), where Roxi Aura loves to play.



The study, with a seven-meter ceiling and views out towards the deck, is essentially a 'room' with an upholstered floor (this page).

Cheung's office is a favorite spot for the family. With its tatami-like seating, low wooden desk and laddered bookshelf, it functions as a space for both solitary study and group living. "We're both designers," says Hong. "When we're off [work], we're still working. We still talk about design, we're still drawing, exchanging ideas." Located across from the main entranceway, the room sits behind a pair of ceiling-high wooden doors decorated with a unique pattern: "I was sketching this space and I just thought, Why don't I make the hatch into the texture [of the doors]."

The huge couch in the living room, one of the numerous pieces of furniture in the house designed by Cheung, was built in situ by a local, family run furniture making company. "It was nicknamed the 'Ashtray' by the contractors," laughs Hong. "This is definitely the hangout place in the house," Cheung continues. "I didn't want to have a room, so the idea was very simple: create a den that is also a piece of furniture. [It's] ... cocoon-like, protective, but you're not too cut off from the house." The living room can be walled off from the rest of the house by a set of sliding doors, "so that when you're watching a movie, it really helps with the acoustics, because the house is [so] open," says Cheung.

The garage was designed by Cheung under the direction of a "very sketchy brief" from Hong. The space, which sits under the first floor deck, was re-roofed and three vented garage doors and an automotive lift were installed. "We didn't want it to be a garage where you just park cars," says Hong. Like many other rooms in the house, "it's more like a hangout space." Skylights built into the deck above let the sun in and the cars sparkle under showroom ceiling lights. This enthusiasm for all things motoring is mirrored throughout the house. Car parts - Porsche exhausts and Mini shift knobs - have been repurposed and used as door handles and a graffitied Porsche fender is mounted above the entranceway.

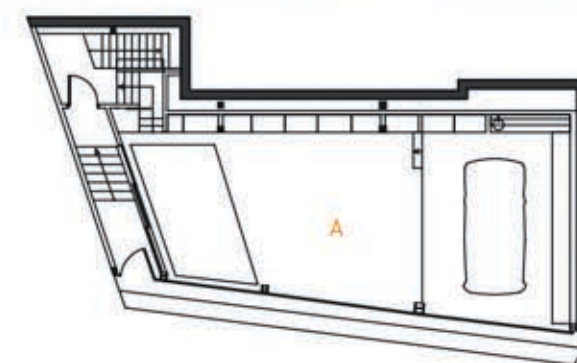
"When we started designing the house we made a model of the original house and all these spaces. We thought that it looked like a toy ant farm because they are like tall, skinny houses: all the spaces are connected," says Cheung. Due to the steep slope of the site, the Tetris-like frontage can only be seen from the first floor deck. It is "almost like a fortress, it's very closed in," says Cheung. "In the daytime [the front of the house] is ... pretty much all black, but at night, once the lights are on, ... the old house really shines through." ■



Ant Farm House
Floor Plan

Basement Floor

A Garage



An expansive garage accommodates Hong's hobby of collecting cars (top). In keeping with this obsession, a pair of graffitied Porsche fenders form an artwork (left) in the foyer. The 'ashtray' is a favorite gathering place near the library (below).

