

Rachel and Pritam Singh's
Jaipur home, designed by
Nimish Patel and Parul
Zaveri of Abhikram, is a
world away from the 'buy
your look' commercialised
design ethos so shrilly
touted nowadays.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS: HENRY WILSON

Rachel and Pritam Singh: the built-in curved stone bench and table in the courtyard is the natural place for a convivial cup of tea. Al fresco living is an integral part of the ethos here. The house is virtually a single-storey building set around an open courtyard.









achel Singh is catching her breath after a whirlwind working trip to the 'Big Apple' the 'Big Smoke' — New and London, two cities in she has happily lived and her home. While New York describes as 'inspiringly , it was in London that she several years at the presti-St Martins design school, "s premier fashion and texinstitute. For all the internajet-set activity, she can't to get back home to her house outside Jaipur. It's and husband Pritam's first per home, set in the richly ted grounds of her in-laws,





plenty of windows draw the eye to wew: the wilder, more wooded part of arm. 'Couch potato' sofas around a recous fireplace in the living room are an arealy English influence. Anokhi fabrics the natural quirks and diversities of and-crafted materials.







Furniture that is classical in form (take a close look at the chairs) and artefacts that draw on a rich crafts heritage, make for a sense of timelessness. The dining area bears out Rachel's strong conviction that it's both impractical and wasteful to change interiors constantly in an effort to be trendy.

from being together with the family, it is the greenery, the open space which surrounds the house, that I love so much. It is what I dream of after a hardworking day in New York.'

Initially the house was built for the numerous guests who come to visit the farm and work with Anokhi, the family's block-printing company whose operations are now established discreetly on the farm. John and Faith Singh, who founded the company, asked Nimish Patel and Parul Zaveri of Abikram to design the guesthouse. The architects have become renowned for their environmental consciousness, a core precept also at the heart of the ethos of Anokhi. So, Nimish and

John and Faith Singh. 'Apart Parul applied their beliefs to the guest-house, using traditional materials, design ideas and building methods to moderate the effects of climatic extremes, and installing solar panels and energysaving devices. Pritam visited the site two or three times each day, making many suggestions, and in the end it was decided that rather than becoming a guest-house, it would make an ideal family home for him, Rachel, and their two children, five-year-old Sumi and three-year-old Meyu.

The house is almost completely a single-storey building set around an open courtyard, its inward-looking form initially designed to provide privacy for guests. But that is not the feeling one now gets, as the surrounding



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rooms, especially the drawing and dining rooms, have plenty of windows looking outwards to give views onto a wilder, wooded part of the farm.

Initially, Rachel had no plans for the interior decoration of the house; after all, it was not intended for them. However, when the decision was taken that her family would move in, one of her first requirements — an obligatory one — was that they should have a pair of sofas. Rachel was very specific: 'couch potato' sofas, ones you could sink into and never want to get up, sofas for lazing around, for dozing during afternoon siestas, to entertain guests in comfort. She knew they had to be positioned in the drawing room on either side of the fireplace, and commissioned them from an Englishman who has settled in India. The idea for the generous fireplace was Pritam's, and he had asked for its inclusion at an early stage of planning. Rachel admits that the sofa-fireplace configuration is a 'very English influence. We light the fire three months of the year and it really becomes the social hub of the house during that period. We relax here and let our hair down, become "couch potatoes", and when we gather with friends, a lit fire helps to create a congenial, snug ambiance.'

Comfortable chairs are another essential fixture for Rachel, ones classical in shape, that will last. 'Can't people live with the same chair for 30 years?' Rachel exclaims, talking about the new trend for constantly changing interiors. 'It's impractical and wasteful', she says, lamenting the 'buy a look, buy a character' attitude practised by some. According to Rachel, 'It takes

time, even a lifetime, for an interior to evolve. The home is a reflection of character and illustrates the growth of the people who live inside that space.' She is nothing if not honest, and having made this serious point she adds that she does have her weak points, admitting to having 'really decadent and rampant twinges of materialism'. Rachel recalls that in earlier days she was very inflexible about her interiors; if she could not achieve what she considered a 'perfect' interior, she was frustrated. Every time she returned to Britain she found herself overwhelmed with a desire to 'buy, buy, buy', the 'cut me loose I hear shopping music' syndrome, and confesses that she had a particular weakness for chinaware, porcelain and cutlery.

Rachel laughs heartily at the memory of all this compulsiveness. She says she has now lost the need for a perfect home and compulsive acquisition — well, almost! During her recent trip to New York, her eye was caught by a metal vase at a trade fair. It was huge and totally impractical: how would she ever get it home to Jaipur? But it was one of those 'absolutely must-have objects. I became obsessionally passionate about it. I knew it would look stunning in the hallway. It's beautiful, the craftsmanship exquisite.' Rachel was emphatic: 'I wanted it.' Smothered in bubble-wrap, the vase was taken all the way to Boston by friends, then she negotiated in advance with the airline to get it back safely to India ('I became one-track-minded'), and she got it home intact.

Having children has taught Rachel that an interior must be practical. She used to shift furniture around constantly, restlessly







nouse, white walls, natural light, real wood, furniture that's been crafted by actual human beings rather than machines in a factory — all contribute to the serene feel that's been achieved with such seeming ease.

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searching for the perfect layout; but, 'With young children one has to be altogether more relaxed and casual.' And in Jaipur there are certain limitations, for not everything that she would like is immediately available. But then this can be a healthy state of affairs: it's very easy when you can have exactly what you want, it's more constructive when you have got to find ways round a problem, and 'you've got to be more imaginative and creative'.

'I'm not interested in all the mod-cons,' Rachel adds. 'In the west there is a striving for the perfect, to reflect efficiency and a clarity of purpose, and again the "buy your look, buy your character" ethos. For me it is important to try to relate, one's home should relate to the local social situation. It would be all too easy to be extravagant, so it is important to keep excesses in check.'

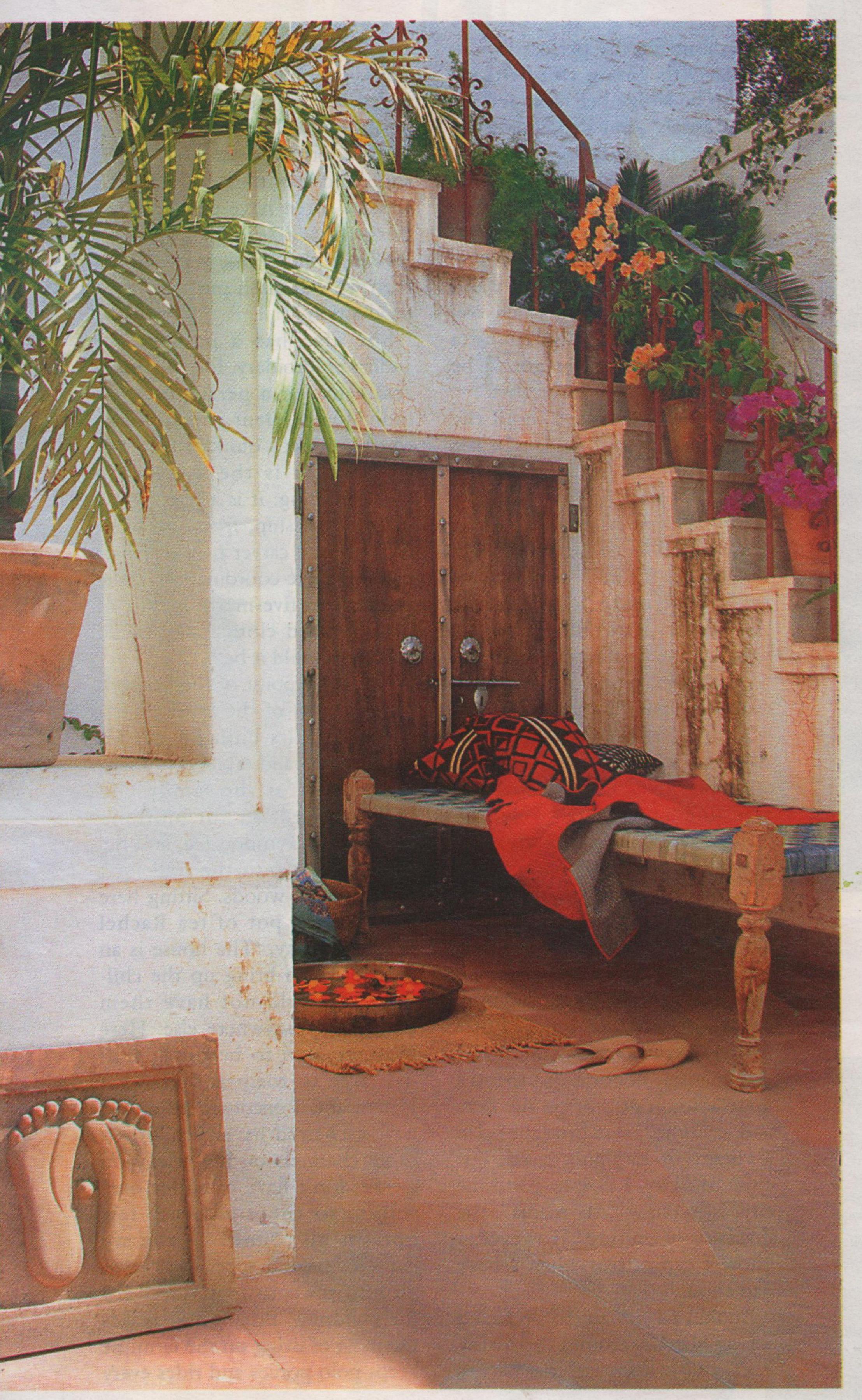
Rachel has her own work studio at home, the only room on an upper floor; it rises above the tree line and is effectively distanced from the distractions of the household. Talking again of her love of greenery, the trees, the garden, the space and light, along with the ability just to walk out which is so essential for her, she says, 'I love the anonymity and the peace and quiet. I'm a homely person and so the house is immensely important; I spend a huge amount of time on the farm and at home. I was brought up in a village in England, rural, but close to a city. I love to go to the city, I do enjoy "city mania", the diversity of culture. However, I know I can retreat when I have had enough.'

Anokhi fabrics are to be found spread liberally around the house. Rachel says, however, that having

the company's fabrics in the house is not an imperative. 'After you have worked on them for months, they are not as fresh as when another person goes to the shop and sees them for the first time. I often have experimental designs scattered in various rooms; if they work in the house then we will often put them into production.'

She also has a passion for Indian embroidery, for 'you get a real sense of a personality, an individual's talent with the finished product's quirks and natural flaws. It is the same with block-printing: it is a real display of craftsmanship, from the work of the wood carver to the precise hand-and-eye coordination of the printer, no five-metre length of hand-printed cloth is the same, and nor should it be.'

One focal point of the house is the bay area of the inner courtyard. With its built-in, curved stone bench and table, it is a natural space for the family and friends to gather for morning coffee and afternoon tea, and the windows set into the wall look out onto the woods. Sitting here with a fresh pot of tea Rachel goes on to say, 'The house is an ideal place to bring up the children, I would not have them brought up anywhere else. Here they are able to be outside all day, free to roam and explore. Pritam and I encourage this. We have eschewed having children's cable channels on the television - we don't have cable for ourselves, so there are very few options all round! — and we have to make a special effort to go into town to rent videos for the children.' Pritam also makes the most of living on the farm: he keeps polo ponies and rides every



other day, the main outlet for his sporty nature. 'I have a great respect for Pritam,' explains Rachel, 'I am enthusiastic about my design work and sometimes I get frustrated and react passionately; Pritam is a true Libran, endeavouring to keep those scales balanced. He is a great diplomat and wonderful at diffusing the occasional difficulties.

'India is my home now,' says Rachel, 'my husband's home and my children's, and I am rooted here. I am still inspired by my first six-month postgraduate placement in India — in a sense, my first unpaid employment, as a fledgling designer the vibrancy and chaos of the land, the textiles, and the "smell" that is India. New York and London are wonderful and exciting but when that plane door opens in Delhi there is nothing quite like it in the rest of the world, such a distinctive, welcoming feel. I know I am back home and only a few hours away from my rural retreat.' 0

Courtyard, charpai, bougainvillaea — the ethos of age-old India is implicitly valued by the absence of anything jarring. Part of the essential rightness of this house is that it fulfils the twin requirements of seclusion and openness.