

JURY
speak

INSIDE **O**UTSIDE

Designer of the Year 2001

for weekend retreats

benny
kuriakose



Animated discussion:

Kiran Kapadia, Dean D'Cruz and Nitin Killawala.

The INSIDE OUTSIDE Designer of the Year 2001 award this year received a wide spectrum of entries from all over India, from traditional farmhouses to contemporary getaways, with locations ranging from the Himalayan foothills to coastal groves.

Nitin Killawala, Dean D'Cruz and Kiran Kapadia comprised our distinguished panel of judges. All three have been winners in previous INSIDE OUTSIDE Designer of the Year awards — Kiran Kapadia was nominated Designer of the Year, 2000, for Small Spaces (Residential), while earlier Nitin Killawala had received a special commendation for Atul Vidyalaya, Valsad (Schools), and Dean D'Cruz for the Pousada Tauma Resort, Goa (Resorts).

Many entries were strong contenders for the shortlist. After an exhaustive, animated discussion of the features which characterised each of them, the judges decided that the award should go to BENNY KURIAKOSE for his design for an unusual ocean-side retreat near Chennai.

All the judges stressed that since a weekend retreat must be recognisably different from a city house or an urban solution, the overriding criteri-

on should be how sensitively the built form responds to the location. They commended the winning entry's adaptation of traditional forms for a contemporary context.

Dean D'Cruz noted, 'I believe the design of this retreat explores the vernacular without being over ornate and successfully exploits the varying relationships of the inside to the outside through its pavilion-like architecture.'

Kiran Kapadia felt that Benny's design is a mature response to the client's programmatic needs. 'Benny has made appropriate use of traditional architectural elements, making an interesting juxtaposition of contemporary and traditional elements. Climatically the complex responds in a positive manner to the natural environment.'

Nitin Killawala emphasised that the design satisfies the primary needs of a weekend retreat, in creating spaces which blend with the natural environment. 'Being a relatively small site, the plan is evolved in a manner where a series of structures, fulfilling different functions, opens up in the natural surroundings. Clever use of simple construction techniques and cost-effective materials enhances interesting spaces within the structures and the open spaces which bind them together.'

All three judges commented on the interesting roof of the Pond House, which goes down towards the water, and whose form is reminiscent of the roof of Padmanabhapuram Palace. In conclusion, the judges noted that since in India we are fortunate in having a climate conducive to allowing us to enjoy the outdoors, the pavilion-like architecture is an essential part of the response. **❶**

The judges with the Inside Outside team:

Dean, Nitin, Pervin, Sheila, Kiran, Gauri and Madhavi.



Meet **BENNY KURIAKOSE**

Designer of the Year, 2001

The Kumarakom Resort in Kerala, the public buildings in Dakshinachitra, the design of two earthquake rehabilitation villages after the Latur and Kutch earthquakes, all show in one way or another Benny Kuriakose's exploration of an architectural vocabulary that is cost-effective and appropriate to the environment, in terms of climate, landscape, materials, techniques and idiom.

Benny started his career by joining Laurie Baker on site in 1984: 'Not joining the office, because Baker did not have an office! Here I had my basic lessons in architecture, which involved learning as well as delearning.' Then followed a stint as Joint Director with COSTFORD in Trichur, involving the construction of demonstration buildings using various cost-effective techniques.

After receiving the Charles Wallace India Trust award for an MA in conservation studies at the University of York, Benny joined the Integrated Rural Technology Centre, Palakkad, and worked with the Kerala State Nirmithi Kendra, coordinating training programmes for architectural and civil engineering degrees and diplomas.

In the nineties Benny decided to go back and spend some time in the village where he was born, trying to make some furniture. 'All designers should try their hand at furniture, working in close interaction with craftsmen, learning about various timbers... Even a centimetre makes a huge difference!'

One day, Benny received a call from the actor Mammootty asking him to design his house. 'I went to meet him on location, we worked out various details — and that's how, after a long gap, I decided to come back to architecture.' In 1994, after the earthquake in Latur, Malayala Manorama asked Benny to design the village of Banegaon, which was sponsored by them. He then shifted to Chennai to do the Kerala buildings and the Public Buildings in Dakshinachitra (a project of the Madras Craft Foundation at Muttukadu on the Madras-Mahabalipuram Road). He now decided to start an office in Chennai.

Among Benny's conservation projects are reports on Srirangapatnam, Pondicherry, Anegundi Palace (Karnataka), and the Senate House in Madras University, as well as being a consultant on various INTACH projects.

Recent architectural work includes the layout for the village of Chapredi for the Kutch Earthquake Rehabilitation Project, the layout of the Pain and Palliative Care Centre at Calicut, and the Kumarakom Resort, Kerala. Benny has lectured as visiting faculty at the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, and has been a member on the Task Force on Urban Development for the 8th and 9th Five Year Plans, State Planning Board, Government of Kerala. He has also served as a member on the Government of Kerala's Expert Committee for examining the feasibility of adopting low-cost technology in the construction of school buildings.

His design philosophy? 'I do not want to follow any particular style, but want to design spaces which people would like to use. I do not concentrate much on the elevation, and prefer to use natural materials. I believe that the view of the clients is important and I try to be sensitive about their preferences.' **●**



Traditional craftsmanship, local, eco-friendly materials, and the vibrant colours of the South, mark this weekend retreat near Chennai, created by our award-winning designer Benny Kuriakose.



PHOTOGRAPHS: RAJIV MENON

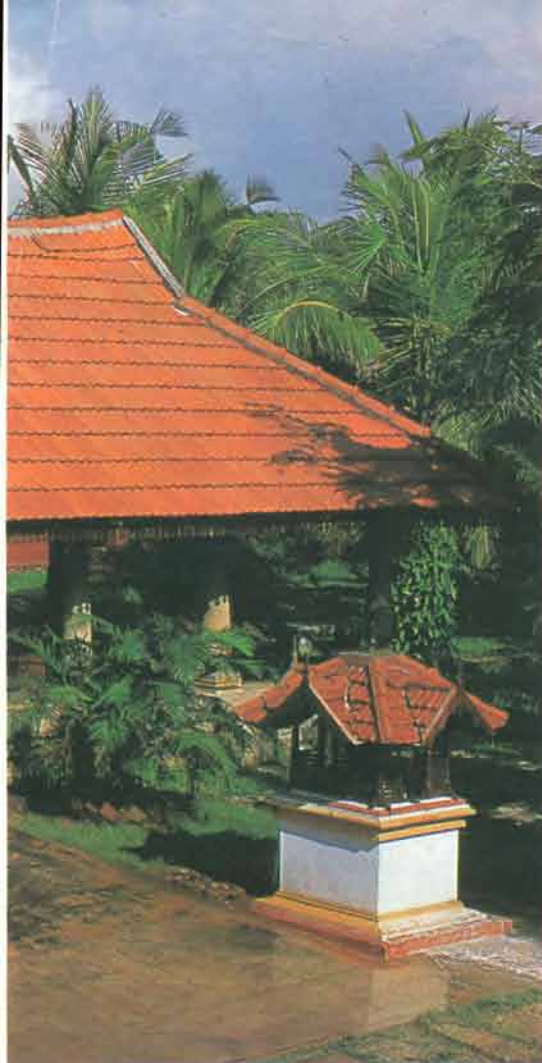
Vishram by the Sea



Vishram, built in the traditional Kerala style, with sloping multi-level roofs, overhanging eaves and deep verandahs.

The rafters and pillars of the small votive shrine to Ganesha at the entrance are also characteristic of the Kerala style.

The multi-level roof is perhaps the most predominant feature in the elevation. 'When you see the building, you see the roof. It slopes down almost to floor level on two sides...so that it becomes a natural thing to touch the roof edge as you pass it.'



‘A beach house should reflect a different perspective from a town house. It should transport you to a different state of being,’ states Benny Kuriakose.

Set on a sloping site facing a magnificent stretch of the Coromandel Coast, halfway down the road from Chennai to Mahabalipuram, this house combines two distinct influences. The first derives from the traditional building styles of Kerala, where Benny comes from. The second draws on certain elements from Chettinad, the land of the Nattukottai Chettiars, further down south in Tamil Nadu — home to Visalakshi Ramaswamy, the interior designer for the project.

‘You need to be in touch with the outdoors,’ says Benny, ‘but naturally in a tropical climate such as ours, we don’t actually enjoy being in the sun too much.

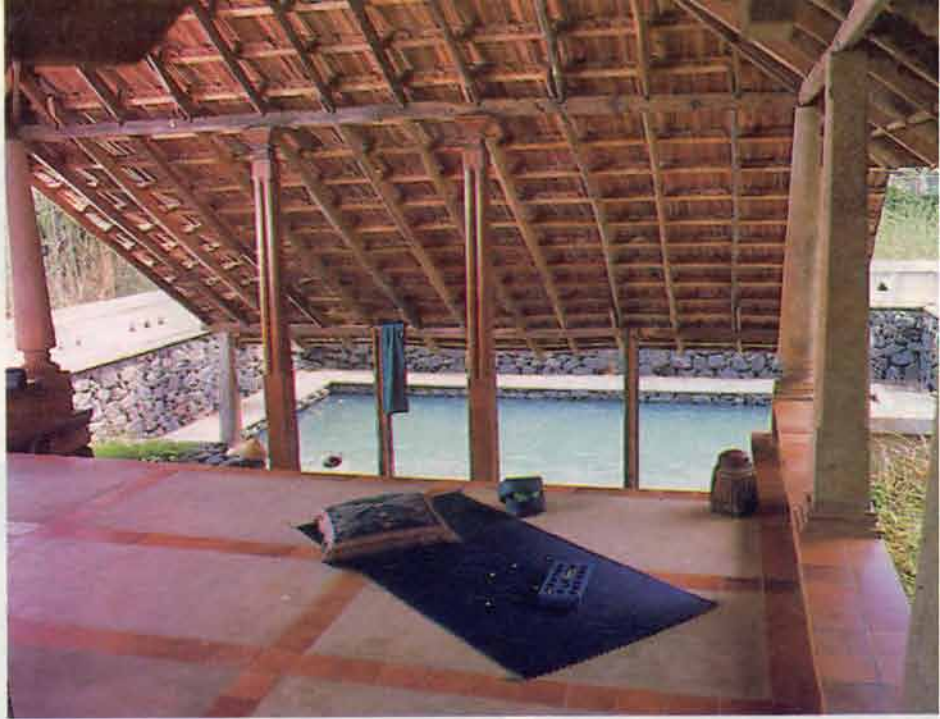
In fact, if you stand under one of these traditional roofs, you cannot see the sky at all,’ he says, pointing to the lacy fringe of fretwork that defines the eaves of the sloping roof on both sides, creating a visually soothing curtain against the glare and light of a sandy landscape.

‘In vernacular architecture, this situation has been brilliantly addressed by the use of courtyards and of verandahs with overhanging sloping roofs. So when Visalakshi and I discussed the plan, one of the first things we decided upon was to create these wide enclosed verandahs on two sides of the house, facing towards the north and the east.’

He points to an open courtyard that stands at the angle between the two pillared and tiled verandahs and says that he had originally planned to have a water body here. However, since the client was keen on keeping to the principles of vastu, this plan was







Traditionally, in Kerala the enclosed pond or bathing area, not only acts as a natural catchment area for rainwater, but with its deeply sloping roof and protected sides, used to serve as a bathing pool for the ladies of the house.

The pond here was inspired by the temple tanks of Kerala where one can go down the steps and touch the water, and luckily, the water table was not very low. Benny brought in masons from Kerala to build it with dry rubble masonry, and no cement was used for the retaining wall on the sides of the pond. With low seating and simple flooring worked into a pattern of checks with burnt clay tiles, the Pond House is a perfect area for relaxing and reclining.





The Mud House has been built as an informal space for craft activities and performances. Separate from the main house, it has a hall with two flanking rooms. Originally the roof was thatched, but it has now been replaced with a tiled roof.



AIR MOVEMENT THROUGH THE HOUSE

modified, and now there is a small lotus pond below the front verandah. The house was built on the highest point of the naturally sloping, 2098 sq m plot, so the larger pond, the traditional 'tank', was built a little further away from the house, with its own steeply sloped roof and stone steps leading down to the water's edge, as in any temple tank. The slope of the site has been effectively used to give privacy for the various areas, while the multi-level terrace makes the most of the sea views.

design features

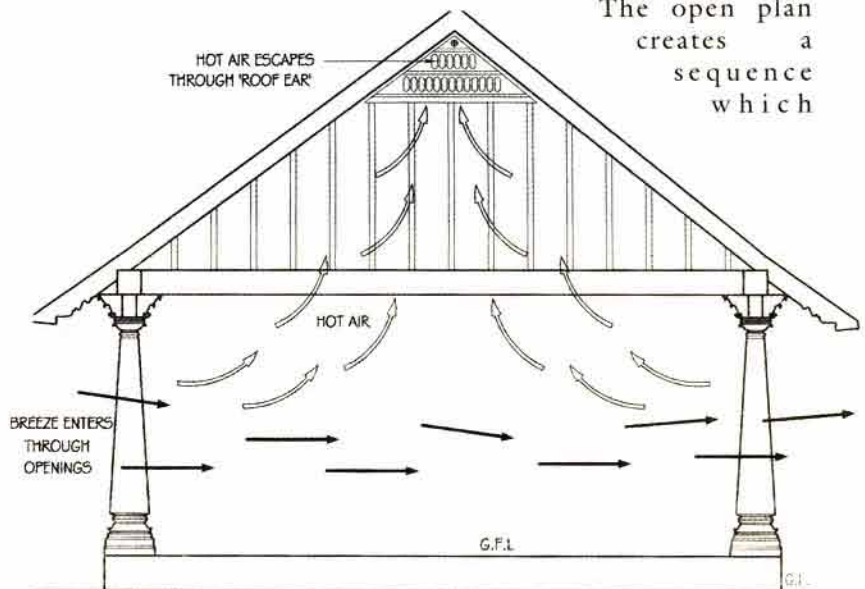
Benny's use of traditional elements within a contemporary context is outstanding. The high sloping multi-level roof with deep overhangs, roof ears, bamboo-mat ceiling, a 'mittam' (courtyard) and large verandahs, are appropriate for the climate. An open plan makes for a free flow of spaces at the multiple split levels, and natural light and

cross-ventilation have been maximised. The construction has been done according to traditional methodology, using fretwork and niches, and timber joinery without nails. The combination of local, eco-friendly materials and traditional craftsmanship, as well as recycled materials, has made this a cost-efficient house.

The rest of the wood used is 'country timber' (eucalyptus and palm trees), rather than the more expensive teak or rosewood. Granite columns, stone slabs, windows and doors have been rescued from old Chettinad houses. The Mud House has mud walls — naturally — and dry stone masonry is the low-cost option for the pond.

Vaastu guidelines have been followed for orienting the different functional spaces in specific quarters. More land was left vacant in the north and east, the master bedroom is located in the south-west, the kitchen in the south-east, and the verandah in the north and east.

The open plan creates a sequence which



AIR MOVEMENT



ABOVE: The thinnai, or stone seating made of granite, for casual visitors, just outside the main door to the house. The traditional red and yellow of the Athangudi flooring tiles were modified and the tiles here are in mellow shades of mediterranean blue, aquamarine green and lemon yellow.

OPPOSITE: In the north-facing verandah, the height of the pillars has been extended by placing them on simple square pedestals, made of cement and painted in layers of blue-green and yellow. The furniture has been kept to a minimum. This is where the family likes to spend most of the time. To the right, you can just see the sunken space, now bricked over, which was originally meant to be a water body with the water flowing under the granite slab. It now marks the area linking the two main verandahs.

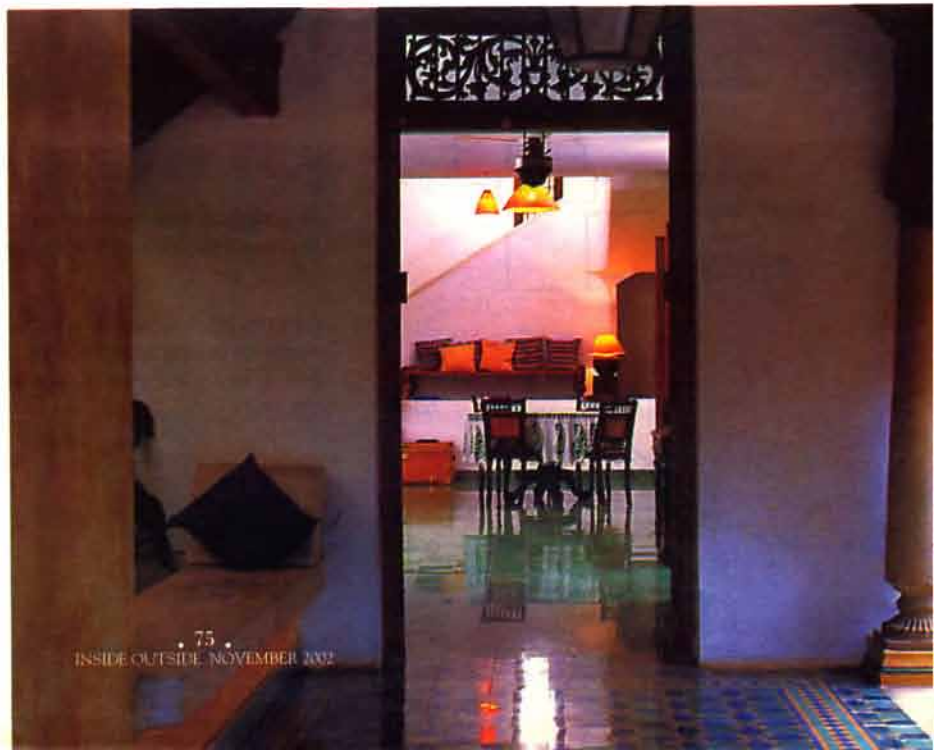
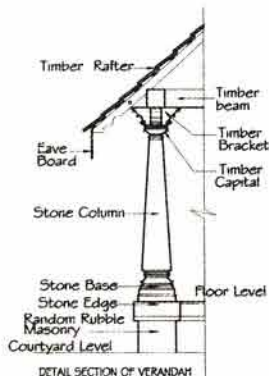


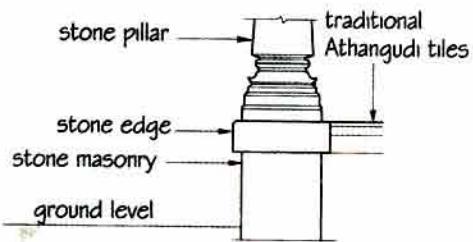
As though to pick up the early morning sunshine, the walls outside the house have been hand-painted yellow in a rough design. Seen through the mellow gloom of the tiled roof and the surrounding green of the casuarina trees and palms that have been planted to serve as additional light breakers, the yellow walls have a wonderfully welcoming air.

begins with the entrance and the public areas, then leads into the slightly more private areas, and finally to the most private domains. The sequence consists of the gate, entrance verandah, internal verandah, living room, dining room, kitchen and lastly the bedrooms.

The design of the large pond, explains Benny, 'was inspired by the temple tanks of Kerala where one can go down the steps and touch the water, and luckily, here the water table was not very low. I decided to bring in masons from Kerala who do dry rubble masonry, and no cement was used for the retaining wall on the sides of the pond.'

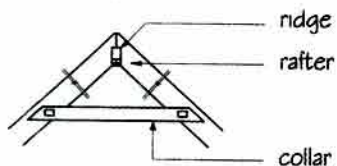
The Pond House in dry stone masonry, with low seating and simple flooring worked into a pattern of checks with burnt clay tiles, forms a perfect area for relaxing and reclining. For craft activities and occasional performances a Mud House — two rooms and a central verandah — is set amidst coconut palms and bamboo.



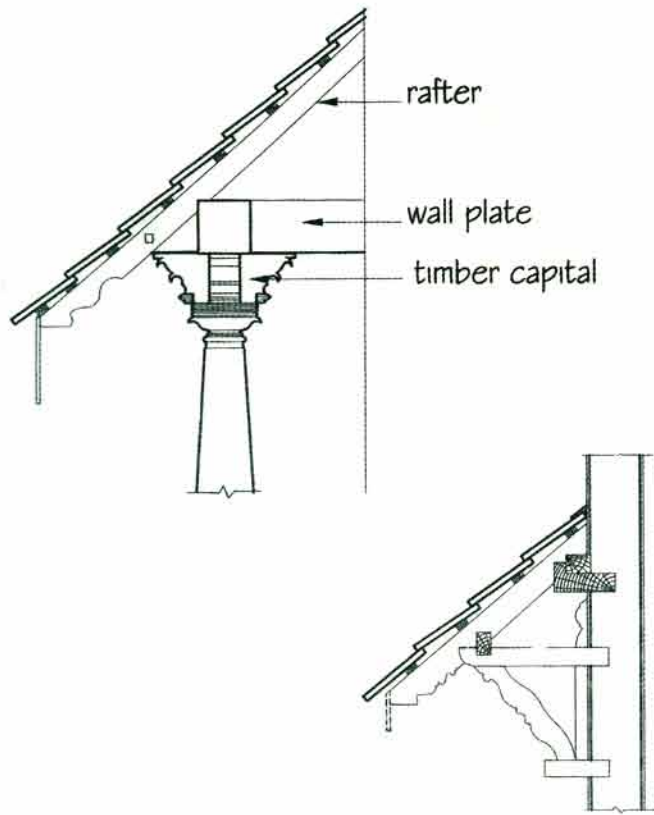


ABOVE: The large foyer with windows and doors opening into it from all four sides, to create a natural flow of air throughout the house.

OPPOSITE: The terrace, with triangular niches in the walls, which were originally meant for placing lamps at night. The bamboo mats used to line the tiled roof are both attractive and provide insulation against the heat.



the play of elements



SUNSHADE BRACKET DETAIL

The mittam commands a view of the larger open space outside. Two doors open from the house into it, one of which also connects to it through a verandah. The spacious, 14-ft-wide verandah forms the centre of gravity in the house (although it is in the north-east, in conformity with vastu). All the rooms open into it and the pathways in and out of the building are part of it. The transition between the inside and outside of the building is gradual — being in the verandah one is partly inside, yet still connected to the outside.

The roof is perhaps the most predominant feature in the elevation. As Benny says, 'When you see the building, you see the roof.' It slopes down almost to floor level on two sides, is higher on the south-west side, and slopes down again towards the north and east. The verandah roof almost dips to ground level, 'so that it becomes a natural thing to touch the roof edge as you pass it.'





ABOVE: The open-plan living area with a raised platform that allows additional seating. The divan is made out of a traditional Kerala wooden bed, with turned wood legs, and Athangudi tiles decorate the risers on the steps. The white cement banisters resemble the famous Chettinad white shell plaster, and the key-shaped windows with their fanlight ventilators are also a typical Chettinad touch. The wooden window frames were painted aquamarine and then scraped and flamed to create an antique effect.

OPPOSITE: The dining table, designed by Visalakshi of deal wood, has ceramic tiles set in the sides along the frame. Niches in the nine-inch-thick walls form display areas for a collection of baskets.



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Once you are inside the magnificent verandah space, the first thing that you notice are the colours. Visalakshmi selected the colour scheme, the flooring, designed the bathrooms, and chose the furniture. Benny says, 'She modified the traditional red and yellow of the Chettinad Athangudi cement glazed tiles with a colour scheme of her own.' The tiles here are in beautiful mellow shades of mediterranean blue, aquamarine green and lemon yellow. As though to pick up the early morning sunshine, the walls outside the house have been hand-painted in a rough design using the same kind of yellow. Seen through the mellow gloom of the tiled roof and the surrounding green of the casuarina trees and palms that have been planted to serve as additional light breakers, the yellow walls have a wonderfully welcoming air...





VISALAKSHI RAMASWAMY

Interior designer Visalakshi Ramaswamy heads the M Rm Rm Cultural Foundation Trust which is involved in documenting and reviving the crafts and architecture of Chettinad. The major activities of the Trust include the documentation of Chettiar Mansions, the revival of traditional baskets called 'Kottan' and the egg plaster of Chettinad. She is the co-author of the book 'The Chettiar Heritage' along with S Muthiah and Meenakshi Meyyappan. Earlier she had organised the craft development and exhibitions in Dakshinachitra for which Benny had done some of the buildings.



LEFT: The bathroom with brightly painted walls in vibrant cadmium yellow. White shiny plaster has been used on the partitions that separate the washing area. The niche outlined with blue picks up the touches of blue that give the small bathroom its charming character. Accessories have been kept simple: authentic period furniture, basketry work, and brass and bell metal artefacts.

BELOW: The bedrooms, with original wooden doors and metal bars, have deliberately been kept small, with just the minimum amount of furniture, since according to Benny, being at a weekend retreat one wants to be with the family and friends.

Natural, organic,

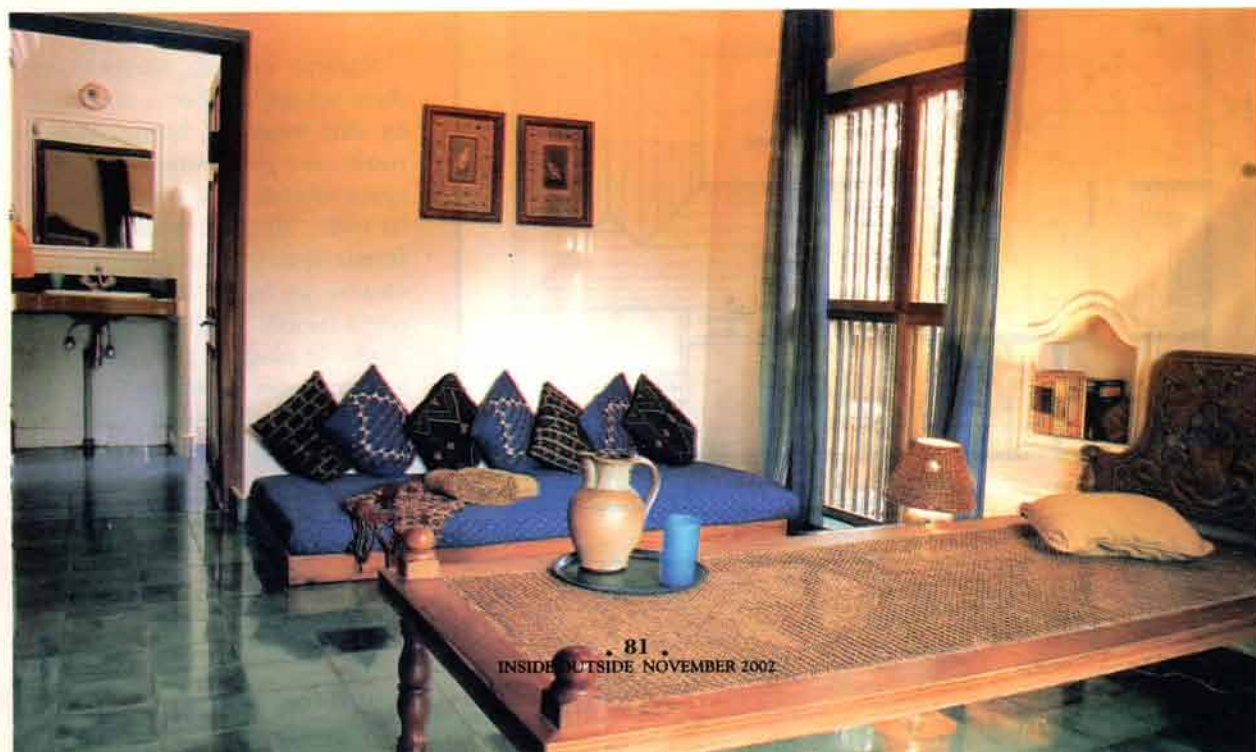
harmonious...

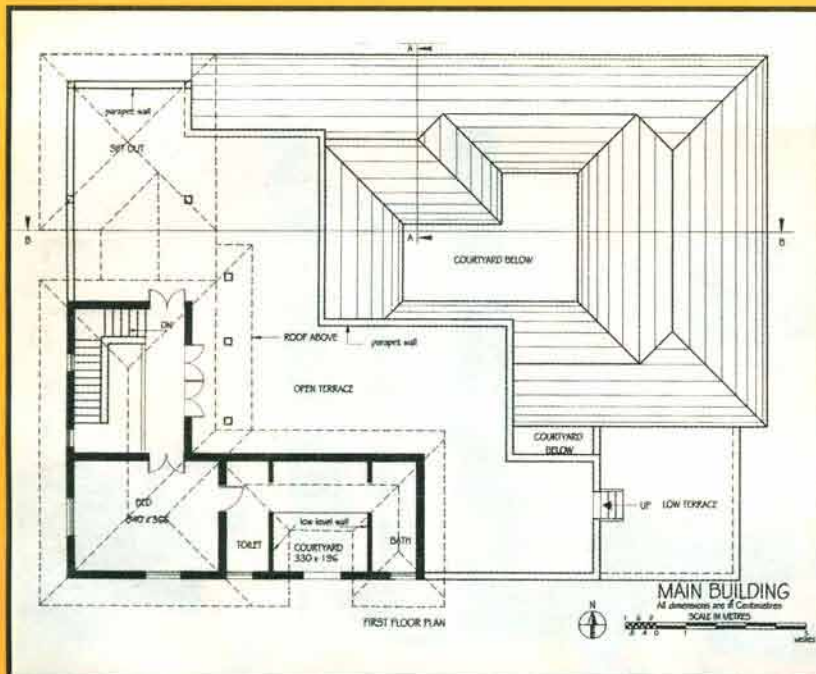
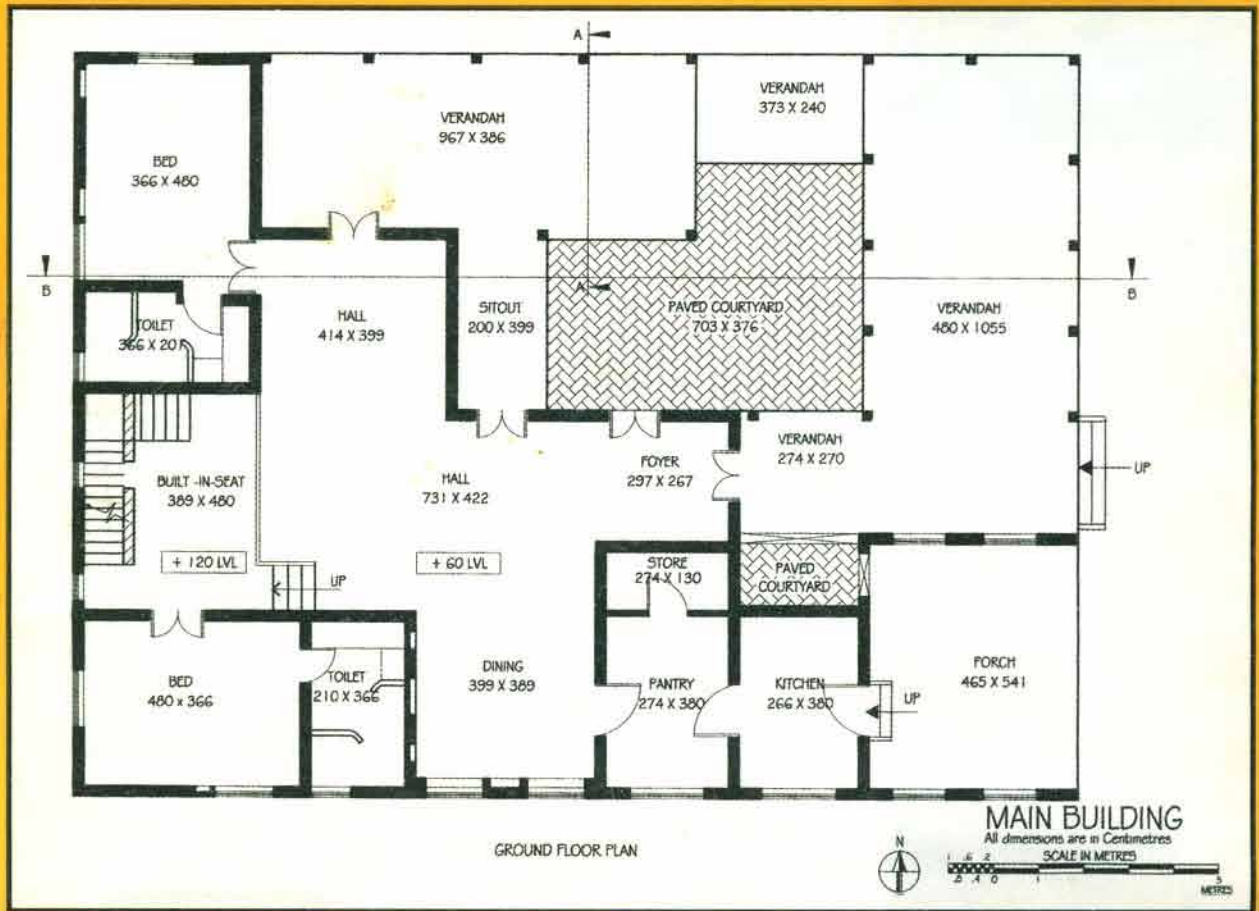
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Natural, organic, harmonious: these are the attributes celebrated by this weekend home. Benny took care to ensure that each space would have a character of its own, 'so there would be different spaces which one could choose to be in depending on one's mood. Each person has a favourite place in the house; my favourite one is where I can sit on the rough granite steps of the pond, looking at the fish and the water and see the reflection of the trees and the walls in the pond.' **1**