

Standing in the linear courtyard that is literally the dividing line between the front bay with its entrance (right) and the rear bay that accommodates the living room. The latter sits as a glassed pavilion under an exposed concrete roof.

ROOTED IN CONTEXT

Low-slung and demure, this delightful getaway on the outskirts of Ahmedabad nestles peacefully amongst existing trees and leverages its green surroundings effectively, while its interiors carry forward the same honest rawness through the materials, finishes and styling. A collaboration between Modo Designs and Patel-Vadodaria Design Research Studio, both based in Ahmedabad.

TEXT: RUPALI SEBASTIAN; PHOTOGRAPHS: MONIKA SATHE, COURTESY MODO DESIGNS AND PATEL-VADODARIA DESIGN RESEARCH STUDIO



TOP The low form of the building strikes a harmonious note in the green surroundings. The front facade is stark, and does allow a glimpse of the spaces within.

ABOVE The west facade of the building. The central void between the two solid bays is the courtyard, whose end is screened with an MS and wood grille.

Most second homes are full of grandiose gestures: lavish ornamentation, a sprawling footprint, a glut of creature comforts that negate the sentiment of ‘getting away from it all, retreating into the lap of nature’ — which often creates the need for such spaces. And what nature there is, is often a manicured, sanitized, palatable version of the real thing. But not The House by the Trees, which has forged an amicable alliance with the site and its existing cover of neem, chickoo and amla trees. It has grown around them, by them, and, in places, embraced them to create a building that is of a shy disposition: low-slung and demure, yet holding its own within the green milieu. “This was to be a retreat for an Ahmedabad-based family. Our primary concern was to weave the layout of the house with the existing trees, and thus the randomly-placed trees define the extent of the house,” says architect Arpan Shah of Ahmedabad-based Modo Designs, who was entrusted with the task of creating a spacious and open place that would, at the same time, address security concerns.

“The initial brief was to have an open place for a gathering of friends and family, which we developed into places of contradictory characteristics: an introvert open-to-sky courtyard hemmed by bedrooms and a cantilevered verandah opening from living, dining and master bedroom into the rear garden,” discloses Arpan. As the design evolved, security was added to the list of requirements, for when the couple stayed overnight. “Hence, we introduced sliding MS grilles that cut off the verandah and instill a feeling of security when one moved within the house from the bedrooms to the living areas.”



Architect Arpan Shah



Architect Keyur Vadodaria and Interior designer Megha Patel-Vadodaria

The west side of the bedrooms has operable louvres, which can be opened to allow ventilation and natural light yet retain privacy and security. The courtyard sit out under the existing amla tree, has an MS and wood grille that holds the place and yet opens towards the existing chickoo tree cluster on the west. Another strategy to strength privacy was to create a stark and blank front facade which would shield the interiors from view. However, slits above eye-level maintain the connection with the surroundings, and invite the trees and sky inside.

For Arpan, lending an attentive ear to his clients’ needs is part of Modo Designs’ “responsive, participative and exploratory” design approach. “Here, the response to their brief of an open, gazebo-like home was a combination of open and semi-open spaces. We engage the users in selection of materials and colour palettes — which, in this case, resulted in opting for grey or black granite and cuddapah stones. This involvement allows each of our projects to have distinctive uniqueness that is in tune with the owner, as if the dwelling is the portrayal of the user.”

Modo Designs also espouses architecture that “plays up on specificness and local nuances”

and engenders out-of-the-box thinking—philosophies that have impacted material selection and spatial configuration in this particular project. “With regards to playing up the local nuances, the existing natural place had an uncultivated feel to it. We tried to reinforce this rawness by working with a palette of unfinished natural materials and

BELOW A 108-foot-long cantilevered verandah spans the rear end of the house, and acts as an extension to the living area and master bedroom.

BOTTOM Clusters of trees create a natural screen that takes the edge off the harsh sunlight.



CONCEPT: Architecturally, to create a gathering and retreat place that would be open and spacious, yet address security concerns effectively. Interiors-wise, to create a modern, elegant, clutter-free environment that would reflect the identity of the users.



Habitat



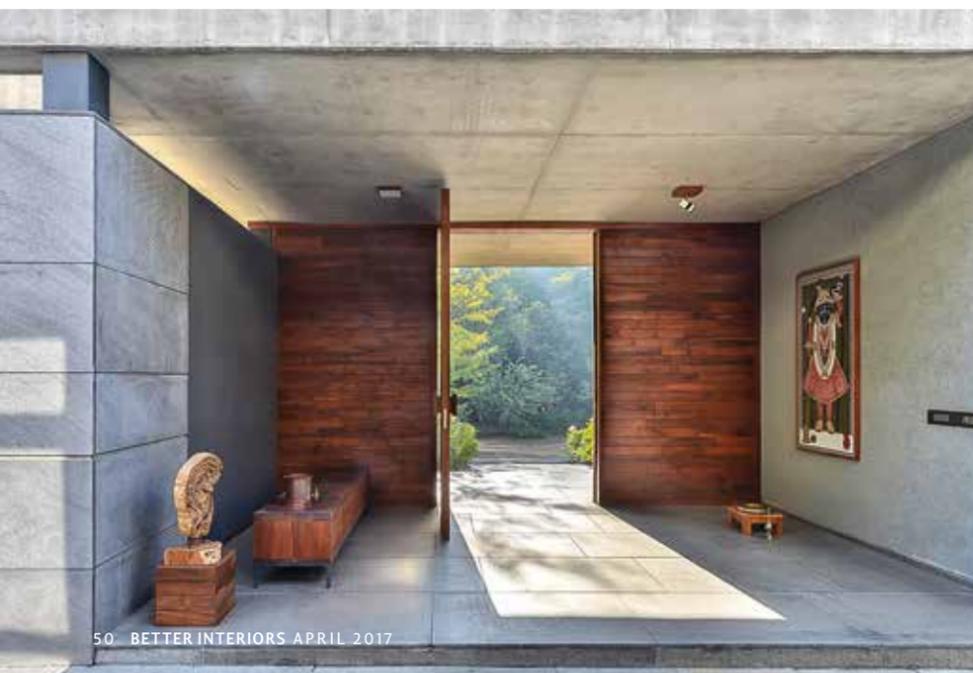
LEFT The transparency and openness of the plan establishes sightlines that transect various functional pockets. This is a view from the entrance right up to the tree cluster near the rear verandah.

CENTRE The lobby adjacent to the living room. The pendant lamp has been fashioned out of the upper half of a century-old copper pot sourced from the old city of Ahmedabad. The lower half (seen on the floor) now functions as a tray to keep flowers, petals and floating diyas.

BELOW The entrance vestibule.

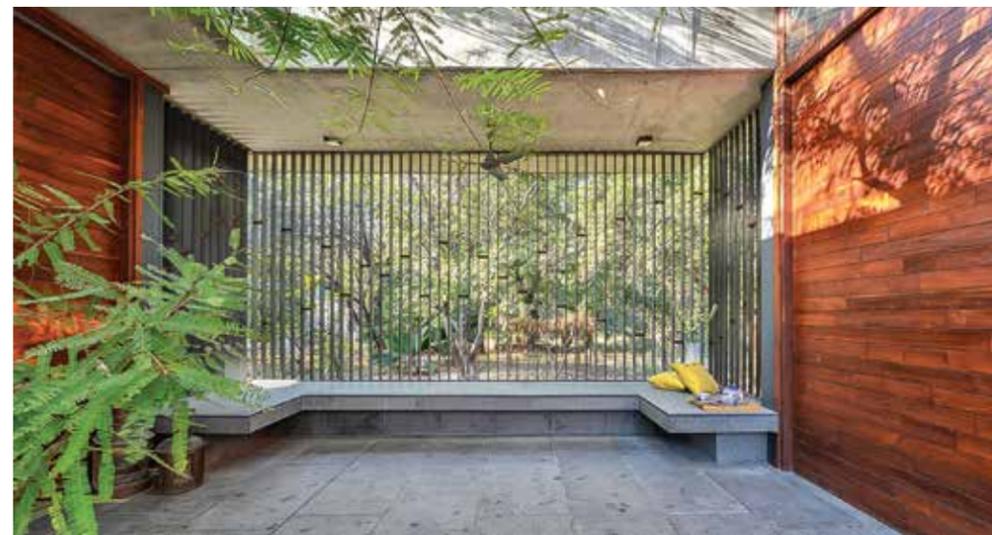
finishes to blend with the surrounding natural character.” Therefore, rough cuddapah (interior areas), river-washed black granite (semi-open areas) and rough brown kota (courtyard) make an appearance as flooring materials. All ceilings are exposed concrete-finished, while doors and windows are made of valsadi wood, reclaimed from the clients old factory. “The out-of-the-box thinking,” discloses Arpan, “essentially was to get the users literally out of the (interior) box... be it in the courtyard seating under the amla trees in summers or the semi-open verandah in the rains. Even the living area is a glass box that allows you to be a part of the outside. It was about making the users connect with the elements.”

Programmatically, the house has shaped up as a parallel two-bay plan, with the front bay having the semi-open entry porch, the vestibule and a guest bedroom adjoining it. A linear courtyard segregates the front bay from the rear one — which has the living, dining and kitchen on one side and master bedroom on the other side, with a semi-open lounge separating these zones. A 12-foot-wide and 108-foot-long cantilevered verandah — “a challenge for the entire team” — spans the



northern side as an extension to the living and master bedroom, along the line of existing neem trees. “We were quite determined to have it as it would connect the interior spaces to the garden without structural obstructions and create a horizontal plate complementing the trees,” says the architect. The semi-open vestibule and lounge connect the house with the courtyard and garden beyond, making the house a seamless place. Come night, this seemingly outward-oriented space transforms into an introverted secured one, when the sliding MS grille disconnects the outer area from the internal spaces.

The House by the Trees displays none of the awkward patchiness that so often marks spaces in which the architecture and interiors have been developed independently. In fact, the seamless blend of these two creative streams is one of the unique aspects of the house, according to architect Keyur Vadodaria, who along with his partner, interior designer



ABOVE The house uses natural materials and finishes to evoke a raw informal place. The floor has rough river-washed black granite in semi-open areas, while the courtyard has rough brown kota stone.

CENTRE A sit-out in the courtyard shelters under an existing amla tree. The MS and wood gridded-window offers a view of a cluster of chickoos.

RIGHT The other end of the courtyard. The powder room connected to the living area lies beyond the end-wall.



MATERIALS

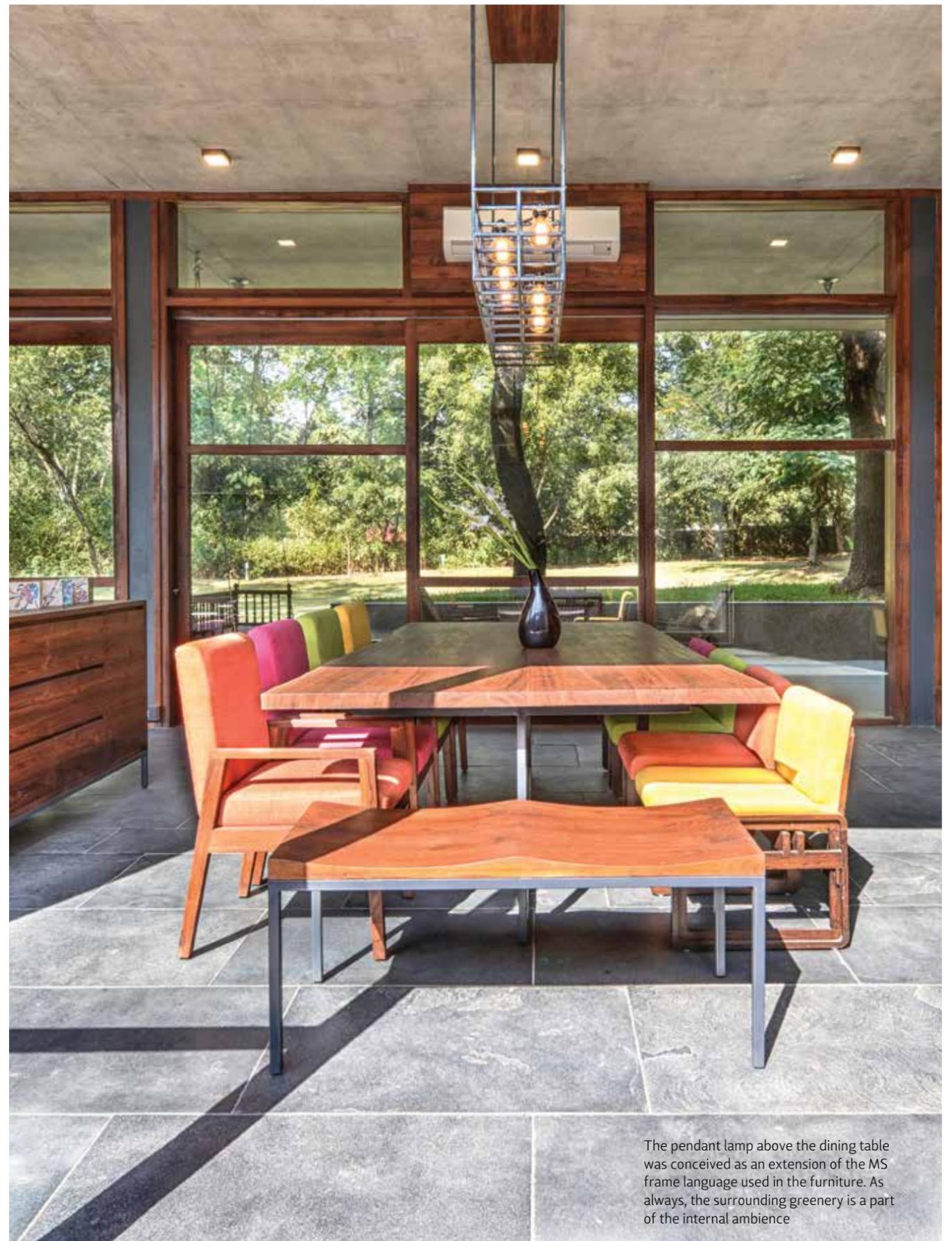
Flooring Rough cuddapah (interior areas), river-washed black granite (semi-open areas) and rough brown kota (courtyard)
Ceilings Fair finish exposed concrete
Doors and windows Reclaimed valsadi teak
Furniture Linseed oil-treated reclaimed teak with painted MS frames
Kitchen counter Matt polish steel grey granite
Kitchen storage units Solid teak wood and painted
Kitchen wall Cracked effect hand cut glazed ceramic tile
Bathroom wall finishes Tiles and black slate
Powder room walls In-situ terrazzo
Wardrobe handles Painted MS plate
Bedroom door handles Textile printing blocks
Upholstery Cotton woven fabric
Blinds Hand woven cotton (Madarpat)



The furniture has been made of out reclaimed teak wood sourced from the clients' factory. The floor features rough cudappah. There are no physical barriers between the living, dining and kitchen areas. The free-standing seating is made from lightweight MS frames, making it easy to move around into different layouts.



The grey shell is uplifted through shots of colours added through soft furnishings. The interior colour and material palette form a background to receive client's collection of painting, artefacts and



The pendant lamp above the dining table was conceived as an extension of the MS frame language used in the furniture. As always, the surrounding greenery is a part of the internal ambience



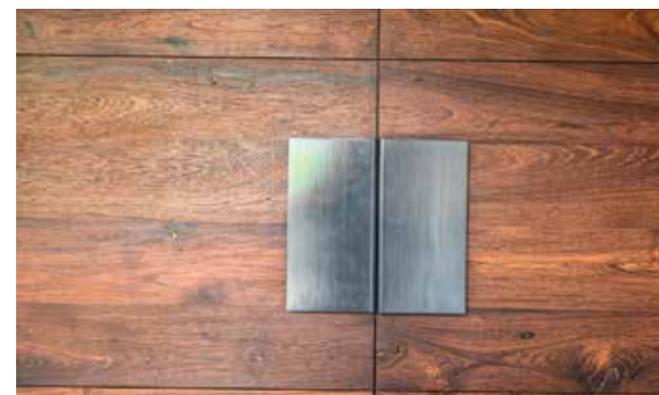
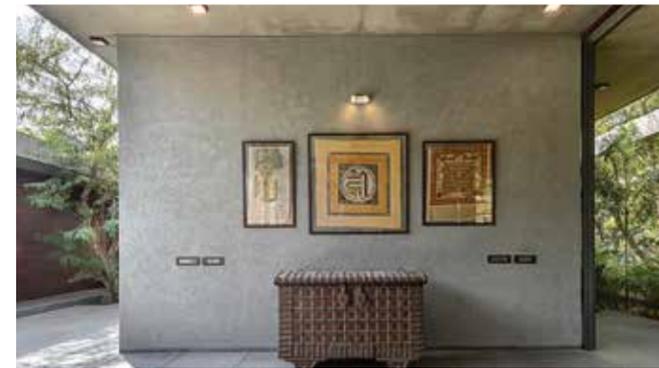
LEFT & CENTRE The long cantilevered verandah — its execution, a challenge successfully met — has a small seating island and a bar at one end. Beyond the built-form stands a line of neem trees. The verandah has been deliberately put in as a horizontal element complementing the trees.

BELOW The kitchen wall forms the focus of the living space with its hexagonal cracked yellow tile with wood inlays. The mural is actually a strategy to divert the attention from the utilitarian aspect of the section.

Megha Patel-Vadodaria of firm Patel-Vadodaria Design Research Studio (PVDRS), was commissioned the interiors of this private getaway. “Typically, interior designers are brought on board after the shell and core construction is completed,” says Keyur. “In this case, we were appointed and made part of the team at the outset. This ensured that the overall space planning was in sync with the interior design concepts. Lighting layout, interior finishes and bathroom layouts were all worked out in collaboration with the architectural team.”

For PVDRS, the challenge was to continue the strong sense of openness that the architectural design had proposed. Responding to the architectural design, the interior approach focused on keeping the common areas as one unified large space, removing any physical barriers in-between and simultaneously offering a flexible spatial configuration to cater to various groups, activities and events in space and time. The entire range of furniture was designed to enhance the flow and continuity of space. “We ensured that none of the seating was fixed and further, the seating was made from lightweight MS frames, making it convenient for the client to move it around and rearrange into different layouts based on their need,” says Megha.

The interior design aimed at developing spaces that would be minimalist, elegant and draped in Indian colours and textures while furthering the raw aesthetic established by the architecture. Barring a couple of wired chairs, the entire range of furniture was designed specifically for this project and realized from solid wood reclaimed from the clients’ 70-year-old factory shed. “The figures, grains and veins of the wood are not masked. They are rather celebrated in an application of linseed oil polish. MS in grey colour is used as structural frame as well as ironmongery,” informs Megha. Sparks of colours were added through soft linen/ upholstery against the overall grey canvas of concrete and natural stone. To divert the attention from the “functionalities associated with an open-plan kitchen, the large wall



The wood used in the entire range of furniture was reclaimed from the client’s 70-year-old factory shed. The challenge was to use the available size and quantity of teak wood pieces from the shed. In collaboration with the master carpenters, the PVDRS team carefully grouped together pieces of wood based on their size, grain and colour and then created the entire range of solid wood furniture using a combination of lapped jointing and finger jointing techniques. The bespoke nature was heightened with the use of elements like wooden blocks used for fabric printing and ergonomically-bent metal plates as door handles.



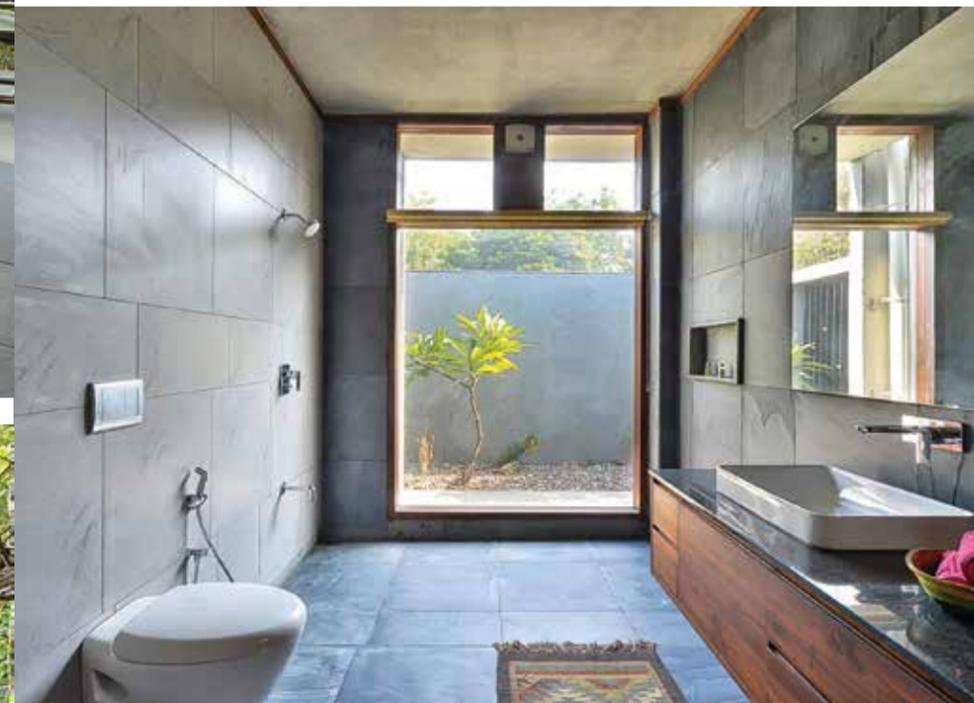
The west side of bedrooms has operable louvres which can be opened to allow ventilation and natural light yet retain privacy and security. Both bedrooms enjoy strong connections with the outdoors: the master bedroom (top) with the verandah and the trees beyond, and the guest bedroom with the central courtyard with its amla tree. Local crafts techniques were employed in reviving old wooden chairs with silk rope weaving (as seen in the master bed).



LEFT & CENTRE The bathrooms see the same raw aesthetic as the rest of the house.

BELOW The walls of the powder room feature in-situ terrazzo technique rendered with waste stone chips.

above the kitchen counter was finished with crackled effect tiles in honeycomb pattern and teak wood inserts of bees — a reflection of the surrounding nature in abstract form,” Megha asserts. In addition to the furniture, PVDRS’s penchant for creating bespoke interiors is also evident in the design of the pendant lighting and door handles.



PVDRS’s focus on sustainability and Keyur’s expertise in energy-efficient buildings, in particular, benefitted The House by the Trees. “Selecting materials and finishes that are natural, local and less energy intensive helps us to reduce the embodied energy of materials. Fortunately, in this project, we were able to reuse wood from the factory shed, which was even better in terms of lowering the embodied energy. We avoid the use of PU polish coating and high VOC paints. We use the age-old technique of linseed oil application with hand. We use fabrics that are again locally made rather than imported... mostly cotton, as opposed to leather, which is totally unsuitable for a hot, dry climate. In this project, we even used waste stone chips into in-situ terrazzo finish in the powder room walls.” explains Keyur.

Minimal, elegant, sensitive to the environment and showcasing impeccable taste, The House by the Trees strikes the right balance between luxury and restraint. With its blurred boundaries between the inside and the outside, it furthers a delightful natural aesthetic that is just what the doctor ordered for city-frazzled nerves! 🌿



FACT FILE: Project House by the Trees, Aranya Farms Location Pallodia, outskirts of Ahmedabad Built-up area 3,600 sq ft Architect Arpan Shah Architecture firm Modo Designs Interior designers Megha Patel-Vadodaria and Keyur Vadodaria Interior design firm Patel-Vadodaria Design Research Studio (PVDRS) Carpenters Kaantibhai, Vishnu bhai and Dineshbhai