



URBAN TREE HOUSE

In small spaces, designers must think big. This Kowloon micro apartment shows that, when it comes imaginative solutions, size doesn't matter.

Words Michele Koh Morollo
Photos Dennis Lo



In densely populated Hong Kong, small apartments can leave homeowners feeling limited when it comes to interior design options, but not architect Nelson Chow, who remodelled his micro apartment using tree houses as inspiration.

Raised in Canada and trained in New York, Chow's practice, NC Design & Architecture, has made waves in Hong Kong with its exciting designs for F&B establishments. Projects include the interiors of Mrs. Pound in Sheung Wan, a covert lair behind the façade of a traditional Chinese stamp shop; Central lounge bar Foxglove, a speakeasy-style space behind an umbrella shop, like something out of Hollywood blockbuster *Kingsman*; and the exclusive Krug Room at the Mandarin Oriental.

Chow's experiments with the themes of secrecy, seclusion and fantasy come into play wonderfully in his own home. His 370-square-foot apartment has been imaginatively transformed into a stylish and

cosy pad with a tree house-like raised bedroom loft.

In many parts of the world, tree houses are built for children, where they can escape homework and chores to daydream and engage in make-believe in a private oasis up in the trees. This is precisely what Chow was going for when he designed his home, located on the eighth floor of a Ho Man Tin high-rise. In a residential neighbourhood surrounded by trees, his split-level design makes the most of the views.

"The building is located in a site that's like a forest in the midst of the city. This is very rare in Hong Kong, so I wanted to accentuate this aspect of the property," Chow says.

The original apartment had a more conventional layout, with a bedroom, kitchen, dining and living areas on one level. To maximise the functional space, Chow decided to make full use of the 10-foot-high ceiling by building a 40-square-foot sleeping loft and freeing up precious floor space. >>

“I grew up in Canada, and I sometimes went out to the woods and stayed in tree house cabins. When you stay in a tree house, you don’t need a lot of floor space, because you feel fully connected with the great outdoors and nature when you’re there,” Chow says.

When he downsized to this microflat, he decided he didn’t need a large bedroom. “I knew I wouldn’t feel comfortable sleeping in a space that was too large. What I wanted was something cosy and intimate. Remembering those tree houses I loved, I decided on a loft-style bed space.”

So he knocked down the internal walls and built a loft-bedroom above the dining area, creating two very different moods within the micro apartment.

“For the lower level, my priority was to capture a panoramic view of the trees outside. It’s hectic in Hong Kong and I wanted the living and dining rooms to be quiet and serene. I created a more contemplative environment here with dark blue walls, subdued enough to draw attention to the greenery outside.”

In contrast to the relatively sombre living areas, the sleeping loft is a light, bright and airy Scandinavian-inspired floating wooden box. Though the living and sleeping zones evoke distinct ambiances, they are visually unified through warm wood, which is used for both the loft and the floor of the living areas.

On entering the flat, there is a galley-style kitchen on the left, with an open-plan living and dining area beyond. Suspended in a wooden box above the dining area, the bed isn’t visible from the living spaces. Instead, the loft wall is encased in a striking feature wall of terracotta latticework that resembles the cross-section of cardboard.

It reduces the ceiling level to six feet above the dining area and is reached by a ladder-like staircase in the dining area.

Clad in natural pine, with a slot-like linear window that looks over the surrounding woods, this nook-like sleeping loft seems to hover above the lower level of the apartment. The window is positioned to give Chow a bird’s-eye view of the surrounding trees when he wakes. At night, outdoor lights from the communal gardens below shine up through the greenery, illuminating the loft in a soft, dreamy glow.

The loft is furnished simply with a mattress, a reading light and a shelf against the back wall where Chow stores his nighttime reading. Along one side is a protective railing, to prevent him rolling out of bed and falling down the staircase. Downstairs, the living spaces are furnished with his favourite pieces from designers such as Hans Wegner, Konstantin Grcic and Alvar Aalto.

“A home needs to reflect your unique personality,” Chow says. “It’s worth taking risks and creating a one-of-a-kind retreat.” ■

