

This grande dame is ready to shine again

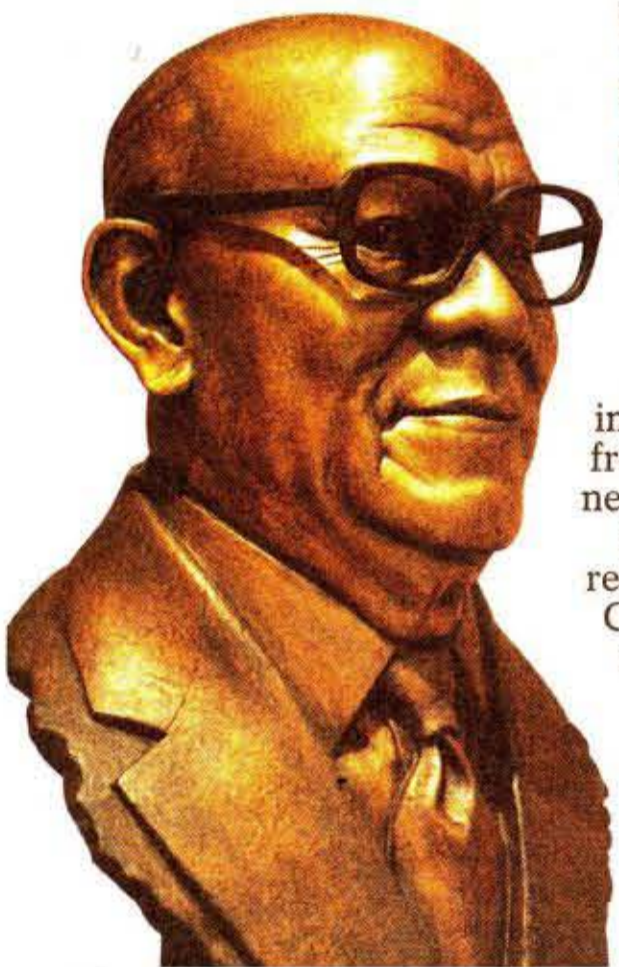
We take a peek at newly renovated Tan Chin Tuan Mansion

BY RADHA BASU

A COLONIAL-ERA mansion in Cairnhill Road has emerged from a makeover, ready for the next chapter of its history.

Four years and \$3 million in renovations have turned the Tan Chin Tuan Mansion into a venue for the charitable Tan Chin Tuan Foundation to host events for its partners and beneficiaries.

The works have added,



OLD AND NEW: Tan Chin Tuan Mansion (above) now has a 20-storey condominium sitting atop it. A bust of banker and philanthropist Tan (left), who designed the condo, sits in the living room.

atop the old house, a 20-storey condominium, the design for which was conceived by the late banker and philanthropist.

The renovations have been completed on time to mark the centenary of the birth of the former OCBC Bank chairman, who died in 2005. The house itself, the family home, fuses colonial architecture and Peranakan influences. The Straits Times was given a preview of the place, now a treasure trove of artefacts linked to Mr Tan's life.

In the chandeliered living-cum-dining room on the ground floor, a 12-seater dining table holds pride of place. It was here he entertained former presidents Benjamin Sheares, Ong Teng Cheong and Wee Kim Wee.

The walls in the house are adorned with photographs and memorabilia, including his marriage certificate dated 1926 and a yellowed newspaper clipping announcing his marriage to Helene Wee. More recent artefacts include a hard hat he wore to supervise the construction of the OCBC Centre and his Order of the British Empire medal.

Upstairs, his wooden desk sits in an alcove, and on it are a decades-old magnifying glass, an ornate paperweight and a 1926 edition of Webster's dictionary. His handwritten diaries have also been preserved.

The restoration has been a labour of love for the family, said Ms Chew Gek Khim, 46, one of the granddaughters who oversaw the project.

Built in the 1920s as the home of entrepreneur and philanthropist Tan Kah Kee, the house was bought by Mr Tan Chin Tuan just before World War II broke out in 1939.

When Mr Tan and his family were forced overseas during the Japanese Occupation, the house was taken over by Japanese generals. They gave away all the furniture in the three years they were there from 1942. By the time they left the house, vanquished in the war, all that was left was a wooden chair, now on display.

The entire project to a large extent reflects Mr Tan's "philosophy of life", in that while history always has a place, it cannot hinder progress, explained Ms Chew, who is also deputy chairman of the foundation.

Asked for his reaction to the mix of old and new in the look of the place, conservation activist Terence Hong acknowledged that many like him were initially apprehensive about whether the condo would mar the history of the place.

He said: "In the end, the project turned out beautifully, marrying the old with the new and remaining useful and relevant at the same time."

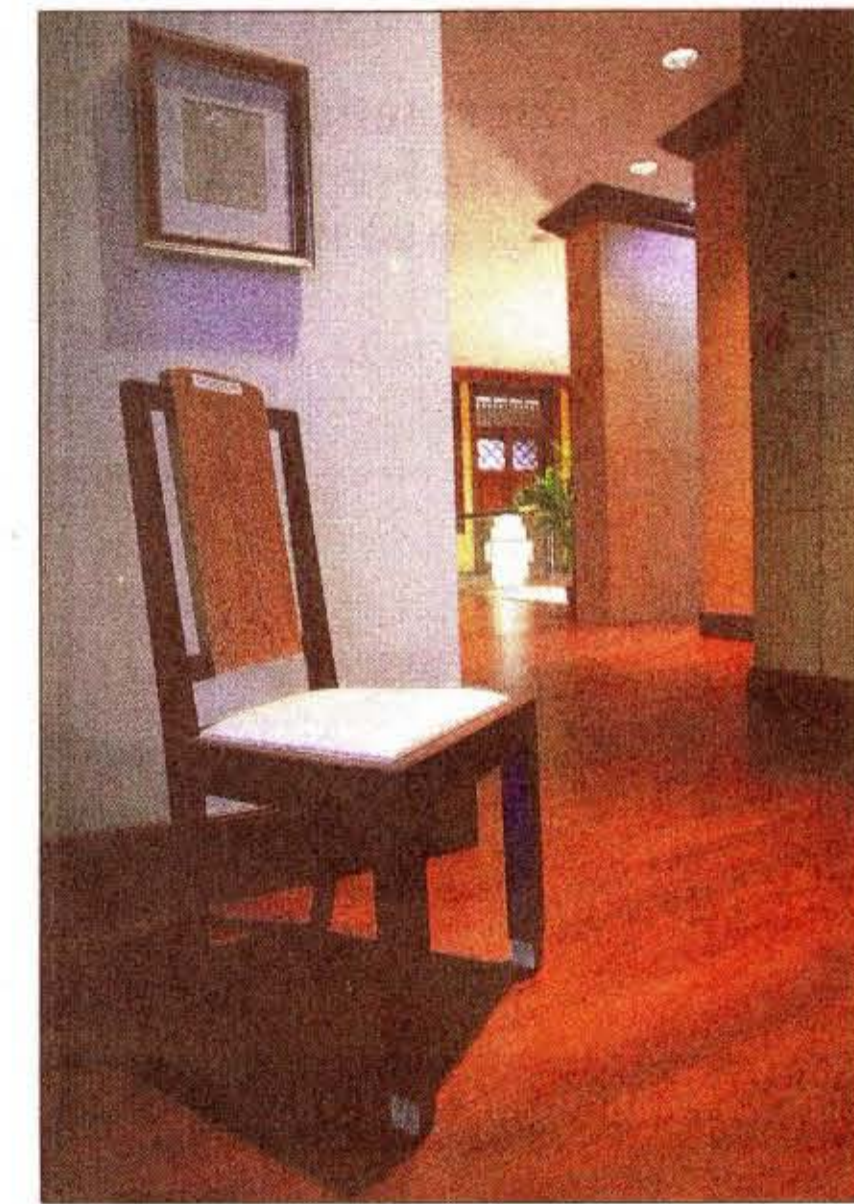


ADORNING THE WALLS: The walls in the house are filled with photographs and memorabilia chronicling Mr Tan's life, including his marriage certificate dated 1926 and a yellowed newspaper clipping announcing his marriage to Helene Wee.

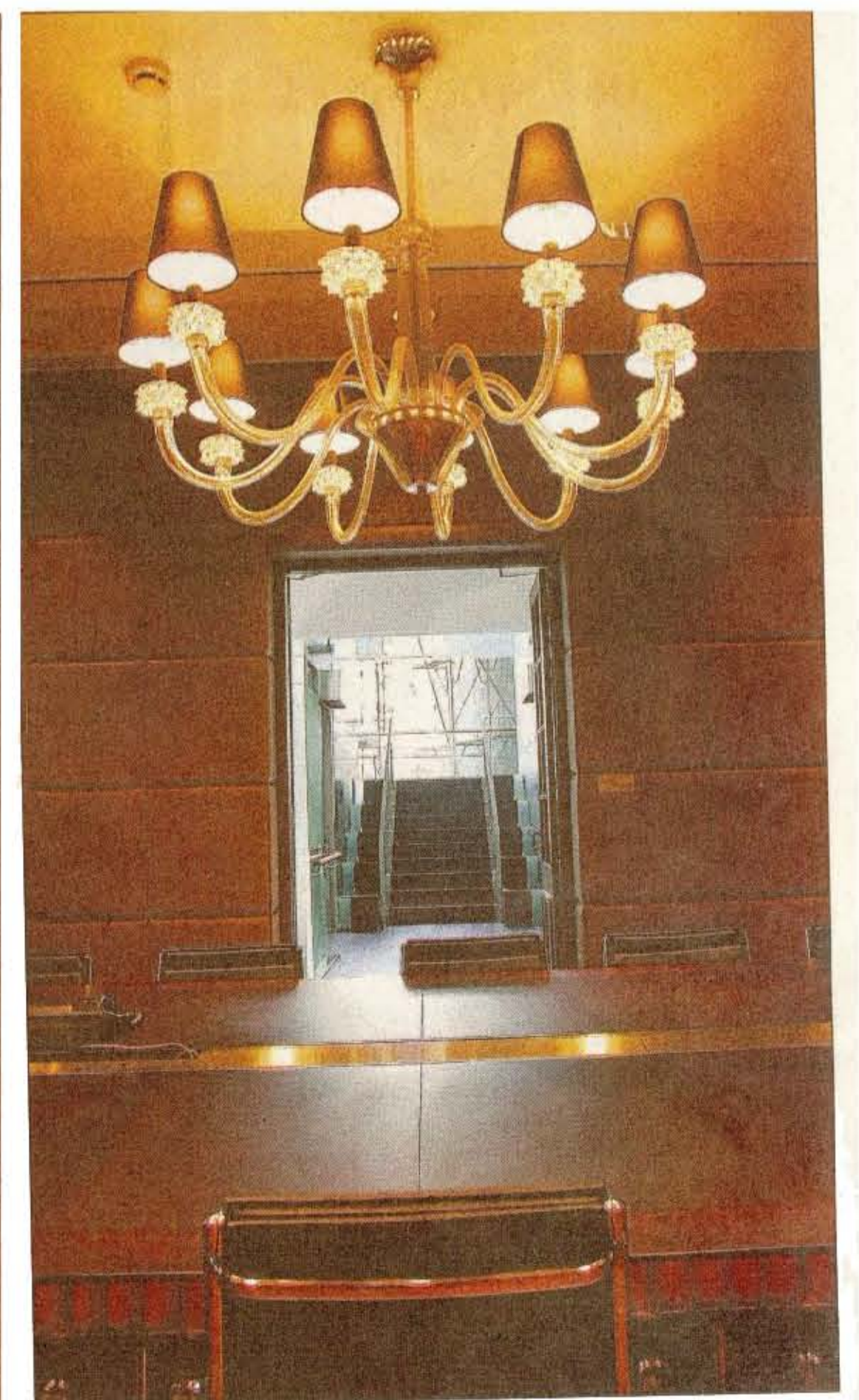


PHOTO: TAN CHIN TUAN FAMILY

PHOTO MEMORIES: Mr Tan (second from right) at the 12-seat table used to host family and guests.



SURVIVING PIECE: Japanese troops in WWII gave away all the furniture except this chair.



MEETING PLACE: A boardroom in the mansion opens to the modern condominium of which the house is now part.