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# A PLACE FOR SUNSETS AND MORE

When Virginia Perez Orive and her family relocated to Singapore, she decided to start doing up her home from scratch. Filling it up with artworks, furniture and accessories that she obtained from several sources nearby only made her understand and appreciate her new home even more.

**T**HERE'S BLISSFUL SILENCE AND AN ENVELOPING SUNSHINE that call to mind a secret hideaway where the business of life and the urgency of deadlines seem irrelevant. But we are really just hanging out in the house of Virginia Perez Orive, Spanish transplant, former M&A lawyer, and, of late, creator of beautiful interiors – such as the one she has worked here in a home that she shares with her husband and their four children.

The house is touchingly unprepossessing, one of a handful of lookalikes constructed in the 1970s on the slope of a residential neighbourhood in the western part of Singapore. It has modern touches of the period but also timeless archaic elements common among tropical architecture. But inside is where Perez Orive truly works her magic and makes a comfortable yet chic environment with elements that she has brought back from her travels.

"Tell me again why you picked this house," I ask.

She looks at me as if I were asking the obvious. "The light, the light and the light," she replies with a big gesture and laughter.





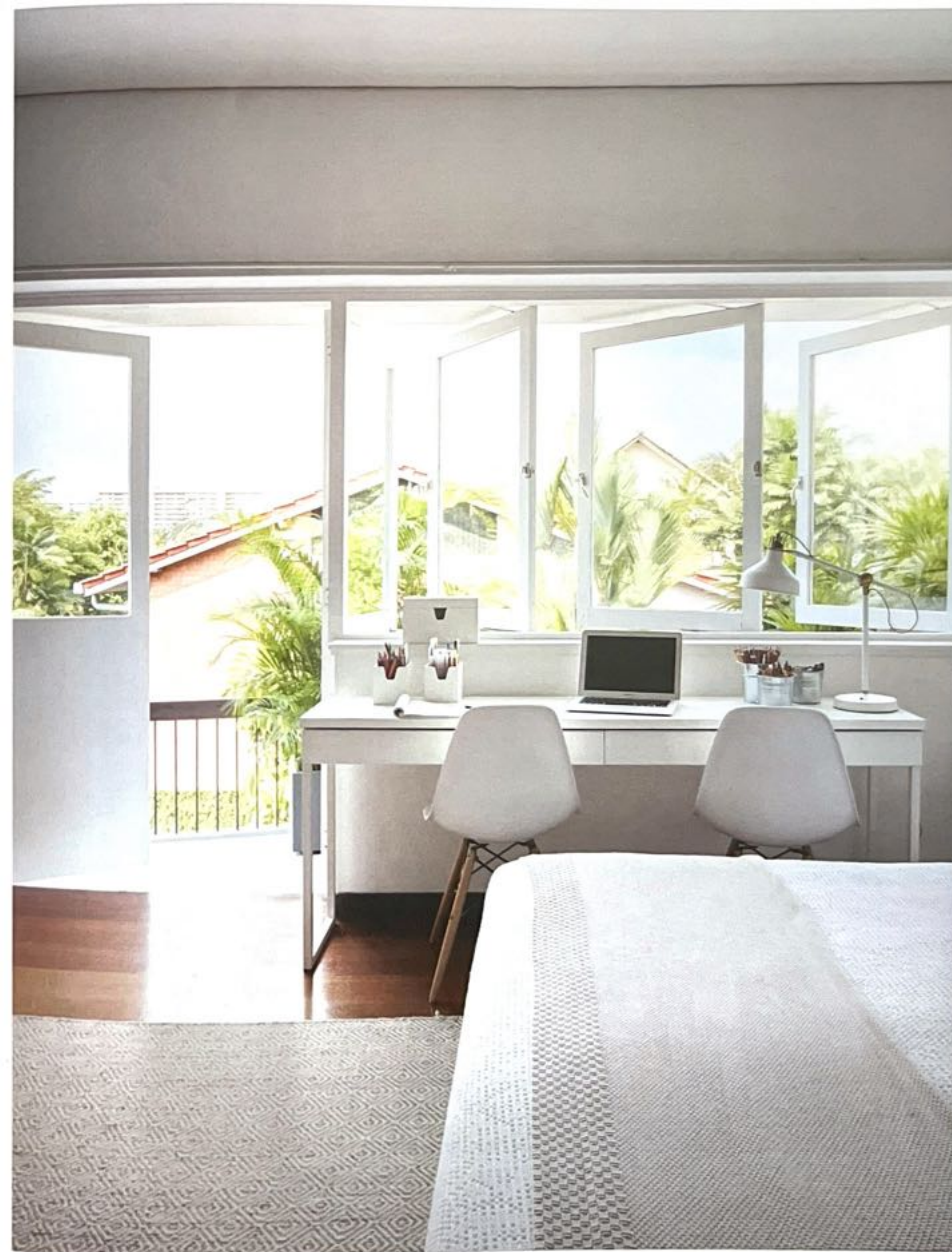
The house, built on an incline, is accessed through the main door at mid-level where one set of stairs goes up to the second floor bedrooms and another descends to the dining room and kitchen. The levels provide both dynamic layout and interesting prospects while dividing the house into private and public domains.

The house was untenanted and under renovation when Perez Orive and her husband first saw it, "yet it already had a happy vibe", she recalls. Before they moved into the house, she had some walls painted white, new bathrooms installed, and unnecessary ornaments removed. "There isn't a moment in the day when you lack natural light – a plus in any home. The house is on the top of a slope with large windows opening to the garden and terraces so that breeze is guaranteed," she explains. "Another great feature is the connection between outdoors and indoors. You barely feel the transition because of the openness of the spaces. My imagination started running like when you know it's something meant for you."

Perez Orive claims that the breath-taking sunsets at her terrace suit the street's name, Sunset Place. "I know I'm a romantic, but all these things give me inspiration and enthusiasm to start designing. It's all about telling the story of what this home is going to turn into. To me it was going to be a very hip, unpretentious, laid back, and understated – but very chic. I wanted it to be filled with art and humour, awash with soft palette, with terraces and small corners to chill out, read a book, or work on the computer as the children play football or splash around in the pool. I saw it as a house where we could all be together yet have our own little private corners."

The house's interesting layout intrigued Perez Orive. "It was very open and all spaces were connected. I love houses that you can circle around without finding walls, where children can run around and you never lose sight of where they are, where indoor blends into outdoor. I also found several corners where I could create different colour themes while staying to a common vibe throughout the house."

(This page) The whimsical and playful touches in the children's bedrooms are kept in check by a consistent application of pastel hues. (Previous page) Perez Orive's son contemplates the message board that his mother crafted with steel reinforcement used in paving and lying above a console table that doubles as a task desk. (Preceding page) Although the home office comprises a simple desk placed against a window in the master bedroom, it has room for actual tasks and storage for files and stationery. A large portrait of a geisha by Mitsuaki Dojima leans against a wall in the bedroom. Perez Orive relaxes in the elevated pool in the yard.









"The house had great potential and I could do whatever I wanted. There were no Chinese dragons, no chandeliers, no golden baroque features – just good quality materials used with taste and discretion," Perez Orive says. All she had to do was get the walls painted white and dark mahogany. She also retained the brickwork for colour contrast and texture.

"We insisted on upgrading the façade of the property – it was a red brick wall in really poor condition that made the house look old and abandoned. We proposed a plan that included incorporating huge planters to the wall, and painting wall and planters in dark charcoal grey. Our landlords were very cooperative; the change was extraordinary. The contrast of the lush green plants against the black walls, made the outside of the house a lot more sophisticated."

Although she retained the layout of the house, Perez Orive gave the interiors some finishing touches. She hung bamboo blinds in one of the terraces to control the sunlight and heighten the intimacy. "One of the Singapore's rare pleasures is 'watching the rain pour in your terrace while enjoying a cup of coffee'; with the blinds, we can relish that experience. There aren't many places in the world where you can enjoy storms that way all year around. The smell of the garden at night after a storm is priceless."

The lawn and terraces also needed new plantings and lighting. "I'm a bit obsessive about having intimate, indirect lights both inside and out, and that's one of the reasons we got rid of many overhead lighting. Between greeneries, we installed lights for that very summery, tropical feel that I definitely wanted," Perez Orive elaborates. "We have the opportunity to live in a country where it is summer all year around, so landscaping was an essential part of the house. The truth is we are outside most of the time whether it is at the pool, in the garden, or having breakfast or dinner in the terraces," she continues.



Having kids in the house does not mean that style goes out the window. An old swing is salvaged in the backyard; activity tools are organised in small aluminium buckets. (Following page) Perez Orive works throughout the house including the spacious and airy dining room. A painting in the dining room becomes the source of colours that find themselves in various pieces of furniture and accessories. The children relax in the family room where a portrait of a boy inspires the relaxed ambience and colours.







The sliding door that leads to the garden from the living room is mostly kept open to allow light and air in all day. Dopazo's study for a painting on the far left is visible in a much bigger canvas that leans against a wall on the other side of the living room. In both areas, Perez Orive assembled easy pieces around relaxed contemporary artworks sourced in local galleries.



From a practical perspective, the house has enough spaces for the entire family: A yard where the three boys can play football, a good sized swimming pool, a play room, large independent quarters for the household help, and several terraces to create different atmospheres. "We were, however, lacking one bedroom and an office space for my husband. There is always a compromise, isn't there?"

Perez Orive's solution was to install a work desk for her husband by the window in the master bedroom where it enjoys natural light and a garden view. For guest accommodation, Perez Orive put an extra bed in her daughter's bedroom. The three boys, meanwhile, share a bedroom, one that she laughingly describes as having the 'orphanage look'. It has a row of beds and night tables for the three boys, but with bespoke touches that Perez Orive made herself. Whenever they have a stay-in guest, the daughter moves into the 'orphanage' for a couple of nights. A shared bathroom joins the two bedrooms.





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Around us on the ground floor living room the large windows are open and the sand-coloured curtains drawn back. Light washes into rooms that are furnished in soft pastels and at least a dozen shades of beige and white. Artworks dominate the walls, most prominently by Bali-based Spanish painter Mersuka Dopazo, and it is clear that they dictate the palette that Perez Orive uses in each room.

In the family room, for example, a portrait of a boy dispenses the sea foam blue and teal of the sectional sofa and trunk coffee table, while on one side of the living room another portrait, this time of a couple, inspires the vivid mustard on a pillowcase and a floor lamp. The study for this portrait hangs on a wall on the opposite side of the room. Rendered in chalky white, it blends with the white couch and armchairs as well as the sun bleached wall.

If Perez Orive is adept at creating vignettes whose elements are strung by colour or texture or pattern, her high-low pairing skills are equally commendable. In various parts of the house, this is on full display. In the dining room a painting of a jeep becomes the starting point for the colour scheme of the room's key pieces. The dining table and chairs, the other artworks, accessories, even the collection of boat paddles that she has repurposed and set as sculpture in the corner of the dining room are all in earth tones.

"As an expatriate family that has to relocate several times, we were tired of moving all our things and adapting to different spaces as it is not always easy. I had just finished decorating our beautiful home in Madrid and I felt awful about removing everything that I had carefully chosen for that house," explains Perez Orive.

Practical choices had to be made – sourcing of furniture and art had to be done in Asia. She settled for a summer house style, which

was different from their previous homes in Europe. "No heavy fabrics, no velvet, no suede, no leather, no woollen cushions and throws, no woollen rugs, no French chairs and sophisticated furniture and art," she says, "like our Calder mobile sculpture, or our modern abstract art pieces." In Madrid, their home had some Oriental elements that they brought back after years of living in Hong Kong, including an antique altar table in reclaimed wood from Zhuhai, a photograph by Yau Leung, and small accessories.

"I wanted to avoid Chinese pieces in new home in Singapore. It was going to be about linen, cotton and teak, and lightness, whiteness and greens, and touches of neon, and fun. I

wanted relaxed, young and less formal – just because we are grown-ups doesn't mean our homes have to be uptight, right?"

Friends have taken to their new home in Singapore. "I love how people come to the house and are reminded of something. 'I feel like I am on holiday.' 'This is a bit of Bali.' 'I feel like I am in a terrace in Ibiza or Marbella,' they would say.

"I have always thought that art should inspire spaces – not the other way around. It's easier to match your furniture and furnishings to a good piece of art than the other way around," enthuses Perez Orive. In this house I began with the artworks."

And that design strategy, as she knows very well, always works. ■



Perez Orive plays with her daughter in the living room. (Next page) From paddles gathered in a corner of the living room, to an unlikely pairing of an old cabinet with a portrait of a footballer, a stop stool and high heels, and a sweet spot in the patio lounge with bamboo chicken coop, Perez Orive creates stunning elements out of what others may overlook and dismiss as commonplace.

