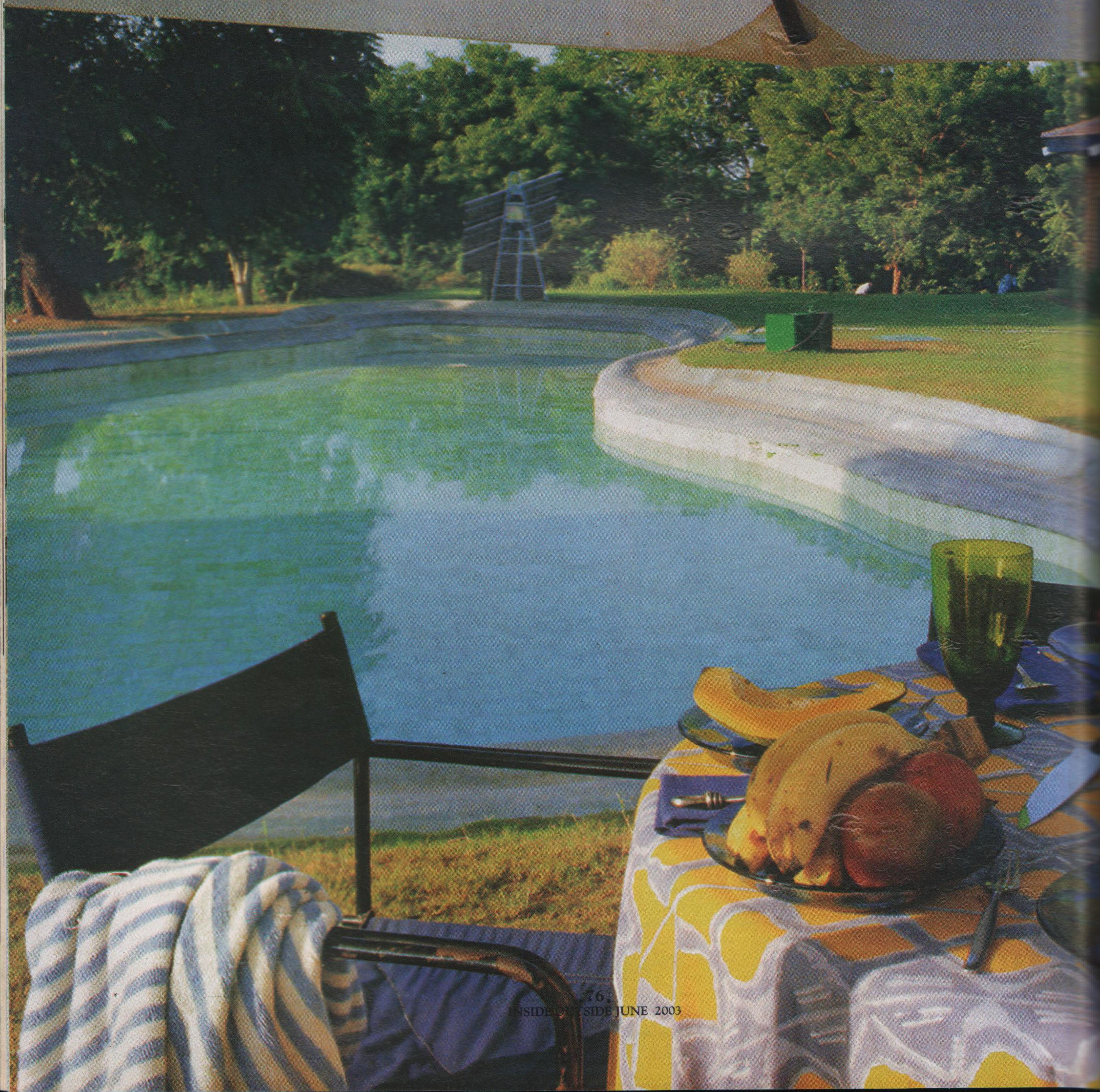
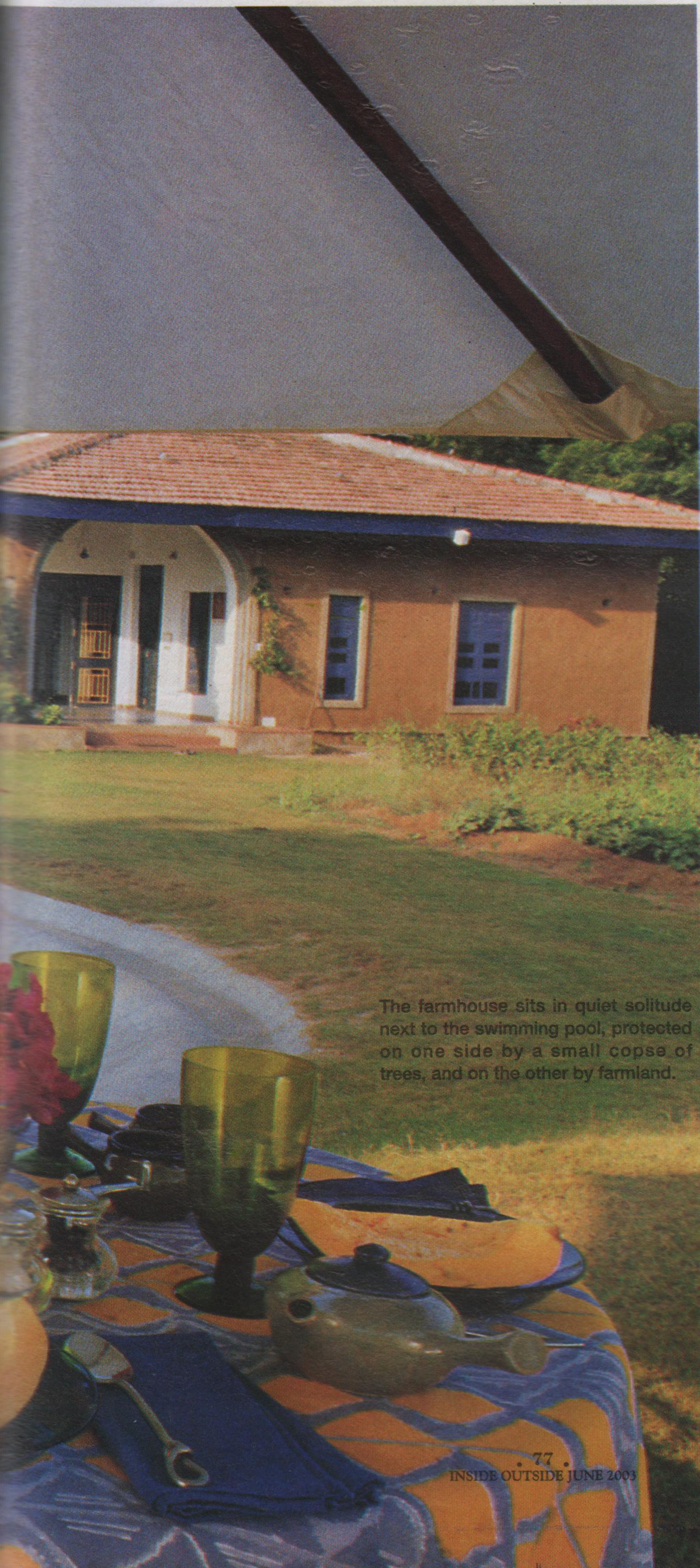


# In Tune with the Earth

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS: HENRY WILSON







The farmhouse sits in quiet solitude next to the swimming pool, protected on one side by a small copse of trees, and on the other by farmland.



**N**imish Patel and Parul Zaveri, firmly believing in the need to conserve natural resources and adopt indigenous traditions, design a country retreat for dancer Mallika Sarabhai near Ahmedabad, that defers to the environment.

**M**allika Sarabhai's country retreat is the ideal spot to rejuvenate and recharge one's batteries. It is a farmhouse rigorously pared down in both concept and usage. As one of the country's top classical dancers with her own troupe, Mallika also heads an international publishing house. She is frequently to be seen on television discoursing on a great variety of subjects and owns her own independent satellite channel. She is also a feisty campaigner for various causes, and closest to her heart are women's rights and the environment, the second of which has guided every step of the design for this rural home.

Mallika yearned for an isolated country retreat that would enable







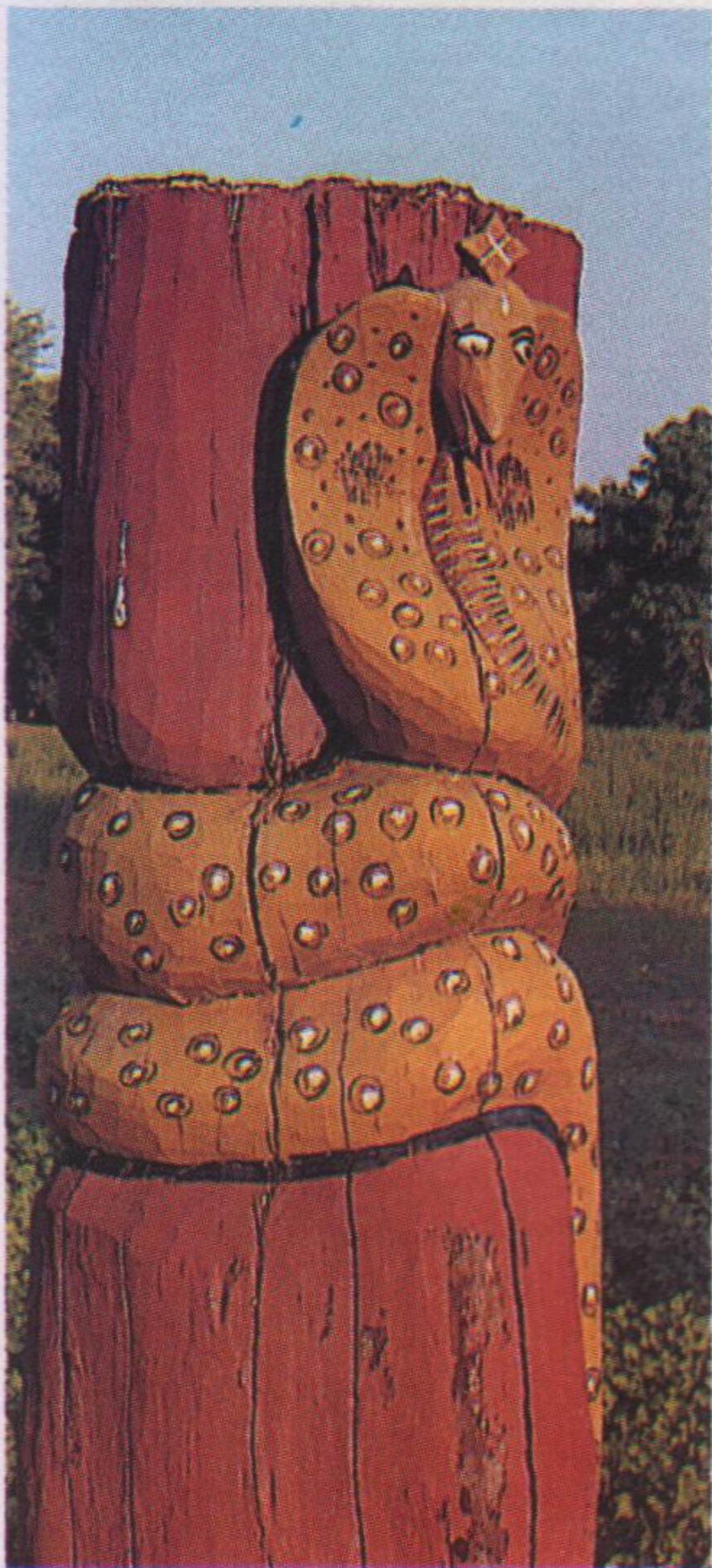


**OPPOSITE:** The traditional *hitchkar* found in every Gujarati household. In an art deco design, inset with ceramic tiles, it can be turned to face either the house or the pool and fields beyond.

**ABOVE:** The mud plastered walls on the exterior, which provide natural insulation against the heat, are patterned with scooped out circular indentations fixed with mirrors..

**BELOW LEFT:** A series of wood sculptures that look rather like native American Indian totem poles, but are sculptures of stylised birds.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Details of the mud walls on the facade, which provide natural insulation.







**ABOVE:** Only natural materials for Mallika — cane, jute and handloom in the living space.

**OPPOSITE ABOVE:** The pitched roof allowed for high ceilings, which accommodated a loft for the children above the kitchen.

**OPPOSITE BELOW:** What better way to enjoy nature than relaxing here, looking onto a copse of trees?





her to escape from the pressures and stress of her working life. She wanted a home that was self-sufficient and self-reliant — a space where she would be able to revel in natural surroundings, rejuvenate mentally and physically and meditate; a place to share only with her close friends and family. Her need initially went as far as refusing to even be connected by telephone, but at this point her mother, Mrinalini Sarabhai, put her foot down.

Mallika approached her childhood friends, Parul Zaveri and Nimish Patel of Abhikram. For her, they were the perfect choice

as architects, as the couple shares many of her core beliefs and interests, such as the environment, the plight of handicrafts, a strong belief in the importance of indigenous traditions, and the need to conserve natural resources. Her brief demanded that the building be comfortable, practical and basic, and above all, a space to share with her two children and four dogs (who can be seen to all pile onto her bed on some mornings). The project had to be completed on a restricted budget and impose on its surroundings as little as possible.











**OPPOSITE:** The living-cum-dining area, with a shallow, sunken *baithak* in colourful mosaic tiles, can be used for the kids to romp around, or filled with water if the mood so demands.

**ABOVE:** The shutters and frames of doors and windows were salvaged from demolished houses. The windows were fixed upside down, so cool breeze from the ventilators could waft in at the level of the people using the space.

The requirement for absolute simplicity took root right from the start, and while planning the structure, only minimal drawings were prepared. The layout was planned according to the principles of *vaastu shastra*, as both Parul and Nimish feel the design of buildings, in form and space should reflect the continuity of Indian traditions; 'progress' to them does not mean rejection of anything connected with the past. The couple also decided to adopt alternate building practices here, like using solar energy, natural and recycled materials and passive cooling systems.

One gets an immediate sense of

a discreet unpretentious house, sitting in quiet solitude amidst its surroundings, protected on one side by a small copse of trees, and on the other by farmland on which Mallika grows various crops. (Of course insecticides and chemical fertilisers are a complete no-no here.) Much of the exterior has been covered in mud — which Parul and Nimish are proponents of — it is practical and aesthetically pleasing, has natural insulating properties, is always available on site, is easy to maintain and is also a malleable material. Mud plaster was scooped out in a repetitive pattern of deep, circular indentations and the circles fixed with mirrors, using a traditional tool called *vatki*. An ingenious way of naturally insulating the house.

Walking into the main reception room you are immediately struck by its spaciousness, high ceiling and plenty of windows, both of which are efficient methods of controlling the interior temperature. This was an important consideration for Parul and Nimish, since Mallika had turned down the option of air-conditioning, aware of its drain on the resources, particularly of energy, in a country with a limited supply. (The house is not even connected to the electricity grid, so power is derived from several solar cell panels and is either used as it is made, or stored in batteries.) Parul and Nimish have adopted many of the traditional ways of controlling the interior temperature naturally. Along with the high ceilings and the use of mud on the exterior to keep heat at bay, Mangalore tiles on the roof quickly release the stored heat of the day at evening. The structure of the roof is made





Mallika's favourite colour palette of blue prevails in the bathroom, enlivened by sea life in-marble and mosaic.





entirely of wooden members; it would have been faster and cheaper to have used metal, but that would have radiated the heat of the daytime sun. Another traditional technique used for temperature control inside, is the partially open to sky, sunken courtyard, which creating a chimney-like effect, brings in a constant draft through the khus-screened windows, which helps in further cooling of the house. Even at the height of summer, only ceiling fans are required.

A deep-set covered verandah, with a traditional Gujarati institution, the *hitchkar*, is one more weapon against the heat of the summer. The *hitchkar* comes in various forms, from a simple slab of wood hung from ropes to the

more elaborate, such as the one here, in an art deco design, with an elaborate brass chain cast with decorative figures and birds and inset ceramic tiles. The verandah looks out onto the swimming pool and the fields beyond. A series of wood sculptures here look rather like native American Indian totem poles, but are sculptures of stylised birds. The swimming pool was essential for Mallika: the best form of all-round exercise, it is an excellent way to remain 'toned' for her dance work and also to relax physically. And of course, the house is not connected to the mains water supply, but takes its water from a well in the garden, and naturally, the electrical pump is powered, like everything else,







by the solar-cell panels. When the pool water becomes dirty it is used to irrigate onto the surrounding farmland.

While inside the house, you feel surprisingly connected to the countryside outside. The large number of windows and doors around the building enable the sounds of the country life, and the various fragrances from the garden and farmland to waft in. Bird song is ever present, particularly at dawn and at dusk. Whether it be the delicious climate of the winter months, the heat of summer or the teeming deluge of monsoon rains, the seasons can be enjoyed from the interior. This was exactly what

Mallika had wanted, a vantage point which brought her close to nature and which urban living so often completely denies her.

The house is a testament to the combined beliefs of Mallika and Abhikram, of putting the least strain on our collective resources. Most of the structure has been made from recycled materials; the windows have been fitted with security grilles that had been thrown out by other builders; and the floor is basic dyed concrete. Mallika's love of textiles, and hand-embroidered, mirror-worked materials from Kutch, is very much in evidence all around. In the bedroom, the quilted bed cover was commissioned in

Ahmedabad, the hand-woven rug was made in Kutch. From its underlying fabric through to its decorative finish, the country retreat has been an even greater success than Mallika initially imagined, and consequently the family spends a great deal more time here. The completion of the house is a living proof that an environmentally friendly home is both possible and affordable. **O**

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