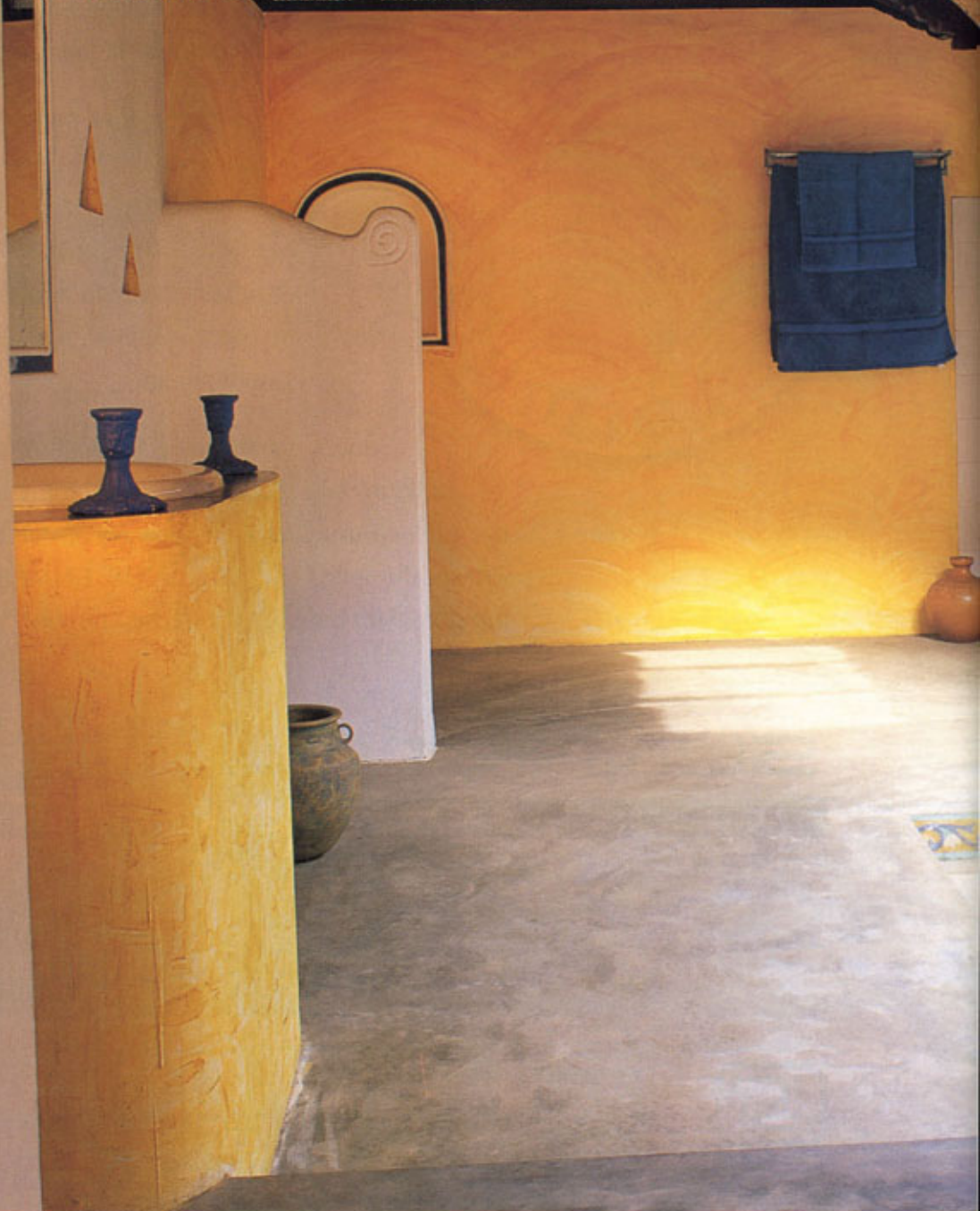
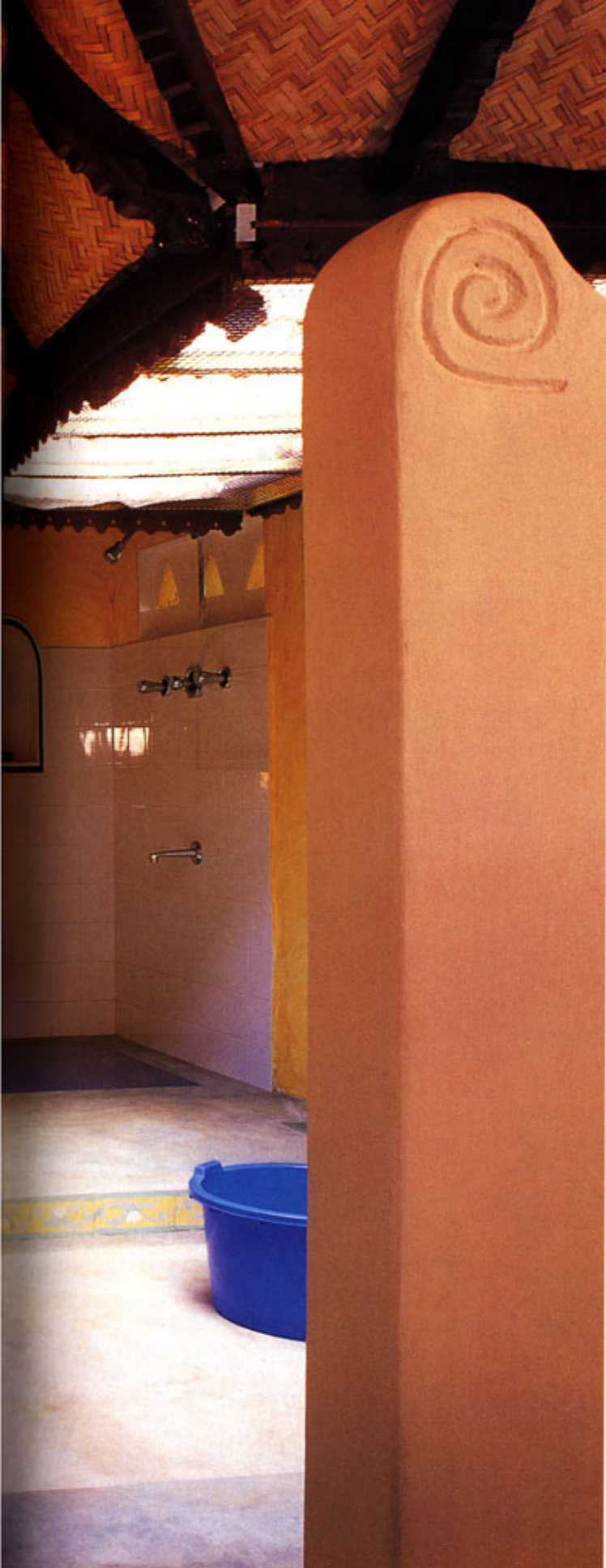


BY THE BAY...

TRADITIONAL OPEN COURTYARDS, AGE-OLD ATTANGUDI TILES AND A SLOPING TILED ROOF fused with flashes of Mediterranean yellow and the azure waters of the Bay of Bengal in the distance... Vishram, a Chennai home designed by Visalakshi Ramaswamy and award-winning architect Benny Kuriakose, is a slice of urban heaven



As I was given a free hand, I gave the home Mediterranean touches, giving walls the textured warmth of golden y



HEADING the M Rm Rm Cultural Foundation that is working tirelessly to preserve dying craft traditions across the country, Visalakshi Ramaswamy's days are filled with excitement. She has revived dying crafts like palm-leaf basket weaving, and has taken them to new heights, giving rural women a new means of livelihood and thereby a confidence they well deserve.

For years, the lady collected doors, windows, stone pillars, furniture and accessories from homes that were being demolished in Chettinaad and Karaikudi, the land her family hails from. At the time, she really had no idea what she was going to do with the growing collection, but was confident something would work out and her collections would find the right home. When the Vishram project came up, it turned out to be the ideal home for all these wonderful pieces crafted caring in the past.

"Right from day one, Benny Kuriakose, the architect and I worked together on Vishram. Being from Kerala, he was keen for the villa to have a sloping multi-level roof and a pond with steps. We simply had to incorporate a traditional courtyard and have huge verandahs, as this was a beachhouse, and stick to the norms of Vaastu," Visalakshi recalls.

Visalakshi and Benny were given a free hand in Vishram. Visalakshi gave the home Mediterranean touches—walls dressed

Being from Kerala, the architect was keen for the villa to have a sloping roof, as also a traditional courtyard and huge verandahs

in the textured warmth of golden yellow, and added unusual design elements. Benny's main focus was on bringing the outdoors in, subtly. That was constantly on their minds as they planned. Water is a cooling element, and Vishram's floors look familiar yet unusual as they are dressed in aquamarine and blue Attangudi patterned and plain tiles.

Traditional Attangudi tiles are red and mustard, but Visalakshi managed to get similar patterns in their colours. These tiles are made such that they age well, curiously becoming brighter and better over time. Keeping the house and the space as cool as possible was a huge criteria, and also the reason why Benny decided on a multi-level sloping roof. When you stand on any part of the verandah you are protected from the harsh glare of an angry sun, and to some extent the heat as well, for Chennai has only one season—summer forever.

To one side of the building stands a traditional mud house, which is currently a centre for craft activities. It has a separate entrance a little away from the main house. "Originally, when it was made, it had a thatched roof that did not quite work out, so we removed that and gave it a tiled roof—just like the rest of the house," Visalakshi says.

At the main entrance a tiny lotus pond sits, and the solitary lotus flower blossoms proudly welcoming as huge leaves reflect the afternoon sun. Kuriakose was very keen on that, and also on

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When you stand on any part of the verandah you are completely insulated from the harsh glare of an angry sun

the bigger pond that is actually a bathing area. He is from Kerala, where water is an integral part of the landscape, and he wanted that in Vishram too; hence the two ponds. The entire house was built by masons brought in especially from Kerala. They have used dry masonry without any restraining cement for the larger pond.

Bathrooms are essential spaces in any home, whatever the design or architectural style, and Vishram is no different. In fact creating a bath space in sync with the look and feel of the home is often one of the greatest challenges. Visalakshi's favourite is the bathroom attached to the bedroom on the first floor that has a small, open skylight. Rain, sunlight, and sometimes even a touch

Little nichés, alcoves, tall doors and windows within the house look out at interesting design aspects

of breeze enter—almost like a mini courtyard. Again, reflecting the Mediterranean influence and preferred hues, textured yellow is interspersed with flashes of dark blue. Bell metal and brass accessories complete the earthy design.

Little nichés, alcoves, tall doors and windows within the house look out at interesting design aspects. Everywhere you look, something captures your eye. An old wooden recliner on the patio invites you to relax, contemplate on life itself while watching butterflies flutter past... The terraces overlook an azure Bay of Bengal shimmering in the hot afternoon sun, or blending into the deep blue velvet night. Waves lap gently sometimes and at others they form walls of water as they break angrily on the beach. On the ground level, gardens and ponds; in the distance, the vastness of the ocean. "I had visualised Vishram as a haven where time waits till you are ready to take on a gruelling city schedule again," Visalakshi says. It has come out 'just so'.