

IN SITU

Space Matters, New Delhi

After graduating from School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi, Amritha Ballal, Moulshri Joshi and Suditya Sinha established Space Matters in 2005 as a multi-disciplinary and collaborative design practice. Part of a generation that witnessed the shifts brought about after India's entry into the global economy, their work thrives in the challenges of this global-local zietgiest intersecting architecture, urbanism, landscape, art and technology across scales and contexts with a stress on collaborative, research-based interventions. Winning international acclaim and awards, the key projects of the firm include the Bhopal Gas Tragedy Memorial in Bhopal, the integrated development plan for an urban village in Delhi, participatory planning for heritage precincts in Goa and Jaipur and urban infrastructure upgradation in the mountain town of Almora.

Two encounters, one of context, one of space caught between two landscape adjacencies – of culture and place; Ramgarh Residency Villas by Space Matters, an architectural firm based in Delhi, sets up a gentle mediation to all the elements in one frame.

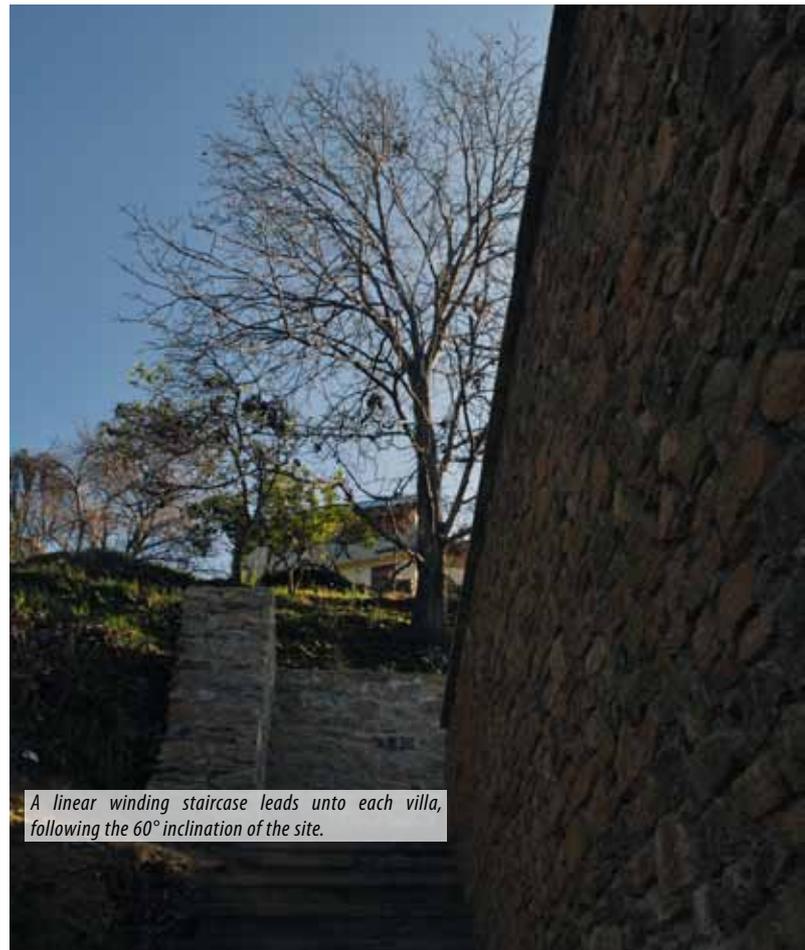
Text: Maanasi Hattangadi

Images: ©Sanjeet Wahi; courtesy Space Matters

Drawings: courtesy Space Matters



The design of each unit is sculpted in the slope of the terrain itself.



A linear winding staircase leads unto each villa, following the 60° inclination of the site.



On Poetics of Space

*"To express is to drive.
And when you want to give something presence,
you have to consult nature.
And there is where Design comes in."* - Louis I Kahn

For those who have gotten accustomed to the burgeoning cities of India, a sleepy little town of Ramgarh settled in the hills of Uttarakhand can only mean luxury of space. But for Delhi-based architectural firm Space Matters, it meant an effort to put across a kind of simple beauty that lies to it. The architects had the chance to experiment with an unexpected but narrow strip of land overlooking a deep valley; the objective to build a stunning living experience in a series of private villas nestled in the greens of the surrounding.

The most potent form of expression of the built is when it embraces its site physically and in consequence. When it becomes the agenda rather than a bonus, the outcome is what Ramgarh Residency Villas has turned out to be – a composition of authentic structures rooted to their location. It is about architecture which episodically basis itself around traditional and modernist attitudes, shaped, co-mingled and reshaped to refine a new language of its own.

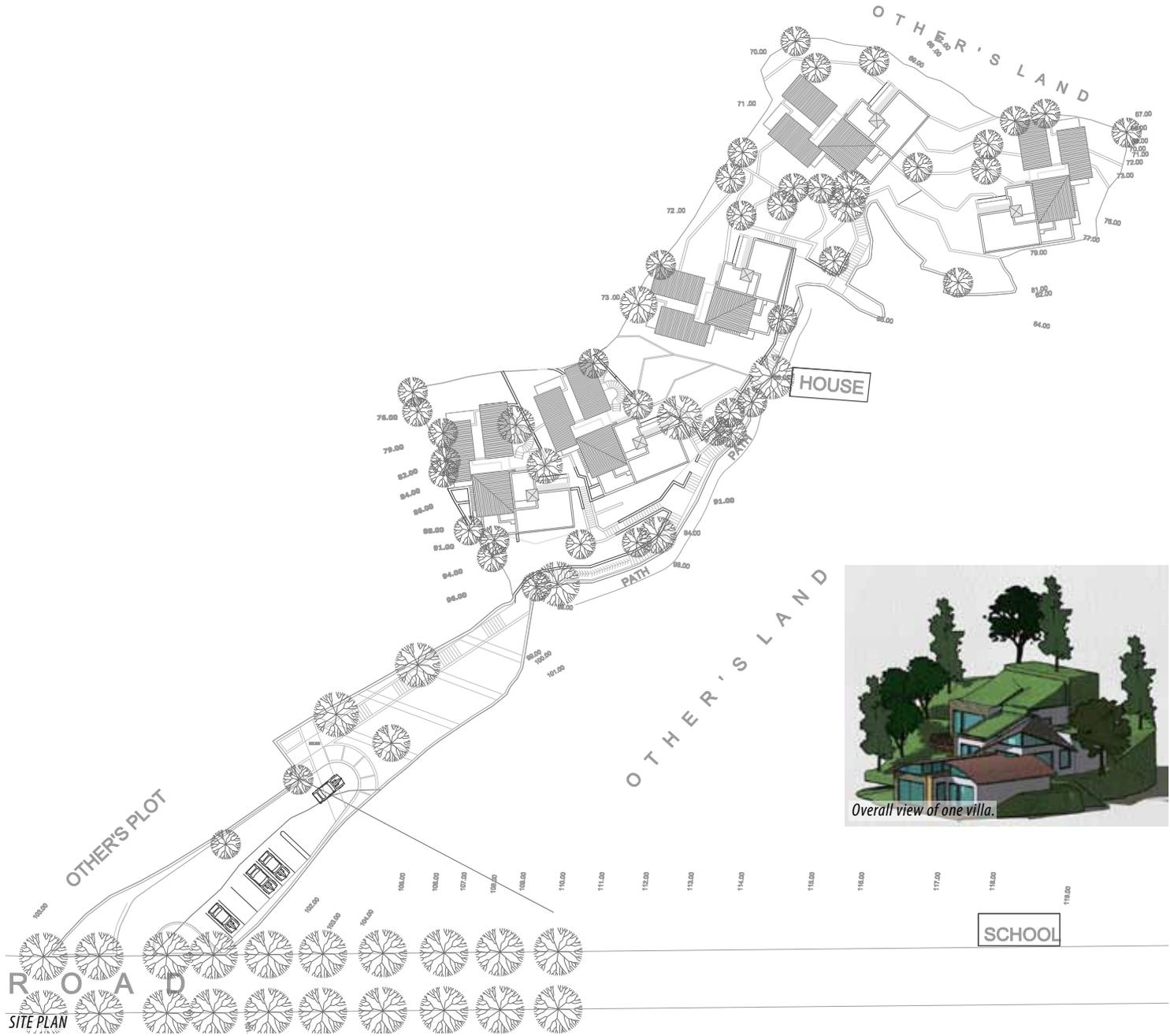
On Continuity

"The way of architecture is the quiet voice that underlies it and has guided it from the beginning." - Arthur Erickson

Hilly regions have a very rare attribute – a commanding and even, at times, a monumental presence. Set in a wide, tree-lined part of such an area, this

Situated in the hills of Ramgarh in Uttarakhand, the project is a composition of six villas across a site of one acre.

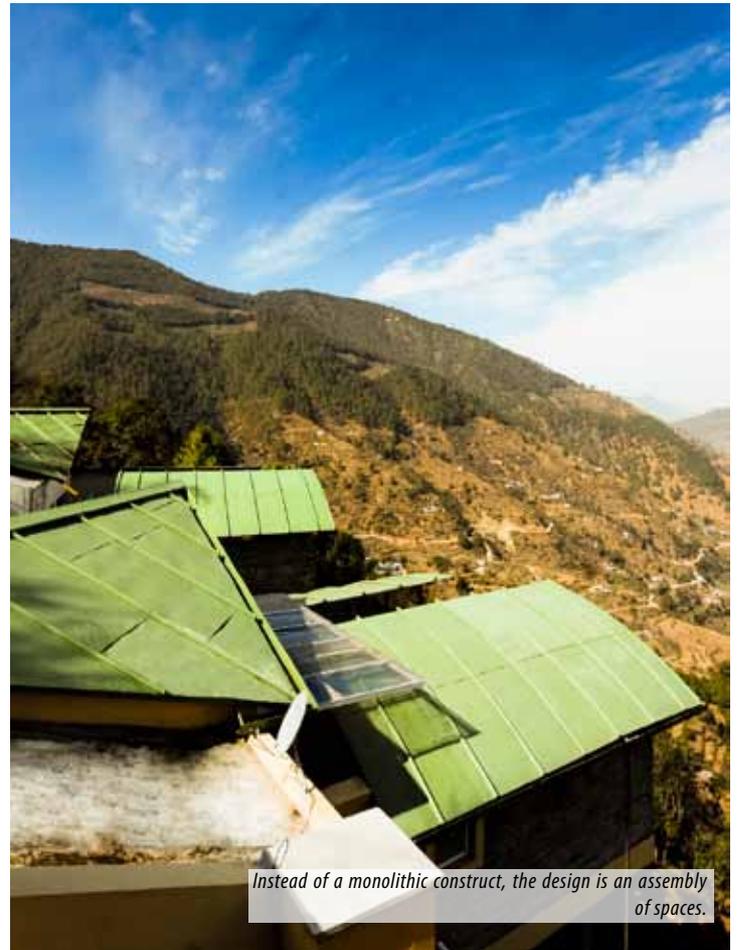
"We responded to the challenge by creating a footprint that would be least intrusive to the surroundings reinterpreting the form and material which built on the organic and traditional buildings of the region with the use of contemporary technology and sensibility."



PLANS



Each built expression is effortlessly natural and responsive to the context.



Instead of a monolithic construct, the design is an assembly of spaces.



Locally available materials like stone dug from the site and pine wood from the region are used to compose the materiality.



The layered approach of the design allows for a series of terraces overlooking the panoramic scenery.



The layout pauses in between volumes to frame the vistas outside.

rambling site of one acre enfolds Ramgarh Residency Villas, visually leaving behind little of its existence. The project, designed in the depths of the steep gradient was tailor-made to the clients' aspirations of holiday homes for clients who are based in Delhi and as an alternative to offer a guest house on rent when not in use. Away from the main town, the orientation of the site is northwest facing, lending a depth that is independent of the southern sun.

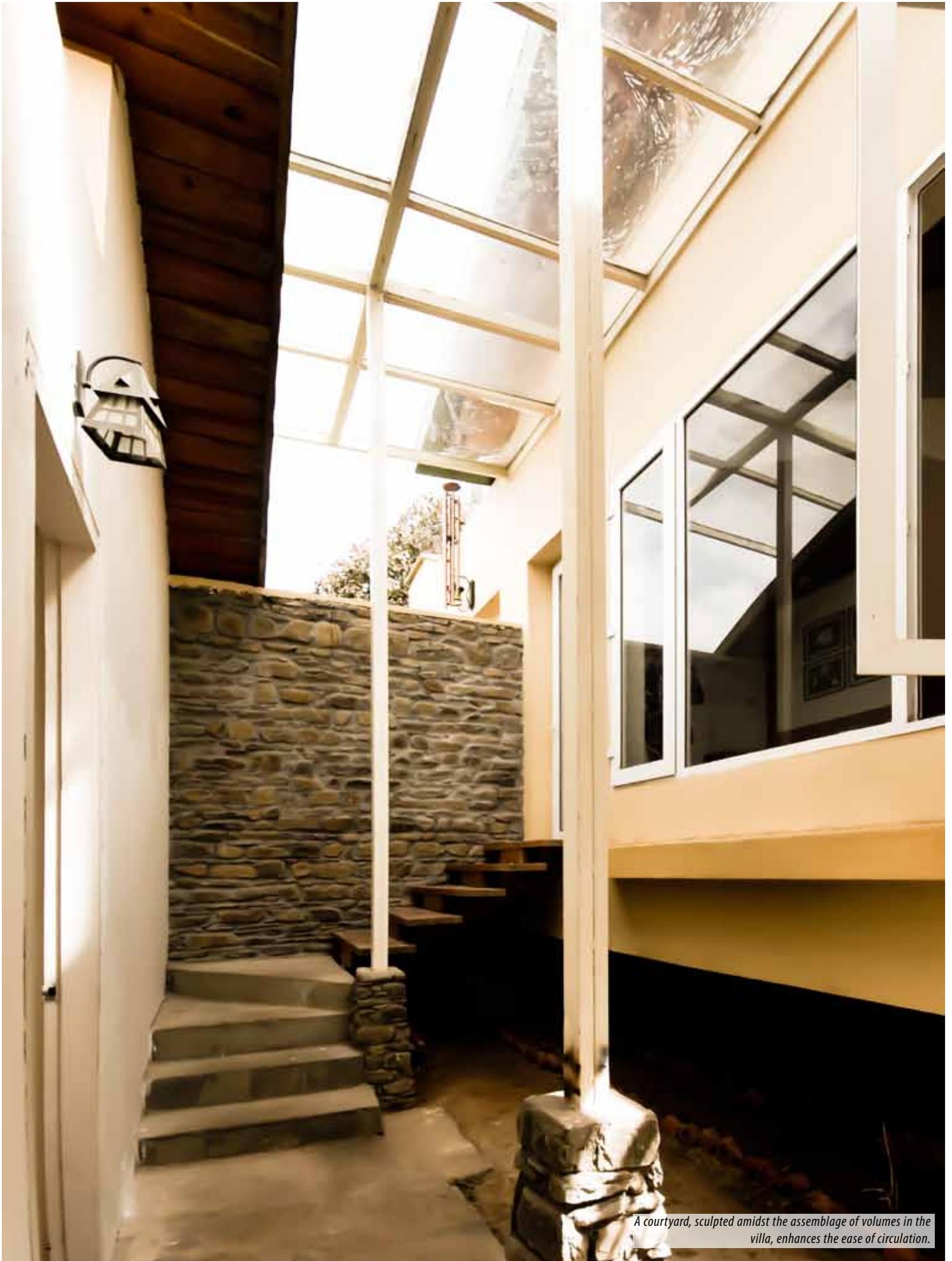
The arrival is marked by a winding ramped-down route angled at 60° that connects to the entire depth of the site – an analogy of the contours that shape the geology of the region. The complex landscape was both the inspiration for the design as well as a contributing aspect of the minimal impact of the footprint. Although, the lesser usage of area can be narrowed down to the

hilly terrain fraught with challenges for an architectural execution, the design integrates a lazy sprawl of six villas ascending the slope; albeit built on an intimate scale. "The site itself," the designers say, "was the key determinant for the placing of the units as well as form of individual units. The steep site was mapped for areas where the gradient provided enough relatively flat areas which could provide proper footing to anchor the units with minimum excavations." The extent of the visual connect is cavernous in the sense that a layered approach was realised in sync with the terraced nature of the site.

As one moves forward, one may get accustomed to the undisturbed rhythms of the place. Branches of fruit trees compose the complete picture of the ambience. Each unit, with a minimal footprint of 1750sqft, catches glimpses



The simplicity emerges from tactile and textural detailing used in some parts of the expanse.



A courtyard, sculpted amidst the assemblage of volumes in the villa, enhances the ease of circulation.



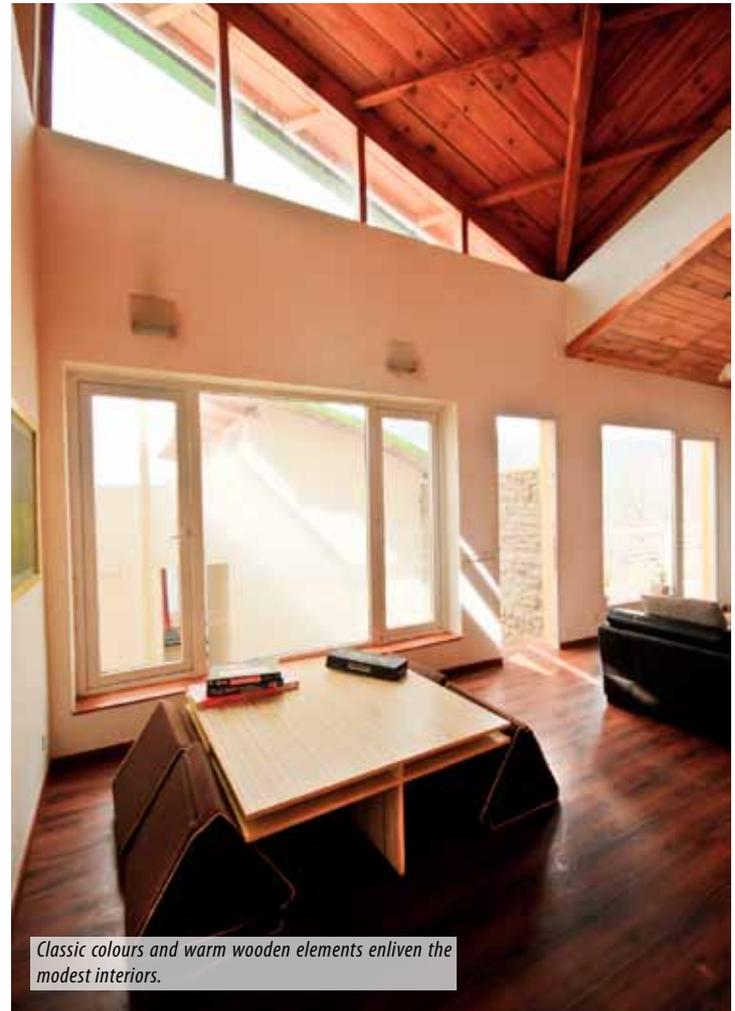
Nestled in the hilly surface, each house comprises of earth-sheltered terraces and roofs.

of each other and themselves in pursuit of the slope where it adapts as per the rise of the ground and the structure – "...partly sitting on the slope, partly inserted within the slope and partly jutting out of the slope, seemingly suspended above the valley...".

The architecture reads as a geometric interpretation of the traditional settlements of the hills found in the detailing of the materials and basic form. In a move that justifiably retains the natural resources, materiality and social order of the prototypical buildings in the hills, Ramgarh Residency Villas asserts its presence as a congruous personality to the humble constructions in the context.

The volumes are linked by a unique concepts, "We responded to the challenge by creating a footprint that would least be intrusive to the surroundings reinterpreting the form and material which built on the organic and traditional buildings of the region with the use of contemporary technology and sensibility," as stated by the designers. When there is a design consciousness, simplicity can inspire wonders. The indigenous thought of carving into the earth not only affords a diaphanous edge to the interiors by framing panoramic views of the valley below but also awakens an understanding of the local ecological preservation. The thought is ineffable; the realisation much more formal.

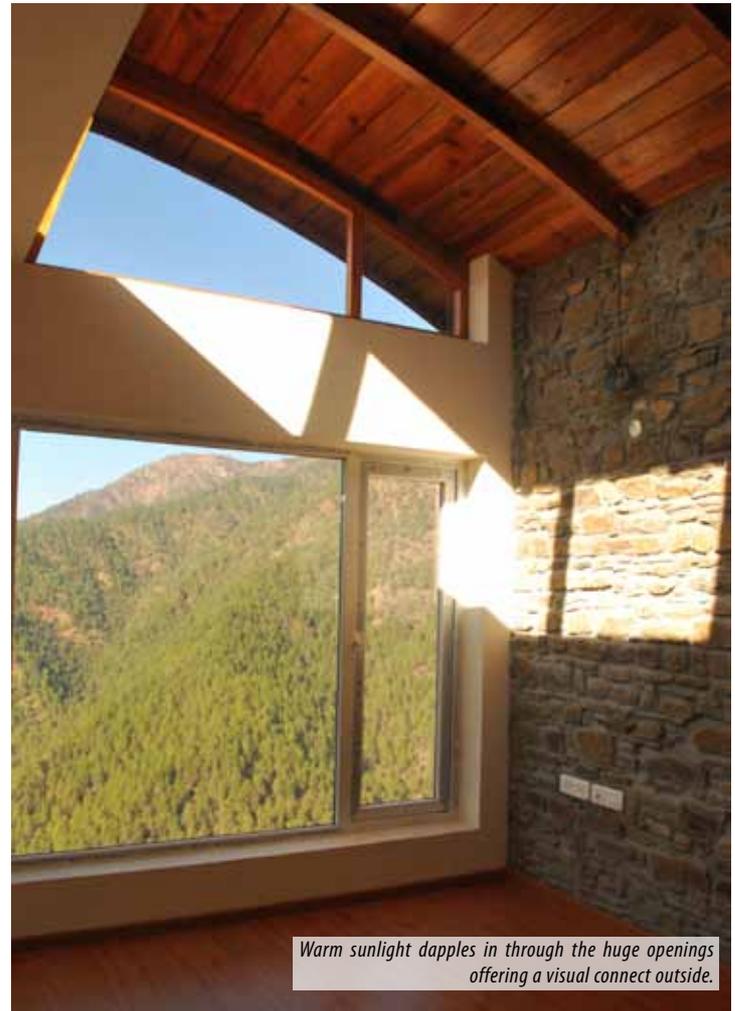
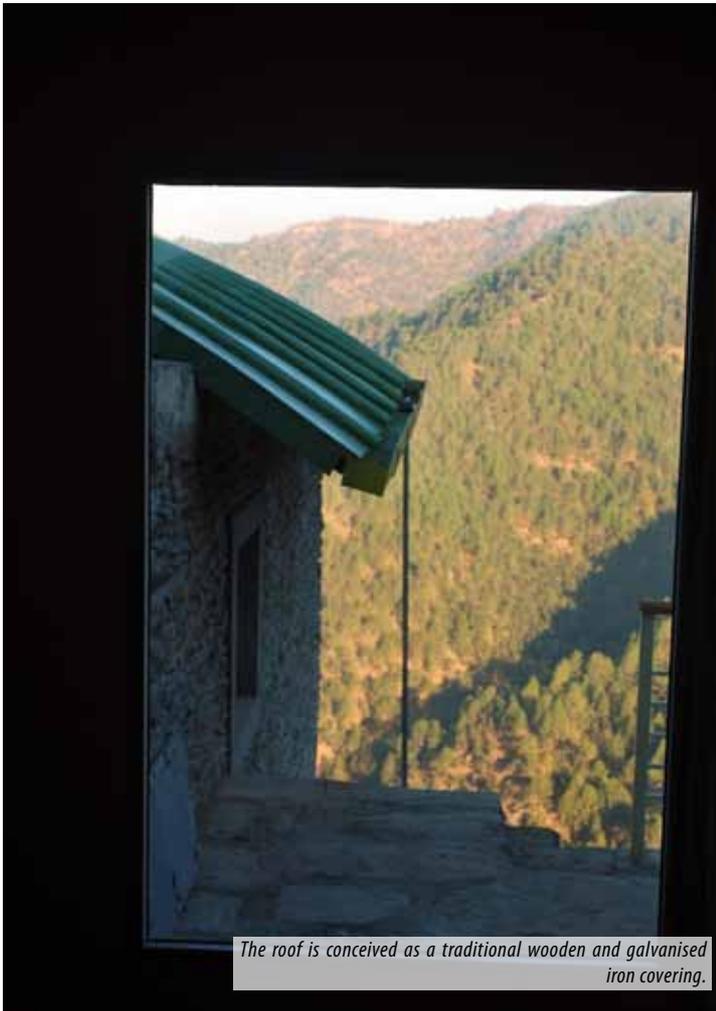
A lined route amidst the flowering plum, apple and peach trees leads to the bit of space that hangs in the earth and sky both. In each villa, the specified



Classic colours and warm wooden elements enliven the modest interiors.

elements of design complement the comforting quality of nature. Earthy tones have been chosen and the surrounding echoes in the detailing itself. The layers slowly emerge and they transcend in materiality, from the roofs, to the stone walls and to the earth. The villa has been sculpted to choreograph views from within and to bring the landscape into the heart of the structure. Silently and stolidly, the surrounding wraps itself gently around the functions so that it forms individual private gardens and earth-sheltered roofs in the structure. A lot has been demanded of the site, and the interiors also recall the memory of the outside. The walls seem to attain the texture of the locale at some places and otherwise, seek a shifting vocation of colours. The plan ambles along meandering staircases, a series of terrace gardens and private courtyards, all the while as a continuous coextensive of the outside. Light washes in the cool spaciousness through designed skylights. The domical language of the roof is robust in a traditional wood and galvanised iron covering as a protection against snow loads - the focal points cognizant in the metallic glint. It also addresses social sustainability by employing local carpenters to ingrain local motifs to the rafters. The striking thought put in the roof that stands out is the designers' belief that the 'roof form retained slopes from the functional aspects but a play of forms again created an appearance of organic 'incrementality' rather a singular dominating form.'

An element of unpredictability that each site offers gives the buildings freshness, spontaneity and a possibility for new ideas. The combining of natural scales and materials create the informal character of the space. The restrained material palette is enlivened with the stark detailing evolved



from the stone dug from the site, locally available pine wood and strategic manipulation of glass for visual connectivity to the panoramic views of the valley and the internal intermediary levels. The intuitive understanding of the site led to an apt placement of units aligning to its natural gradient. At the same time, the construction was carefully engineered to minimise intrusion wherein foundations were isolated footings and random rubble stone walls offered stabilisation.

In this translation of the site, achieving sustainability arrive from the rethinking of resources like preserving the tree cover and solar passive design elements. Boundaries dissolve; at one part, the earth shelter renders a moderate temperature throughout the year and on the other hand, the rooms directly establish a relationship with the valley and the sun. The diverse reality of the environment is discovered inside the building and the various forces at work serve as a window to sustainability. In its mellow quality lies the same serenity that can be found in nature.

On the Epoch & Expression

"And in architecture the experience comes first. That has the deepest effect on us." - Thom Mayne

Of individual buildings, some are more expressive and some are more experiential or dynamic. Each building is fixed in a moment. All those moments read together take on the narrative of architecture. This project

doesn't tell one story but becomes a part of the unfolding of several. Architecture, here, encounters every plane of the earth in an unexpected way. Effortlessly, it drifts into naturalness in a continuous and measured manner. Extending the fragile metaphorical notions, it speaks unsentimentally of the latent spirit of vernacular dwellings of the region. The architecture is equivocal investigation of form and material – the duality responding to both built and unbuilt scape. It captures an essence of intrigue and the slow reinvention of the context on a small scale; the kind of pragmatism where a built expression can actually write a piece of the story of the site that it celebrates. ■

FACT FILE:

Project	:	Ramgarh Residency Villas
Location	:	Ramgarh, Uttarakhand
Architect	:	Space Matters
Client	:	Rohit Sethi and Nischint Chawla
Area	:	6 villas, 1750sqft on 1 acre site
Scope	:	Master Plan, Architecture, Interior and Landscape Design, Project Management
Completion of Project	:	Phase 1 of two villas complete