



# tradition here and now

Architects Parul Zaveri and Nimish Patel of 'Abhikram' demonstrate the relevance of age-old craft techniques in a mud-and-thatch farm residence.

## architects

Parul Zaveri and Nimish Patel  
Abhikram

## photographs

Henry Wilson

## project

Farmhouse

## location

Near Ahmedabad









**‘W**hen Shri and Shrimati I A Modi asked us to design a two-bedroom weekend retreat at Chharodi on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, we attempted to re-establish the relevance of mud and thatch as building materials,’ explain Parul Zaveri and Nimish Patel, whose architectural practice, Abhikram, has become noted for reviving the use of local materials and traditional methods of construction.

Since the one-acre site was part of a real estate development complex, with adjacent plots on which owners would build according to their tastes, it was likely to eventually be surrounded by a Babel-like variety of architectural languages. That was a major constraint for this retreat, which has a built-up area of about 230

square metres.

The basic concept stemmed from the owner asking for circular rooms in stone, which he had seen in the Himalayas, and whose shape he felt was conducive to meditative activities. This requirement led Abhikram to adopt the module of the Kutch ‘bhungas’, with one change: they constructed them of mud. The mud blocks are made from earth excavated from the site, and the roof is covered with thatch. Both materials are an ideal insulation against heat. ‘Chikni mati’ from Kutch has been used for the decorative relief and mirror work. The wood used is locally available babul (acacia), which is hard and termite-resistant; the craftsmen carve the surface with geometric designs and patterns, which shifts the focus from its warped shape.

#### PREVIOUS SPREAD & THIS SPREAD:

The client wanted circular rooms, so the architects decided to use the form of Kutch bhungas, executed in mud. The creative interiors show a richly textured blend of traditional craftsmanship, and a wide range of crafts.

The dining-kitchen module has a traditional Kutchi storage unit in clay, with carved wooden shutters, and china mosaic and traditional carving on the furniture.



KITCHEN FLOORING LAYOUT









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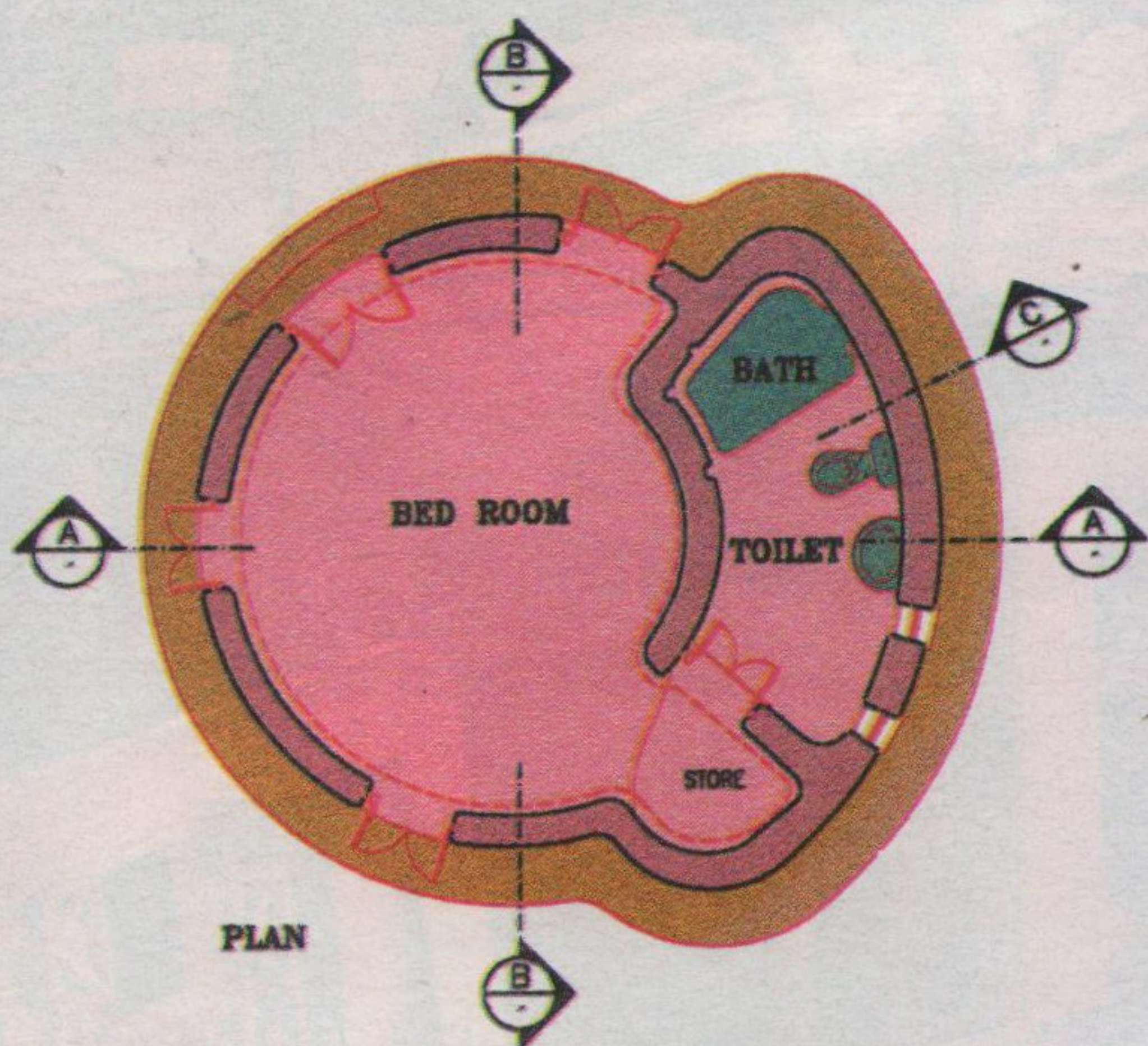
Parul and Nimish had several design objectives. 'We aimed at evolving a type of dwelling which is local or rural in character and yet provides urban comforts. Also we wanted to establish that mud and thatch as building materials are not as weak or as temporary as they are usually conceived of being. This was an opportunity to demonstrate the usefulness and the richness of our refined craftsmanship base, and how it was still relevant to contemporary life. We tried to integrate the crafts as inherent design features in the interiors and the architecture.' A different roof form was designed to interconnect two independent circular bhungas. Though traditionally bhungas evolved in an area with hardly 8 to 10 inches of annual rainfall, here it has been shown that they

can also survive in an area where the rainfall averages 24 to 30 inches. Finally, this has resulted in a farmhouse which merges with the environment, creating its own ambience, without allowing the character of adjacent houses to dominate it.

The basic construction materials are all local. The earth for the sun-dried mud blocks for the walls was dug from the site, thatch for the roof was purchased locally, and babul wood for carving doors and windows was used due to the craftsmen's familiarity with it. Only the finishing mud, the 'chikni mati' for the mirror-embedded patterns in the plaster, was brought from Kutch, since the stickiness of the local mud was not adequate.

Parul and Nimish emphasise that the design team and the

The master bedroom has mirrored mud-relief work forming the huge headboard and a clay storage unit without wooden members except for the door shutters.











craftsmen worked very closely with each other throughout the construction process, constantly reviewing decisions about the design and the finishes. The joint venture continues for the interiors: a collaborative effort was attempted between the Kutch craftsmen and local carpenters to evolve comfortable furniture, which was upholstered with the inputs of a textile designer. It blends with both, the ambience and the craftsmanship. 'The integration of the master craftsman, the local contractor, the textile designer, and the landscape consultants, under the leadership of the designer, was a difficult but an educative and an enjoyable process which generated unending enthusiasm amongst the design team as well as the craftsmen.'

The end result offers the ambience of a simple rural setting in the exterior with creative interiors displaying a richly textured blend of craftsmanship from Kutch. In all seasons there is a balance

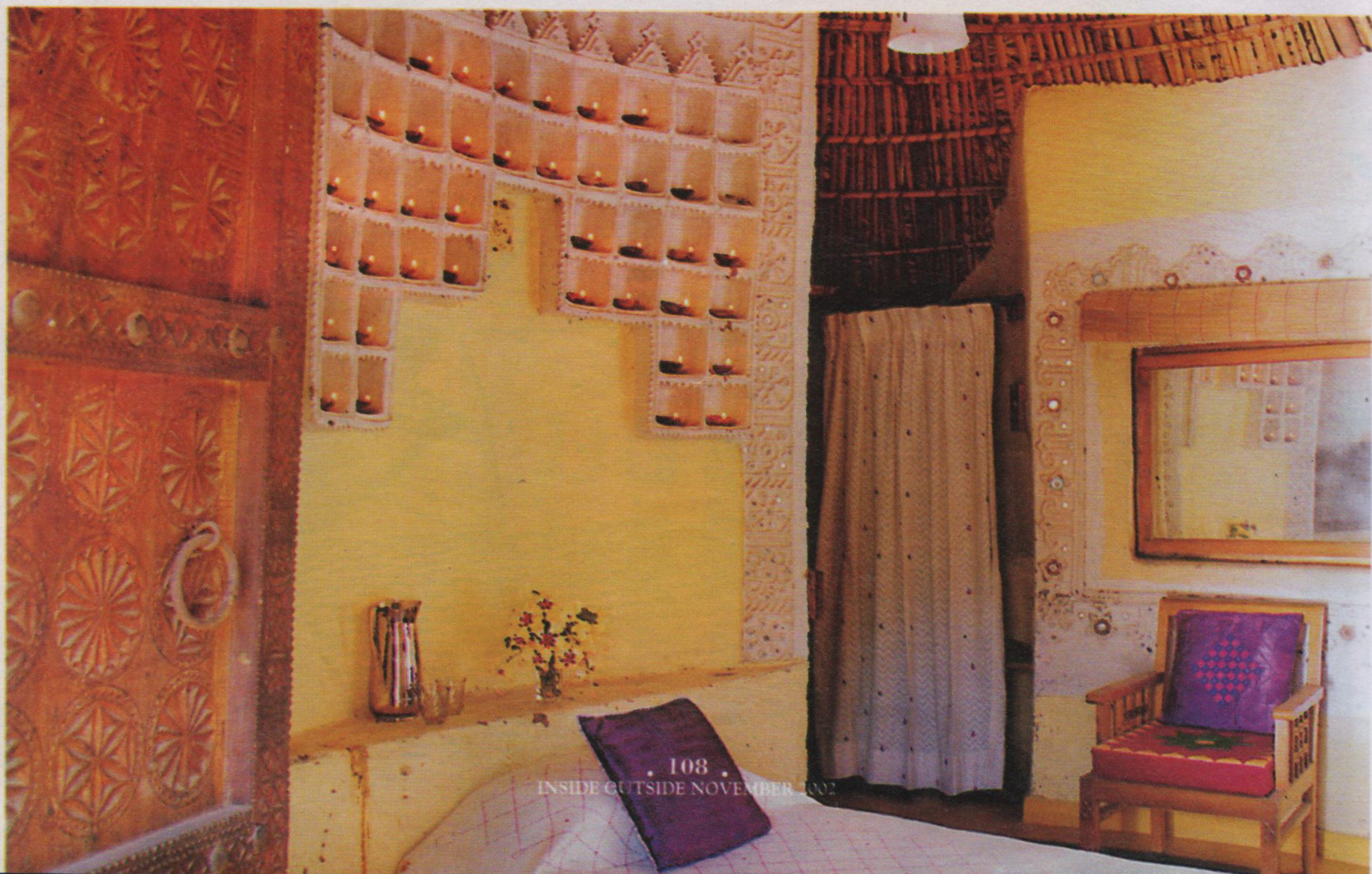
between the landscaped spaces and the existing eucalyptus trees.

Most of the wood-carving and mud relief work on the walls represent the creative inputs of the craftsmen. While the process demonstrates the success of the combined efforts of traditional skills and contemporary designer's inputs, it also brought out the limitations of some of the materials and established that their use requires continuous observation and upkeep as a follow-up.

Paul and Nimish's last words: 'Simple-looking, time-tested solutions are often more appropriate than variety-oriented design solutions without innovative inputs. The simplicity of the process and the speed with which the craftsmen put their inherited skills to use, can put any contemporary educated professional to shame.'

#### **The Lessons:**

Parul Zaveri was responsible for the design, design development and supervision of all aspects of





**OPPOSITE ABOVE:** Detail of a window shutter, which shows the traditional craftsman's perfect sense of geometry and rhythm.

**OPPOSITE BELOW:** The guest bedroom with decorative claywork and carved babul wood doors.

**RIGHT:** Detail of decorative clay and mirrorwork, with a switchboard cover carved of babul wood.

