Bright ideas

A retired couple transformed a cramped and dark apartment into a light and spacious home perfect for displaying their exotic fish.

Vicky and Henry Lai have well-read fish. An aquarium accommodating exotic discus freshwater fish is a key design feature in the couple's well-stocked library.

The tank was one of solicitor Henry's few requests when the couple renovated their 1,600 sq ft Pok Fu Lam apartment last year. "Henry's easy-going when it comes to décor, but he had an opinion on the major things," Vicky says. "He finds the fish relaxing and has kept them since he was a child."

Spittel Concept director Gary Lai (no relation) says the tank required a lot of preparation to install. "We needed to be careful with the loading of the apartment and the tank also had to connect to the water system and pipes," he says.

In addition to incorporating the water feature into the layout, Lai was tasked with brightening the interior. Built-in laminate cabinets that made the place feel cramped and dark were replaced with handleless white oak units to provide a seamless finish and reflect light. The Lais moved into the flat when they outgrew their 1,700 sq ft home in the building next door.

"We liked the area so it was only natural that we would find something close by," Vicky says. "The sea view is what we fell in love with - it's so relaxing to watch the sea and the boats, plus it's really quiet here. So we made a quick decision and bought it."

They then left it to a professional to give them the interior they wanted.

"Vicky and Henry gave me the flexibility to come up with the design," Gary Lai says. "The only challenge we faced when doing the layout was the location of the en-suite bathroom, which could not be changed or enlarged because one of the walls is structural."

The result is a contemporary but comfortable home with ample storage space and simple décor that will stand the test of time.

One of three bedrooms was turned into a study for Vicky Lai, who is enjoying her retirement after working as a Japanese interpreter for the Adventist Hospital. "I spend a lot of time in this room," she says, explaining that she plays the piano and practices newly learned computer skills in the study. "It's like my retreat."
1. The dining table (HK$4,200) and chairs (HK$3,000 each) were from Armani Casa (UVF, 30 Leighton Road, Causeway Bay, tel: 2882 2239). The light fitting above the table cost HK$2,440 from Apartment (UVF Leighton Road, tel: 2882 2098). The L-shaped sofa cost HK$27,200 from Life Style On Blue Pool Road, Happy Valley, tel: 2891 2093. The white-topped side table was bought for HK$2,500 from Le Cadre Gallery (UVF, 1006 E. 11th St., Central, tel: 2528 2154). On either side of the sofa are KEF speakers that are part of a home theatre set that cost about HK$20,000 from the company's Causeway Bay store (UVF, Times Square, tel: 2837 1717). The Nagashi coffee table cost HK$2,000 from aluminium (UVF, 25-27 King Street, Causeway Bay, tel: 2837 4766). Gary Lai of Spatial Concept, 22/F, Tai Yau Building, 38 Johnston Road, Wan Chai, tel: 2829 3800 designed the bookshelves, which were made for HK$80,000 by contractor Juggle Decoration (UVF, Block 3, Yip On Factory Estate, Wang Ho Road, Kowloon Bay, tel: 2988 4240).

2. The Yamaha piano in the study was bought from Tom Lee Music almost 20 years ago. The Herman Miller chair cost HK$4,300 from Lane Crawford (Pacific Place, Admiralty, tel: 2881 2668). Lai designed the desk (HK$3,200), cupboards (HK$8,000) and day bed (HK$7,800), which were all built by Juggle Decoration. The cushions and mattress were HK$5,000 from its Futon (46 Morrison Hill Road, Wan Chai, tel: 2845 1318).

3. The apartment opens directly onto the lounge. The natural white oak flooring in the living and dining areas cost HK$32,000 from Egnau UVF, Phase 2, Ming An Plaza, 8 Siu Ming Road, Causeway Bay, tel: 2881 7066).
Her connection to Japan is reflected in this room, with pillows covered in Japanese fabric and a photograph of her when she was a student in the country.

"I'd never hired a designer before but it has made everything so much easier and enabled me to achieve the look I wanted," she says. "Pink is my favourite colour and if I had my way our bedroom would be girly and pink, but Henry wouldn't be happy with it."

The compromise was burgundy.

A bedroom for a daughter studying in Edinburgh, Scotland, has been painted a relaxing, pale green. There is also a daybed in the study for their other daughter to use when she visits.

"Even though the children are gone, it was important to us that they have somewhere to sleep and relax in when they come to stay," says Vicky.

The Lai's cosy pad was designed with family get-togethers and entertaining in mind; walls have been demolished to create open-plan living and dining areas.

And, after the dinner plates have been cleared away, the family can retire to the library to watch the fish swimming happily among the thrillers and the classics.