The hardwood flooring in the living area was one of Gary Lai’s biggest expenses, at HK$3,944 a square metre from Equal (room 362, Phone 2, Hong Kong Plaza, 8 Sunning Road, Causeway Bay, tel: 2881-7664). The olive green bookshelf (HK$1,000) was designed by Lai and built by contractor Zoe Chan of Jolly Construction (tel: 9818-4240). The dining table (HK$4,000), wooden bench seats (HK$3,000) and window storage benches (HK$1,000) were designed by Lai and made by the contractor. The sofa (HK$7,000) was also designed by Lai, and made by Classical Curtains (223 Queen’s Road East, Wan Chai, tel: 2836-8833). The Maharaja fabric has a stain-, moisture- and bacteria-resistant Crypton finish and is available from Fabrication (tel: 2180-8772). The Eames moulded plastic dining chairs cost HK$1,500 each from Aluminium (19 Lyndhurst Terrace, Central, tel: 2844-9764). The Fritz Hansen PK22 Easy wicker chairs (HK$2,000 each) and the Fritz Hansen PK61 coffee table (HK$2,350) are from Salotto (29/F, Two Chinese Exchange Square, 338 King’s Road, North Point, tel: 2898-9777). The Tale lights on the cross beam (HK$1,400 each) are from Artemide (shop H51, Rutland Centre, 11 Duddell Street, Central, tel: 2523-8333).
Empire of the Sun

With an abundance of natural light to illuminate his handiwork, one interior designer focused on the finer details when renovating his home.

As a young bachelor, interior designer Gary Lai readily admits to having spent little time in the kitchens of the apartments he has shared for most of his adult life. Which is probably why his shiny new kitchen has not ignited a sudden interest in cooking at home.

"It was rare for me to use the kitchen except maybe for breakfast, but I liked the idea of using it more and I would always wanted an open-plan kitchen," he says. "So I built a breakfast bar I can use as a work surface. I now spend more time in there than I do in the living room."

Lai spent close to a year looking for his first home, a 35-year-old, 900 sq ft beam-and-pillar apartment, and took up residence in December 2005 after six months of renovation with the help of contractor Joe Chan of Jaggie Construction (tel: 9818 6240). Determined to make the most of the space, he gutted the flat, situated in a quiet Mid-Levies enclave, moved the entrance of the main bathroom to create an en suite and demolished the walls of the second bedroom to build the work area and kitchen.

"I was very busy and I don't make decisions very quickly," he says, referring to the relatively long renovation process. "I wasn't in a hurry to move and I wanted to give my contractor time to get it right."

Lai's love of clean lines is evident in his choice of simple wooden furniture, handle-less doors and hidden window blinds (see Tried & Tested), while ceiling lights have been replaced with Lamps and wall lights. A chafing unit in the lounge and the built-in wardrobe in the bedroom, both olive green, represent the only strong colour in a sea of browns and beiges.

Lai, who entertains a lot at home, says the flat's open-plan design and seating options, from benches to cane chairs to sofas, make it ideal for mingling.

"I like minimalist design, but don't want it too cold," he says. As to why there are two bathrooms in a one-bedroom flat, he says, "If I have friends staying over they can sleep on the sofa, but I prefer to have my own bathroom."

Lai believes care should be paid to items with which you have close physical contact. So although much of the furniture is made from cheap wood and stained dark for effect, the oak flooring, cut wider than usual to help accentuate the space, was among the few luxuries he allowed himself. He also spent time and money on designing the sofa.

To save on cost, and to provide plenty of storage space for clothing, Lai retained the flat's original built-in wardrobe. In the living room, an open-shelving unit holds books and ornaments, and extra space was created within bench seats that run along one wall. Shoes are kept in a floor-to-ceiling cupboard that helps create a small hallway at the flat's entrance.

While Lai worked hard to improve the flat's interior, little needed to be done to enhance illumination. Double openings in every wall allow plenty of natural light. I put my desk in front of a window so I could look out at a tree," says Lai. "The flat faces east, so in the morning the sun is in the kitchen and study, and in the evening it's in the living room. You'll rarely find an apartment with double windows like this."

2 Once the least-visited room in the flat, the kitchen is now a heavy-traffic area where Lai eats and works. The storage cabinets and fridge-concealing doors (HK$35,000) and the single piece of Corian for the breakfast bar, sink and work surface (HK$12,000) are from Simons (room 1051, C.C. Wu Building, 302 Hennessy Road, Wan Chai, tel: 2832 3918). The motor-operated window blinds throughout the apartment are from L&M Engineering (tel: 2428 3993). The bar stools (HK$2,000 each) were from a shop since closed. Apart from the Westpoint exhaust hood, electrical appliances are from Siemens (shop 91, Bankervill House, 13 Duodoi Street, Central, tel: 2511 2323).
3 The floor tiles cost HK$8 each from one of the many tile shops along Lockhart Road in Wan Chai. The desk (HK$4,800) was designed by Lai and built by the contractor. The Aerio chair (HK$6,000) is from Herman Miller dealer Frontier (1/F, Luk Kewk Centre, 72 Gloucester Road, Wan Chai, tel: 2821 3128). The Totomeo lamp (HK$2,900) on the desk is from Artemide.

4 The Japanese-made chairs were a housewarming gift from a friend. If the third from the left looks familiar, it's because it is a miniature of Lai's famous dining-room chairs. The handmade plaster tiles with paint finish were bought in Canada.

5 The Duravit sink (HK$2,000), Hansgrohe tap (HK$1,800) and shower (HK$3,080) are all from Sunny (365 Lockhart Road, Wan Chai, tel: 2993 9118). The limestone-topped sink storage unit (HK$2,800) was designed by Lai and built by the contractor, who also supplied the shower splash (HK$6,000) and mirror. The limestone sink finish St Tailone wall tiles (price on request) are from Markway International, 1st Fl, 1st Fl, Capital Building, 6 Sun Wui Road, Causeway Bay, tel: 2834 6463).

6 Lai divided off a small section of the guest bathroom with a frosted glass partition and shower curtain to create a small utility area.
Having kept the flat's original built-in storage, Lai was faced with a dilemma. The only space left for the bed was with its head to the window - a feng shui no-no. He solved the problem by having his contractor install a false wall, thus creating twin sills windows and rebalancing the room. The bed (HK$5,000) was designed by Lai and built by the contractor. The headboard is covered in Makuram fabric from Fabricnation. The picture (HK$1,700) is from the Louvre museum in Paris. The Tolomeo Parato wall lamp (HK$1,200 each) are from Artemide.

**tried & tested ready to roll**

Curtain rails and the rolling mechanism of electronic blinds disturb less lines. Designer Cary Lai solved the problem by taking advantage of his home's beam-and-pillar design. He instructed contractor Joe Chan of Jaggi Construction to increase the depth of the beams in front of the windows by a few centimetres by adding wooden "falsewindow". These hide the blinds' rolling mechanisms, leaving the window areas looking less cluttered.

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