





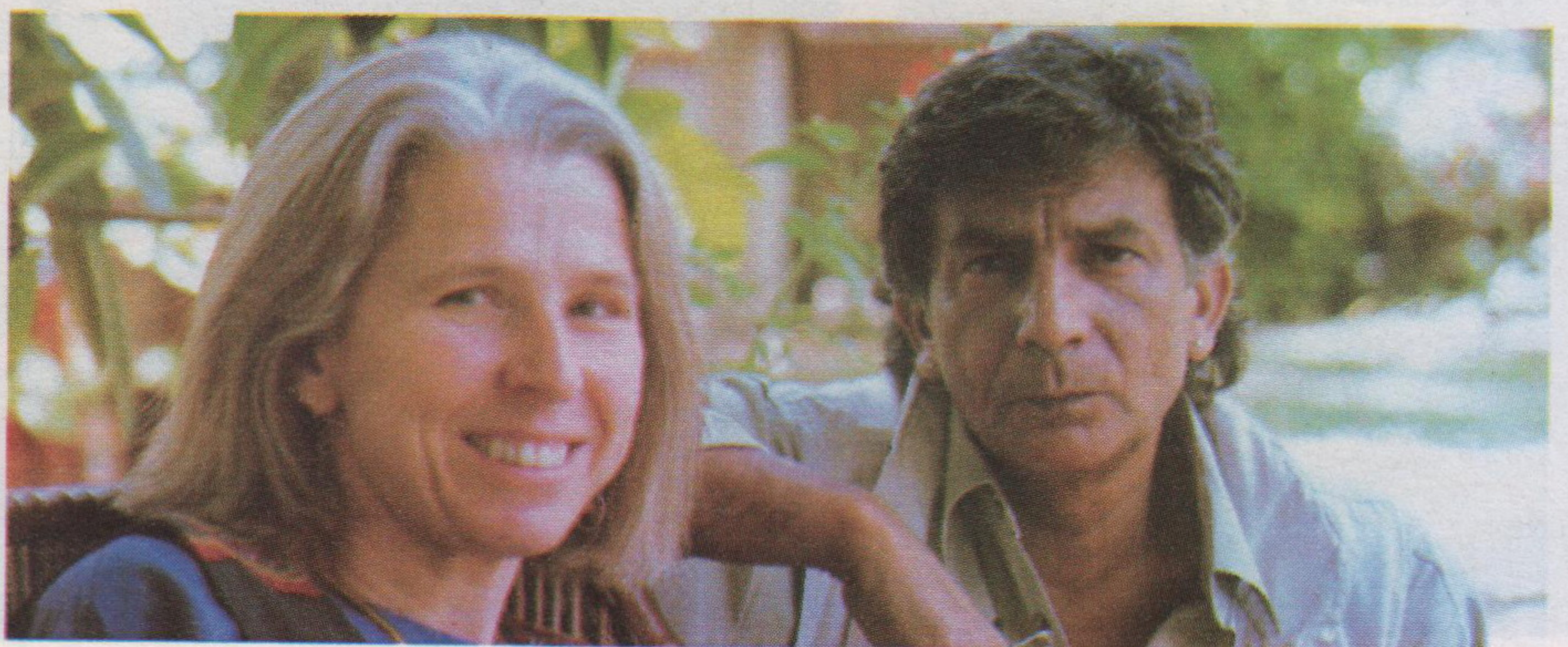
**Parul
Zaveri
and
Nimish
Patel**

SET IN AMBER

Restoring the grand but crumbling Chanwar Palkiwalon ki Haveli in Amber was a joint labour of love for John and Faith Singh and the architectural team of Abhikram, founded by Nimish Patel and Parul Zaveri. Together they recreated its former magnificence, which won it a UNESCO Heritage Conservation Award.

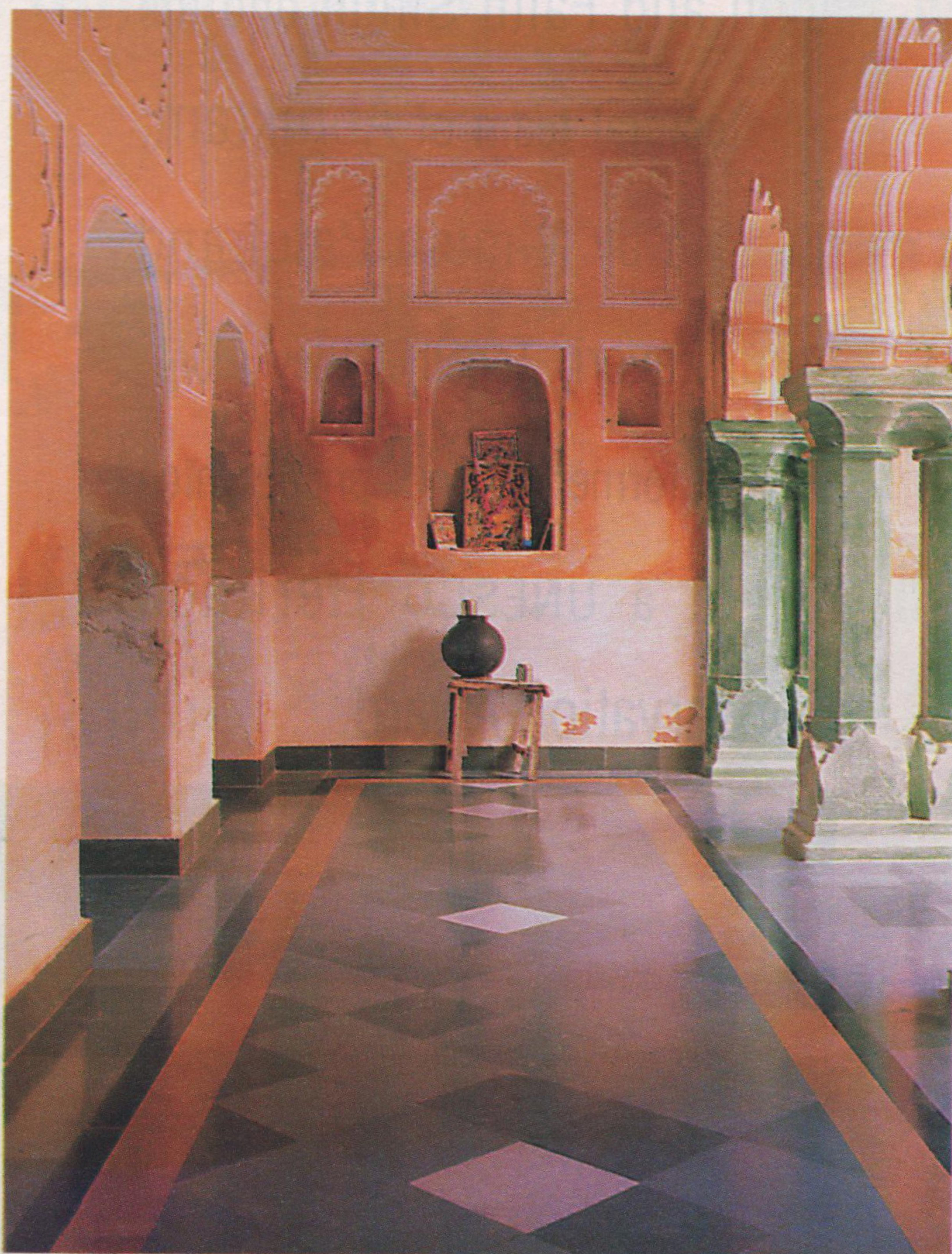
**Faith
and
John
Singh**

**TEXT: JOHN SNELSON
PHOTOGRAPHS: HENRY WILSON**





**Abhikram
describe their
work as
'attempting
continuity with
the past
without
fossilising it,
and a change
for the future
without making
it incongruent'.**



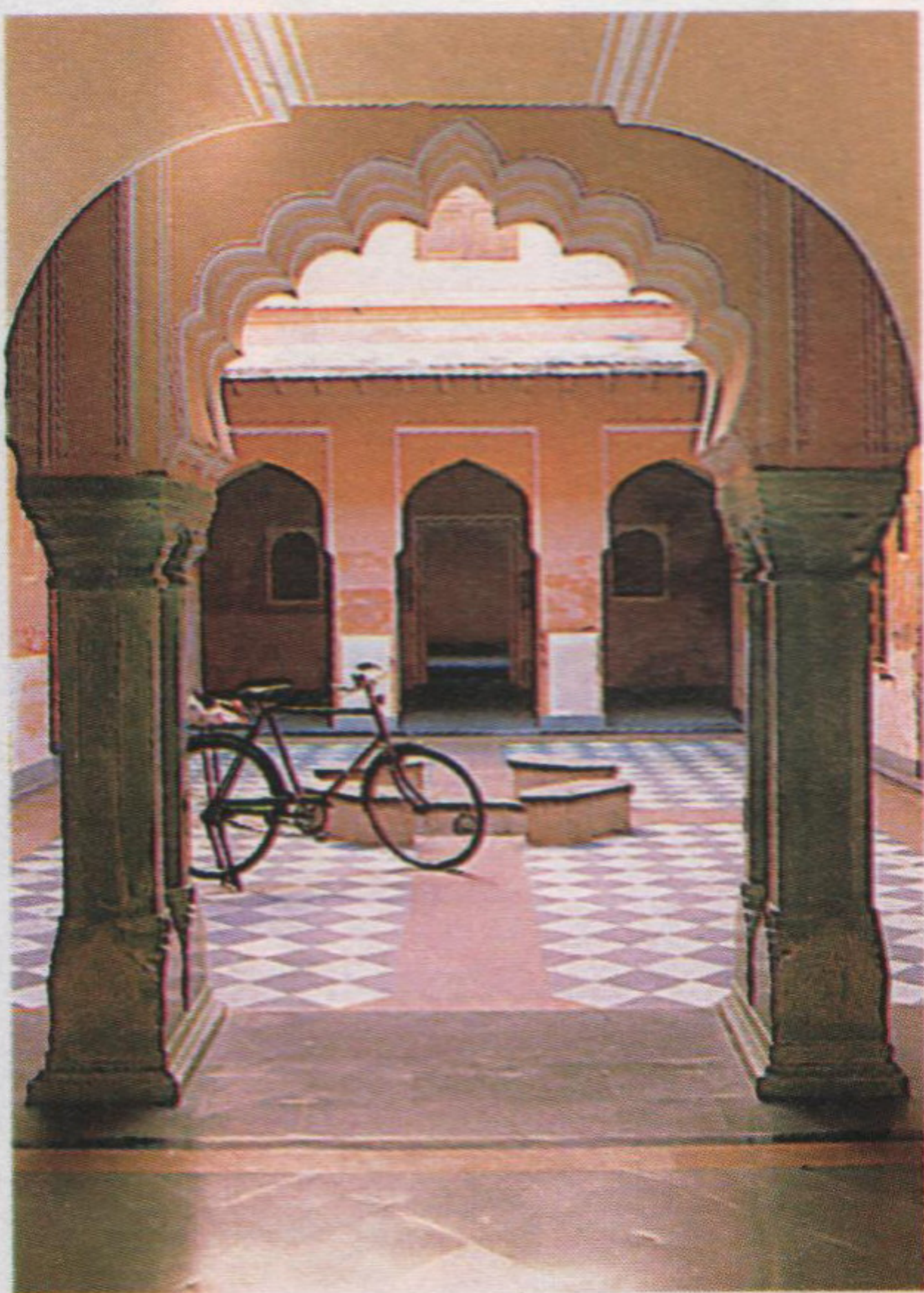
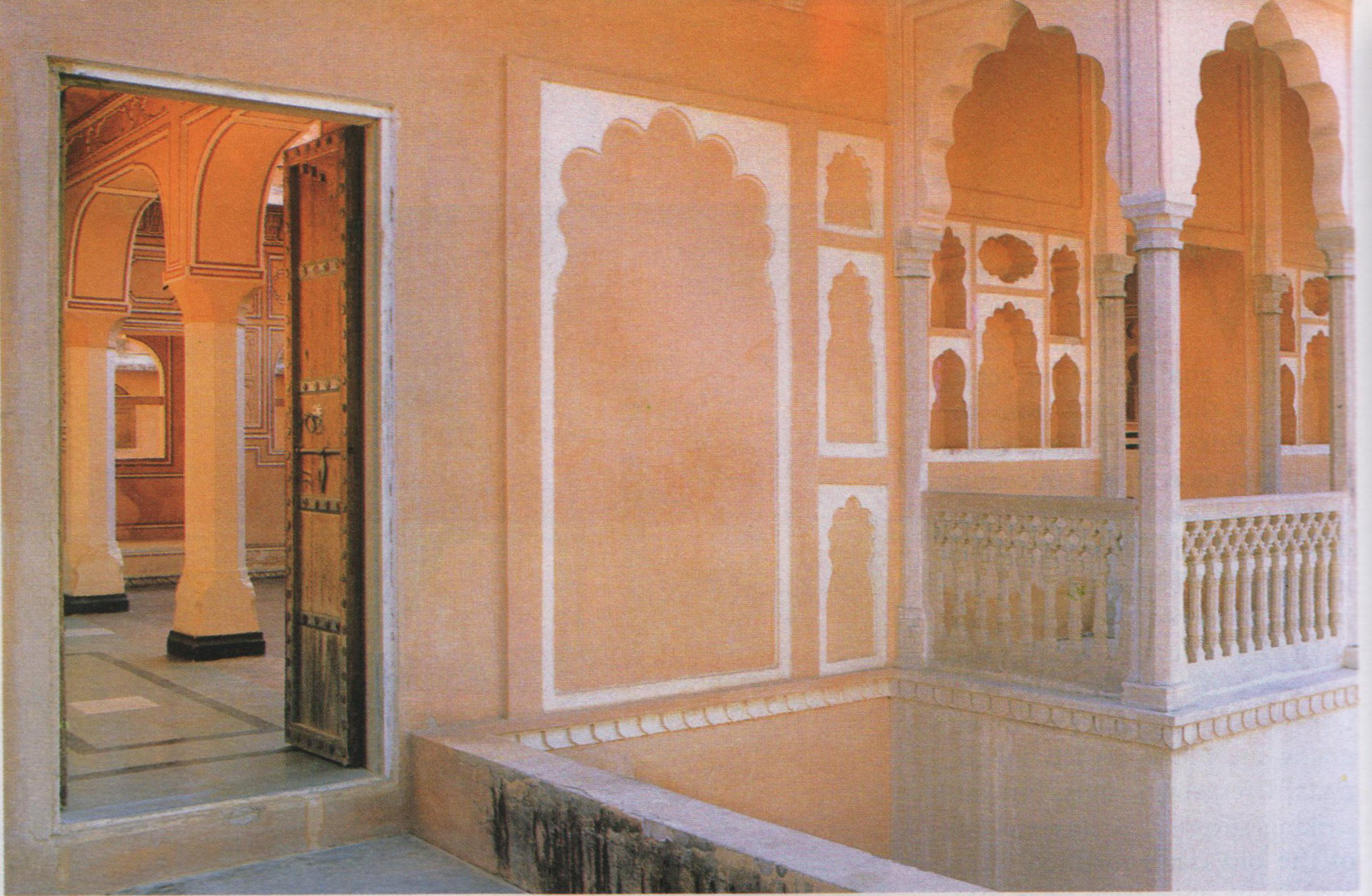
This courtyard, with its colonnades and painted niches, demonstrates how Parul and Nimish made the most of the original mansion's aesthetics: simplicity of form, combined with intricacy of ornamentation. Massive stone walls and breezy corridors ensure natural cooling in these desert climates.

When Raja Jai Singh instigated the new walled city of Jaipur in 1727 in Rajasthan, and moved his centre of power there, away from the Amber Fort and Palace a few kilometres away, the 11th century town of Amber was gradually deserted. It had first developed in the valley below the fort and palace to serve the court, but with its source of support removed, its buildings increasingly fell into decay. The atmospheric site today has few inhabitants, overgrown ruins, but one striking surprise. Built onto one of the old city's fortified walls, next to its impressive Kher gateway arch, is the Chanwar Palkiwalon ki Haveli, recently restored after nearly three centuries of decay.

The haveli was restored as an experiment by John and Faith Singh — the founders of the famous block-print textile company, Anokhi. As regional convenor for INTACH, John Singh realised the need to find out exactly what the cost and effort would be for a task he described as 'constant fire-fighting'. He bought the derelict property in the early 1990s to use it as a testing ground to discover what it would take to bring one of these cultural relics back to some sort of useable state. The idea of saving all this architectural heritage was much talked about at the time — but actually doing it was too much like hard work for most.

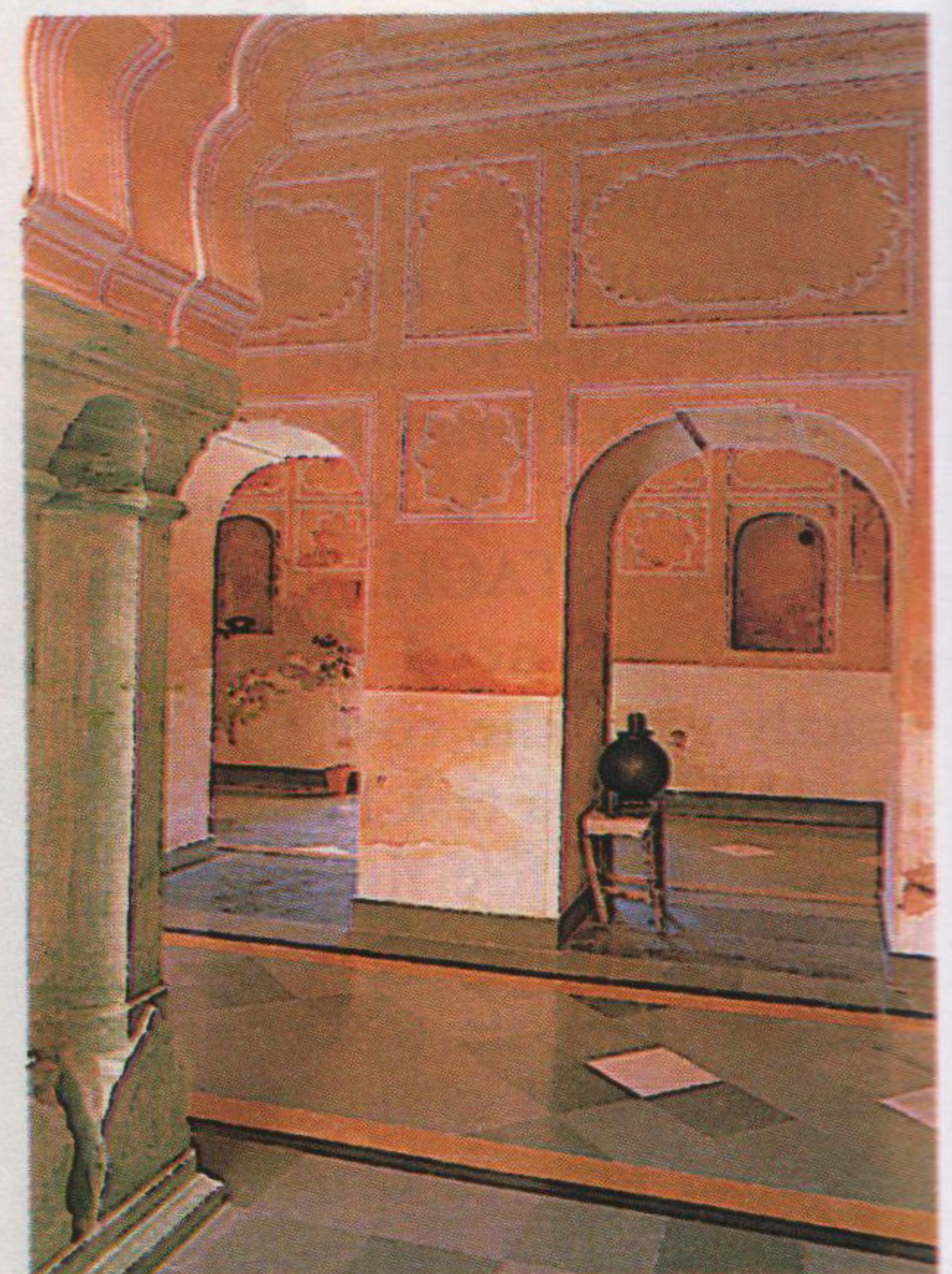
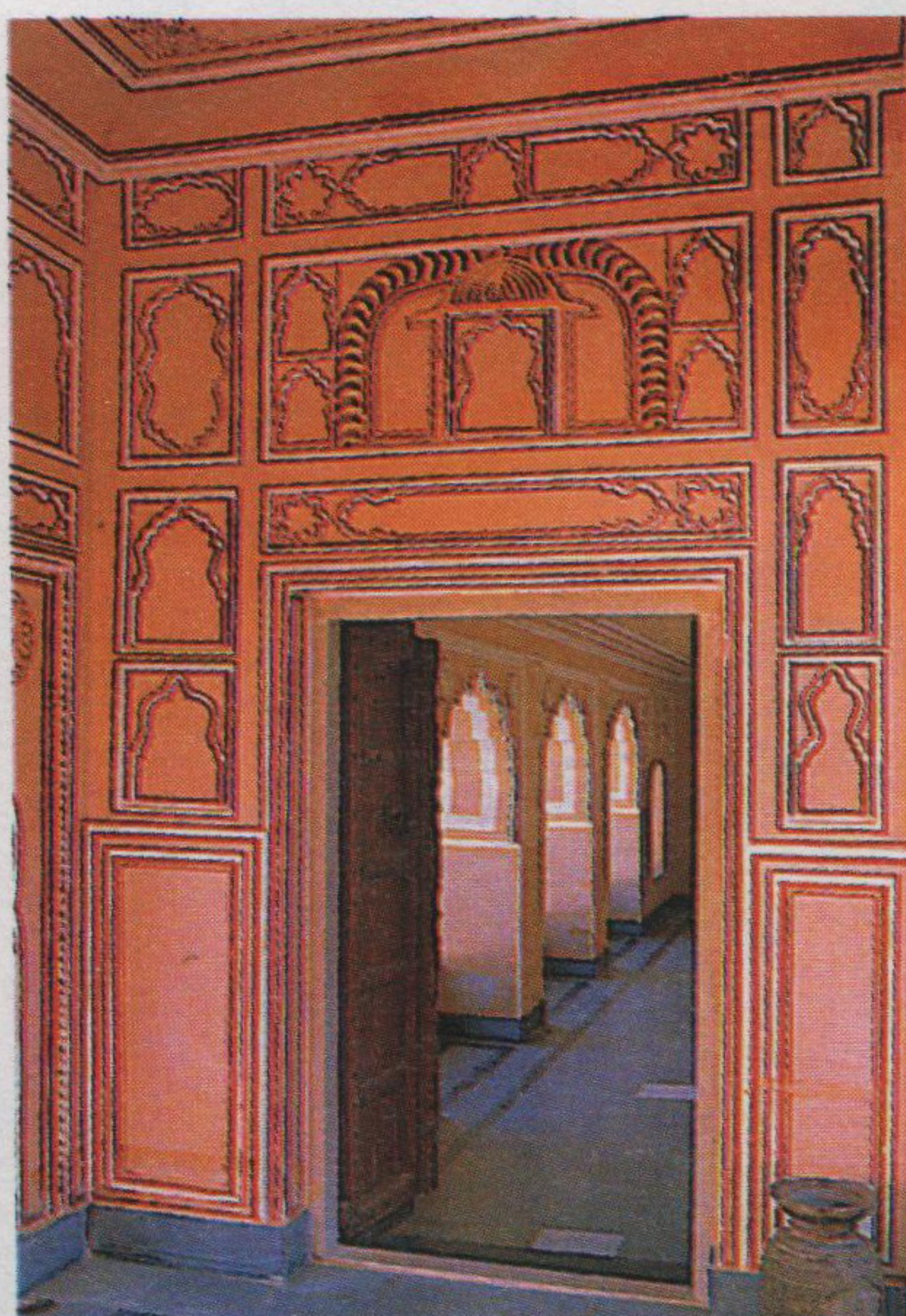
John Singh drew on the expertise of the architecture and design company Abhikram, founded in 1979 by Nimish Patel and Parul Zaveri. Abhikram — the Sanskrit word for 'initiation'





Exquisite details and meticulous restoration make one recall John Singh's exclamation: 'I don't think anyone builds using local materials, except damn fools like us!'

Arches and niches form a constant refrain, and Abhikram experimented successfully with traditional finishes such as aarish, a paste of crushed shells, lime, oil and sugar that sets to look like marble.

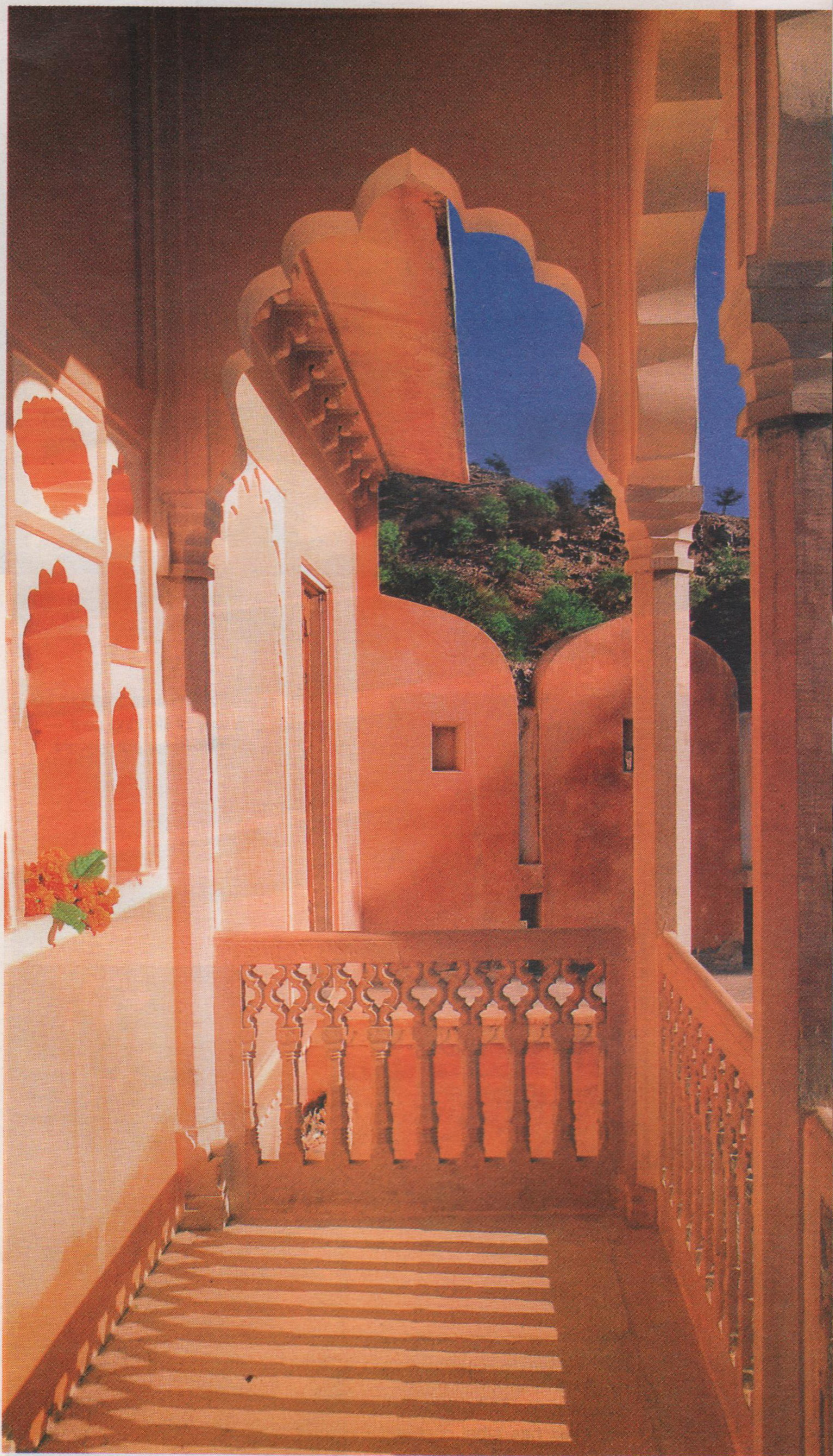


Baradaris (verandah bays) and courtyards epitomise the quintessential Rajasthan atmosphere.

— was established to create architecture founded on the conservation of resources and the continuation and development of Indian traditions. They describe their work as ‘attempting continuity with the past without fossilising it, and a change for the future without making it incongruent’. They worked with only the most essential of drawn plans, relying on the skill and sense of the craftsmen to reconstruct the original building. It took some 50 workers and four years, from 1989 to 1993, to rebuild and restore the ruined haveli. They used only traditional methods, a task that involved much experimentation: ‘I don’t think anyone builds using local materials except damn fools like us,’ says John.

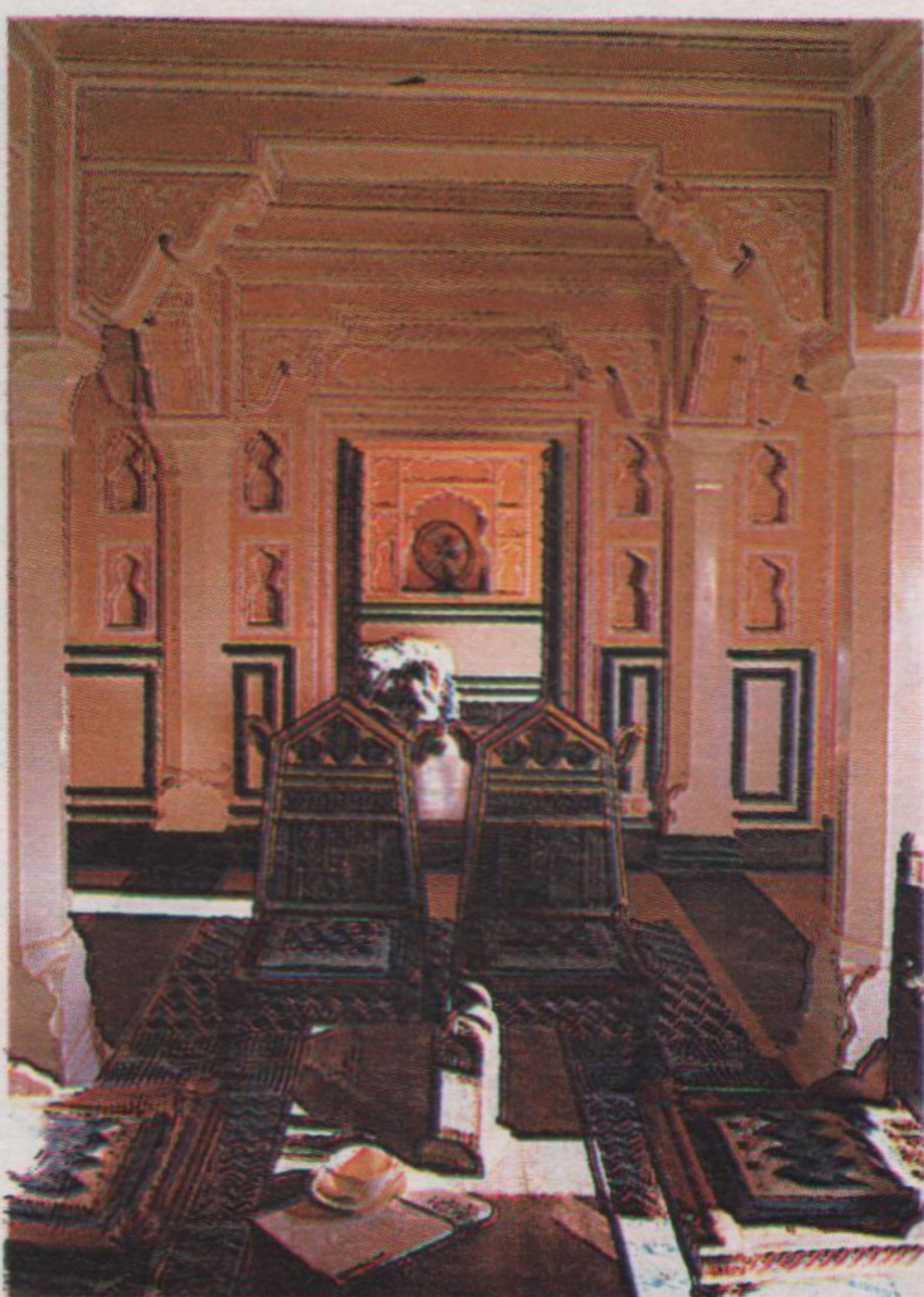
There is an extraordinary atmosphere about standing alone in a building that is so old and yet looks so new. But, of course, this is no empty building, no blank canvas. The architecture alone represents a whole tradition of construction linked to a whole way of life. The name ‘haveli’ is derived from a Persian word meaning ‘enclosed’, and the building is constructed around a series of walled spaces, each of increasing intimacy.

The first courtyard would have been used for receiving guests and for formal ceremonies. From small high windows the women of the zenana could look down unseen onto the business affairs below. A stairway off the main courtyard leads up steep stairs to a small, dark entranceway. To the right is the public area and main rooms of the master of the haveli, while the way through a small and concealed courtyard leads to the private area where





think anyone builds using local materials except damn fools like



Elegant, sparsely furnished interiors bring in echoes of a way of life long past — but one whose aesthetics are still relevant.

Sensitive furnishings with natural dyes and hand-crafted artefacts emphasise continuity with tradition. The low strung chair has tribal origins, indicated by its roughly carved design.



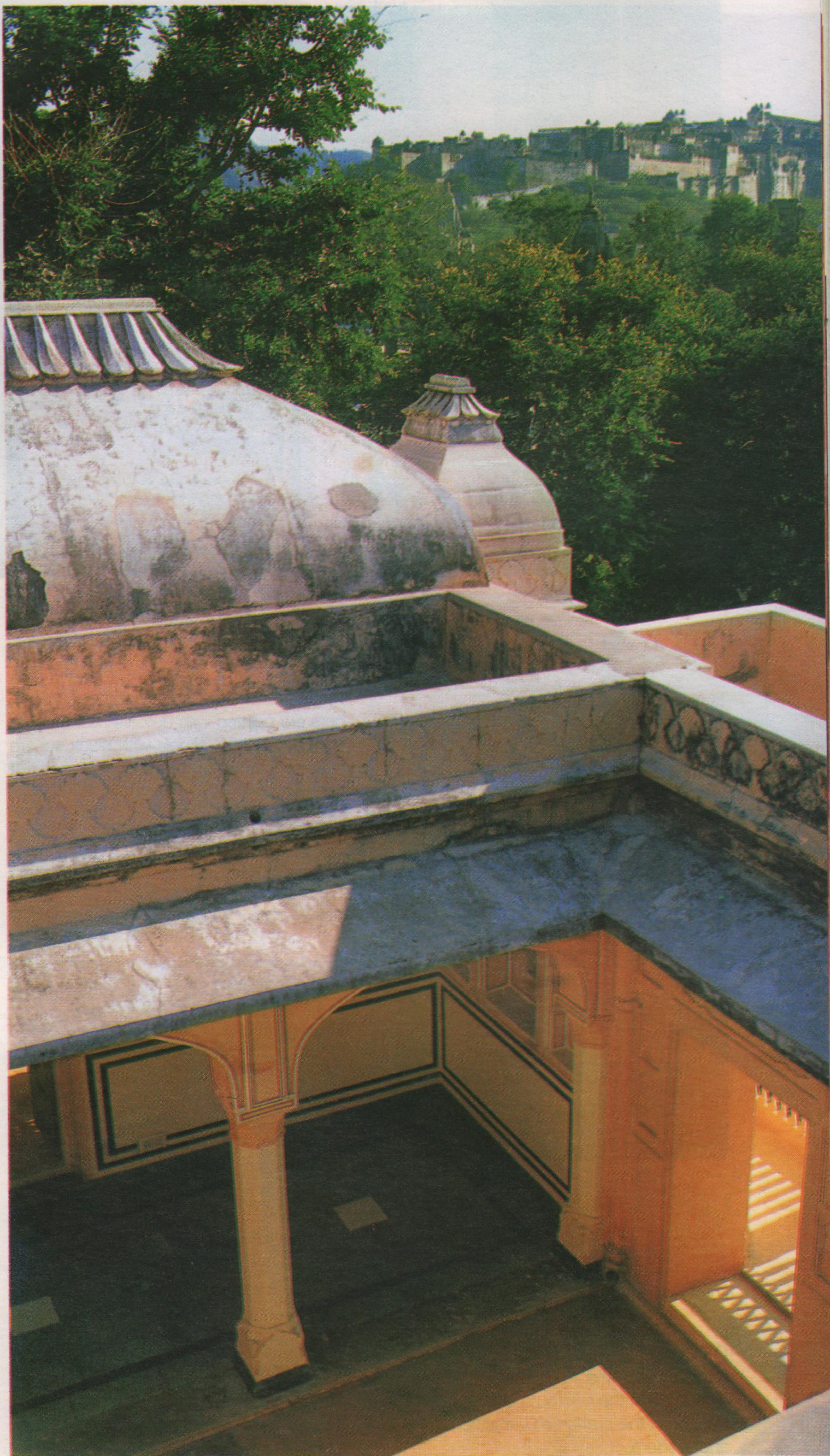
of the scene could look down unseen onto the business affairs below. A stairway off the main courtyard leads up steep stairs to a small, dark entranceway. To the right is the public area and main rooms of the master of the

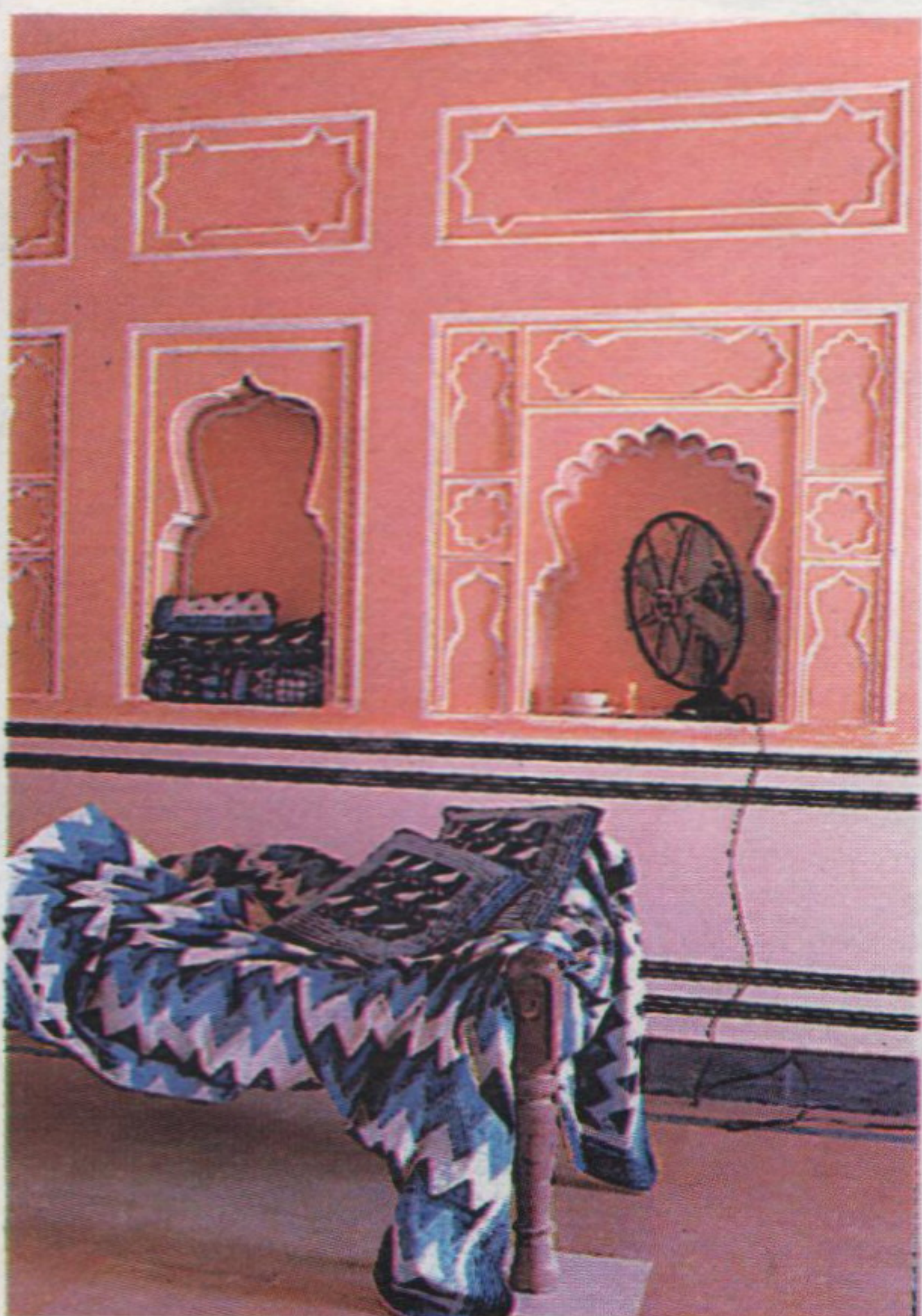
OPPOSITE: This old mansion has low windows and high walls to prevent direct sunlight in the searing summers from heating the rooms.

the women lived: no windows here on the outside walls to let prying eyes in.

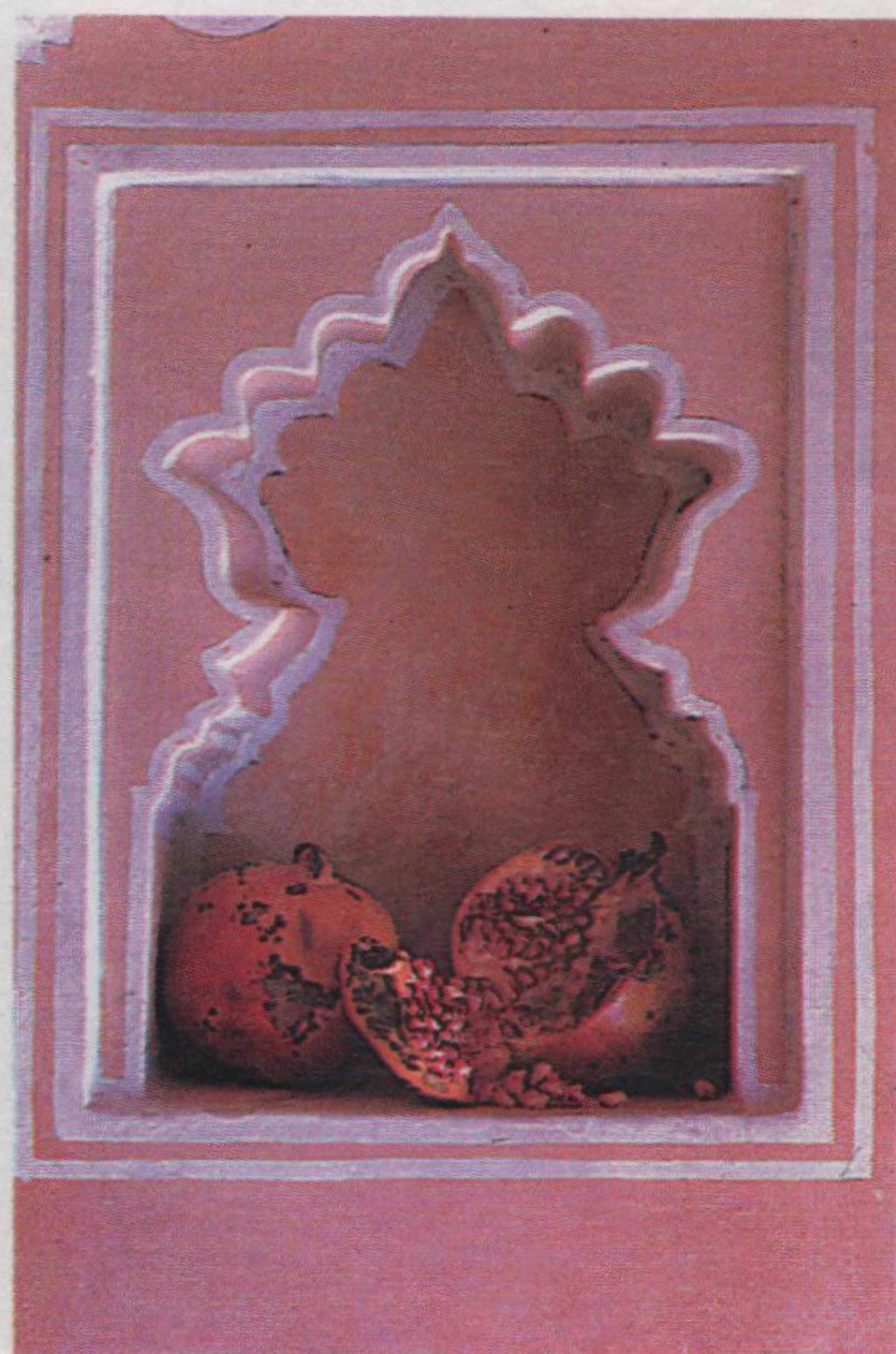
The priorities of the original builders are very much in evidence today, although the atmosphere is now one of space and tranquillity. Such care was taken to decorate the building with intricate carvings by the door and decorative columns: practical but always pleasing to see. Many of the columns are finished with aarish — a traditional fine paste made of crushed shells, lime, oil and sugar that when set, looks like marble. The natural air-conditioning of the design is in strong contrast to the energy-intensive contemporary mechanisms. This old mansion has low windows and high walls to prevent direct sunlight in the searing summers from heating the rooms. The pillared entrance is shaded and cool, and the corridors are enclosed with thick stone which lets the temperature remain bearable, even in the extremes of winter and summer. The haveli has been given the typical terracotta wash that intensifies at sunset to resemble the pink of the city of Jaipur.

The family has furnished the haveli sparsely, as something of an antidote to their more hectic lives running Anokhi, their firm which has been instrumental in reviving and popularising the Jaipur block-printing tradition. The Anokhi fabrics, printed with natural dyes, echo the architectural aesthetic of this stone building. The indigo prints are typical of the area, the blue colour representing Krishna. The rich reds and oranges again indicate the Rajasthani taste for brightness, possibly as an antidote to the earthen tones of this desert state.



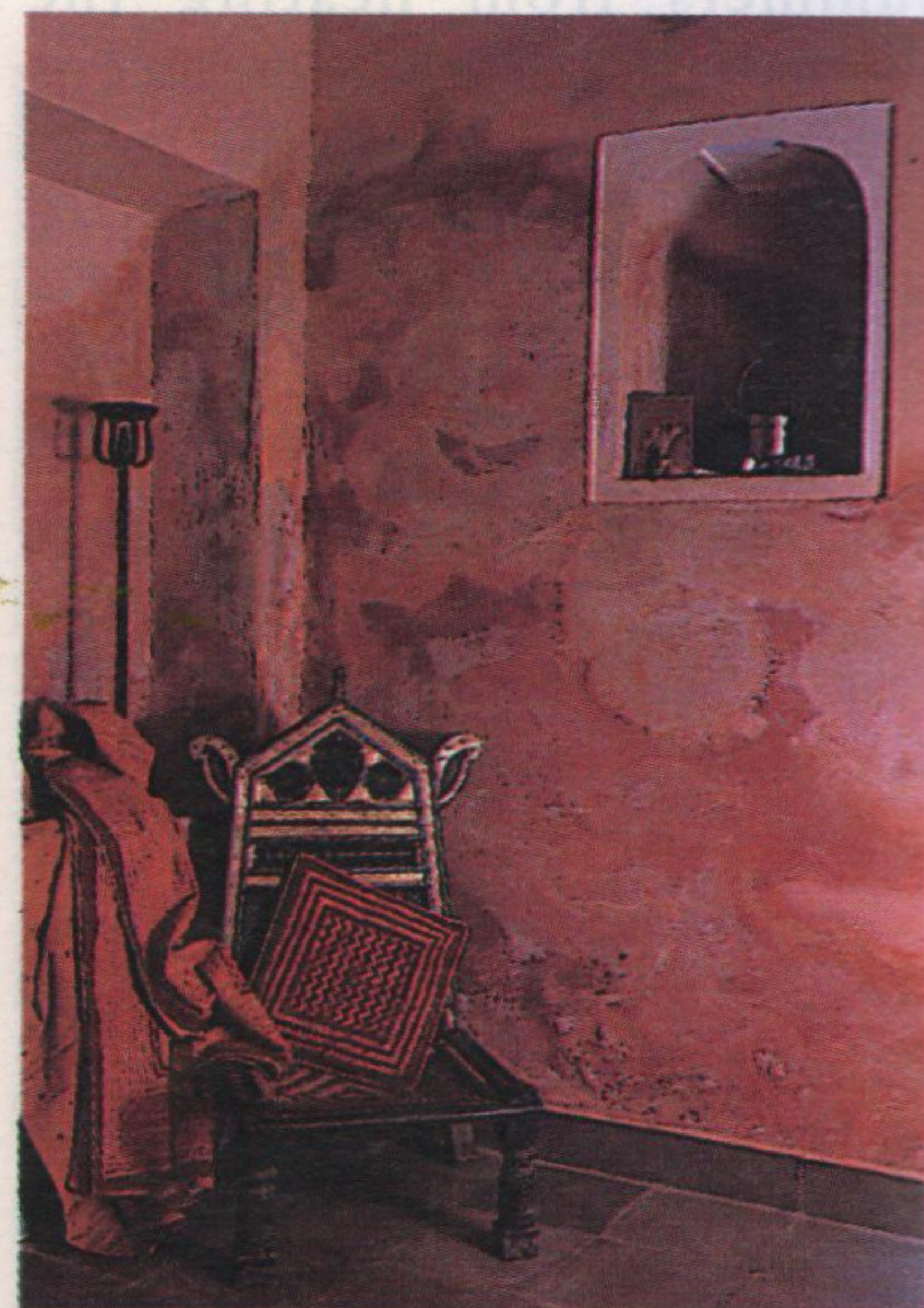


Niches, brackets, corbels and ceiling corners are painted with delicate motifs, while the dado is kept simple with black square outlines that accentuate the proportions of the rooms.



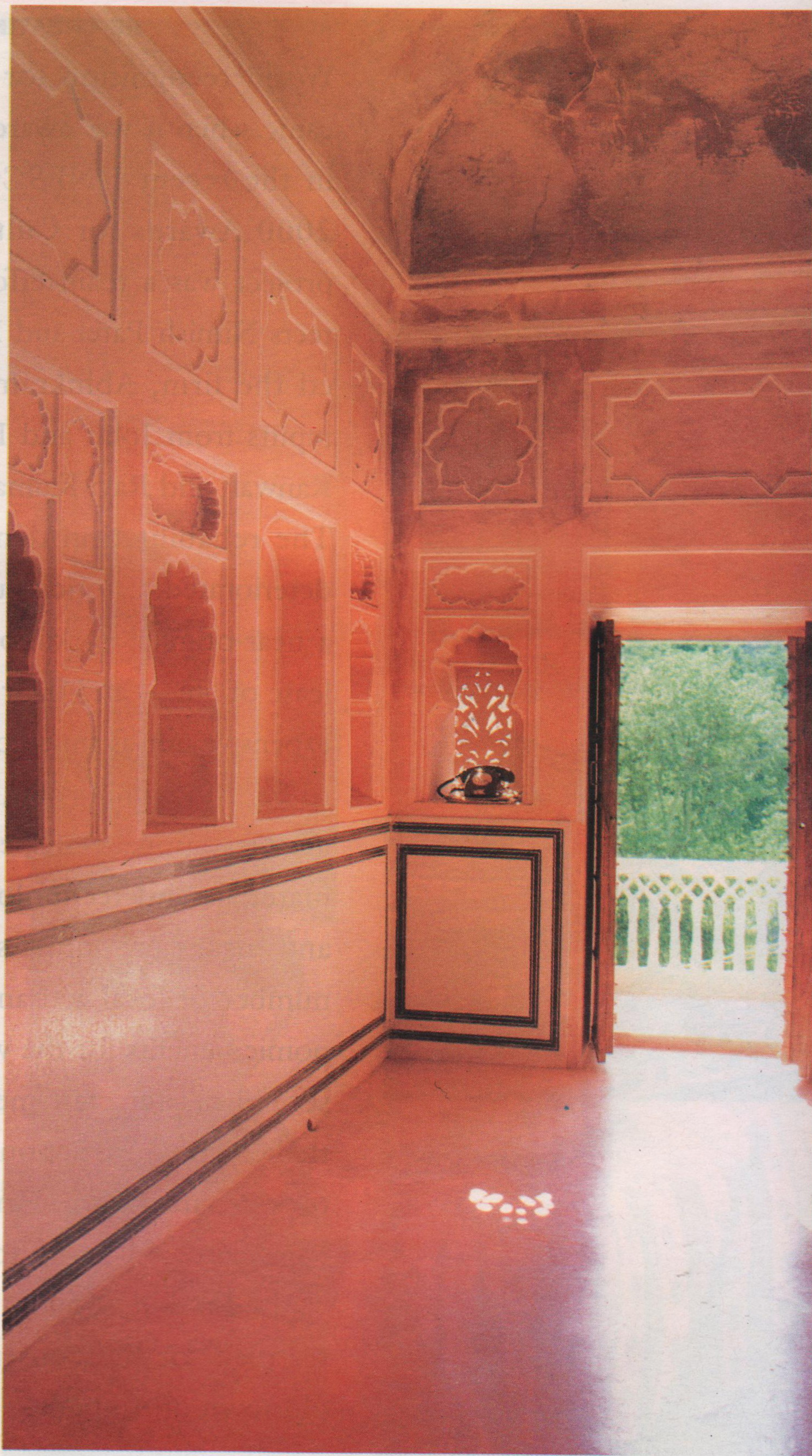
OPPOSITE: A restored corridor — Nimish Patel and Parul Zaveri believe in working with the minimum of drawn plans, relying on the craftsmen's traditional skills and wisdom.

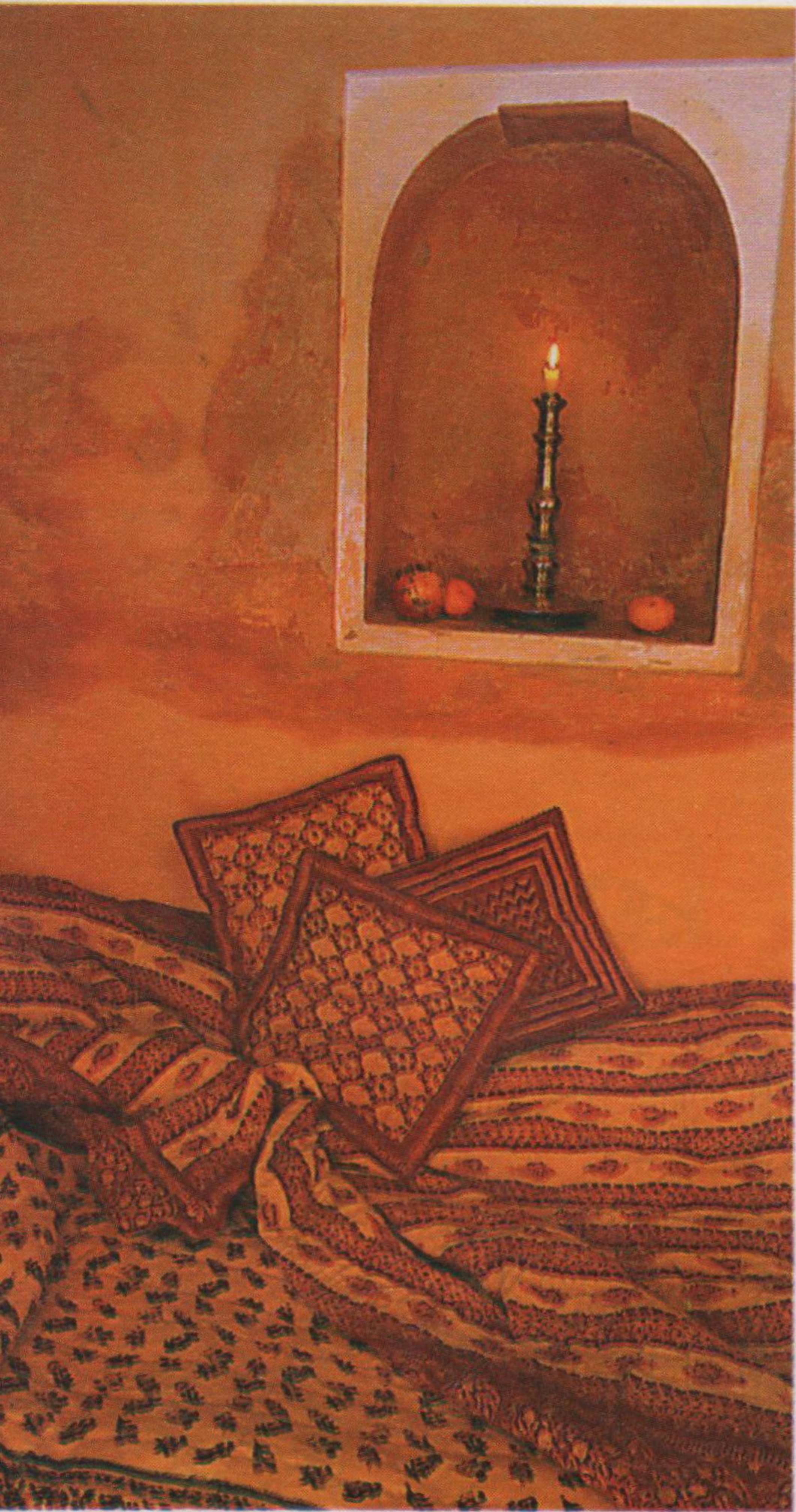
This old mansion has low windows and high walls to prevent direct sunlight in the scorching summers from heating the



fabrics, printed with natural dyes, echo the architectural aesthetic of this stone building. The indigo prints are typical of the area, the blue colour representing Krishna. The rich reds and oranges again indicate the Rajasthani taste for brightness, possibly as an antidote to the darker tones of the desert state's interiors with its intense sun and glare.

The name 'haveli' is derived from a Persian word meaning 'enclosed', and the building is constructed around a series of walled spaces, each of increasing intimacy.





RE-CREATING HERITAGE

World recognition for this restoration project came when it was awarded one of the top prizes in the recent UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage 2000 Awards for Culture Conservation. The project was a team effort: in addition to architects Nimish Patel and Parul Zaveri, who founded the firm, Abhikram, there were invaluable inputs from John and Faith Singh, Dharmendar Kanwar, and Ravi Kaimal.

The rehabilitation demonstrated that severely deteriorated historic structures can be restored to a near-original condition and given a prolonged lease of life — and their conservation is neither as expensive nor as time-consuming as it is projected to be. Most important, it proves that employing local traditional craftspeople and using traditional materials and technologies is technically viable and makes economic sense. Recruiting a large number of local artisans created long-term economic benefits for the whole community. In fact, several master craftsmen were able to establish their own construction firms specialising in historic rehabilitation. Finally, the high visibility of this project throughout its renovation, galvanised public support for implementing a master plan for the conservation of the 800-year-old town of Amber.

So what do you do with an old house in perfect condition, but designed for a society and life-style that has long-since passed? For some time it was something of a family albatross for the Singhs, but daughter-in-law Rachel found one unexpected application: 'It's very good for games of "Murder in the Dark"!'. Although, with the odd heights of doorways, strange uneven stairways and constant obstructions of pillars and arches, 'Broken Leg in the Dark' seems a more realistic title.

The haveli also acted as home for three months to 30 Australian students studying the ancient water system at the Amber Palace, one of whom claimed to have seen the ghost of a night watchman!

More recently, work began to convert it into a select hotel, using whole floors as discreet suites rather than creating many individual bedrooms.

Through an uncompromising understanding of the past, the Chanwar Palkiwalon ki Haveli demonstrates both the echoes of a past society alongside a architectural sophistication that can still teach something to a contemporary world. ❶

Anokhi hand-block textiles in earthy reds and oranges bring a richness to the severe stone structure.

