

# Inside Outside

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Home near Dharamsala designed by Architect Romi Khosla



# Living a Fairy Tale

holiday home

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**D**riving along a narrow mountain trail on a dark quiet night, at what seems like the dead end of the road you hear from the other end of the phone, 'You are on the right track, just look to your right'. You wonder if your senses are playing tricks with you. But no... lo and behold... you see the silhouette of a house with light filtering through patterned curtains and you envision an image of a house set in medieval Europe. Two slate roofs (one of the outhouse and the other of the main house) with their jagged eaves shine under the moonlight and the light-defined rooms bring back images from tales by Hans Christian Andersen. Radhika and Shara's holiday home could well have been called by any epithet that described 'charming', but Radhika chose to call it 'Harshi', after Sharat's mother's name.

Radhika and Sharat Anand's holiday home near Dharamsala conjures images from the fairy tales of one's childhood. Designed by renowned architect Romi Khosla, its sharp alpine roof echoes the steepness of the mountains which envelop it.

Emerging out of seemingly nowhere from behind the shrubs, the lines of this holiday home are straight out of a fairy tale.



Cherry blossom tree in full bloom.





After the initial euphoria of being there, there is a flood of questions and I want all the answers immediately to quench my heightened anticipation.

The house rises up from the ground to 39 ft, of which the master bedroom's ceiling soars up to a mind-blowing 28 ft! It is 77 ft long but only 27 ft wide. Perched on a slope the two guest rooms are on the lower floor while the living areas, the kitchen and the master bedroom are located above, to allow them a maximum view of the mountains. The kitchen is an extension of the dining area, which in turn is a part of the living room. This whole area is glazed on three sides -- the fourth side makes up the generous sized master bedroom, while the roof overhang is long enough to comprise its walls. The other living areas have fixed glass windows inset substantially to protect them from the abundant rainfall the region receives. On the roof, local slate is arranged on a wooden frame made of cheel wood while the trusses are of saal. In fact, the whole house is mostly made with



The living area on the upper level is a large open space. Above the flat roof of the dining area, is the attic where the water tanks were originally positioned so that the roof lines would not be interrupted.



The shelving in the kitchen and even the crockery rack have been made with scrap wood found around the site. The traditional vessels seen on the shelves were found at a local shop in Kangra.



local materials, so even though it has an alpine roof, it fits in well with the locale.

The exposed brickwork in the bedrooms is paint-plastered with a mixture of locally available mud and other rustic ingredients. The finishes are left natural and slate appears over and over also as shelves perched on local stone piles. Distinctive not only for its design but also the way Radhika has dressed it on the inside, each turn has a story to tell.

Cherry blossoms in the foreground and the mighty Dhauladhar kissed by the warm glow of a rising sun make a perfect setting. The evenly slivered slate tiles fixed in perfect lines are hung by nails on three sides, while the fourth side is left free to overlap the next row. Once inside, the house is a happy mix of several styles. Exposed wooden ribbing both within the interior and on the outside lend a distinct charm, while the sharp slopes, the contrast of materials,



'Pictures are not meant for albums, they are meant to be seen everyday and as frequently as one goes up and down the stairs!' believes Radhika.

The impact of sharp slopes is as strong on the inside of the house as it is on the outside. The living room ceiling is as dramatic by the day as it is by the night especially when outside light filters through the Kashmiri embroidered curtains.







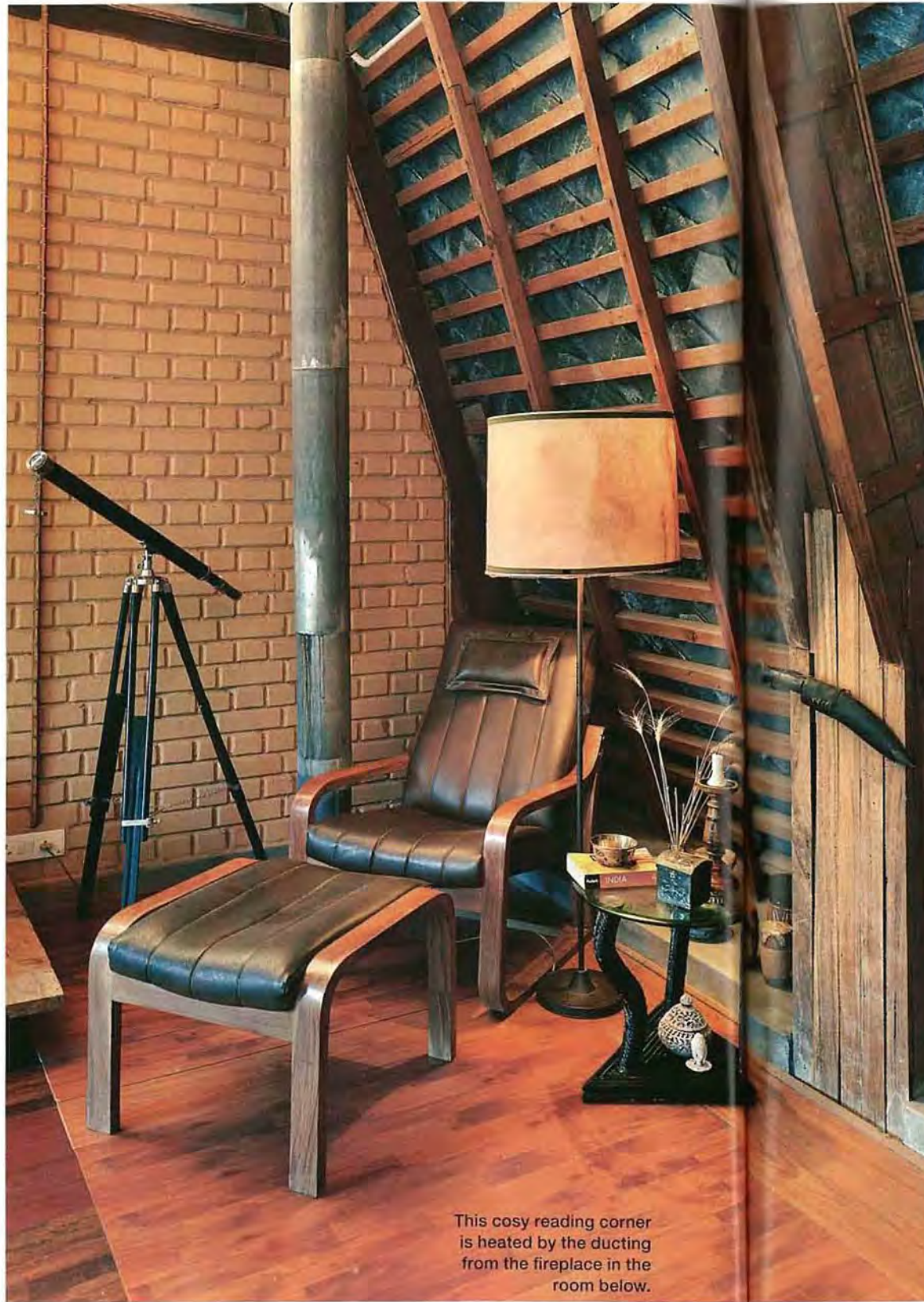
Red paint on the floor was an exercise to bring a little colour and drama to the plain cement flooring in the bathroom. The shelving is slate perched on local river stones. To bring in natural light, some of the tiles on the leeward side of the house have been replaced with fibre sheet cut to tile size. Not sure how Romi feels about these but the light was needed!

their colour and texture and the drama created by the volume, indeed, make it a very unique and special house.

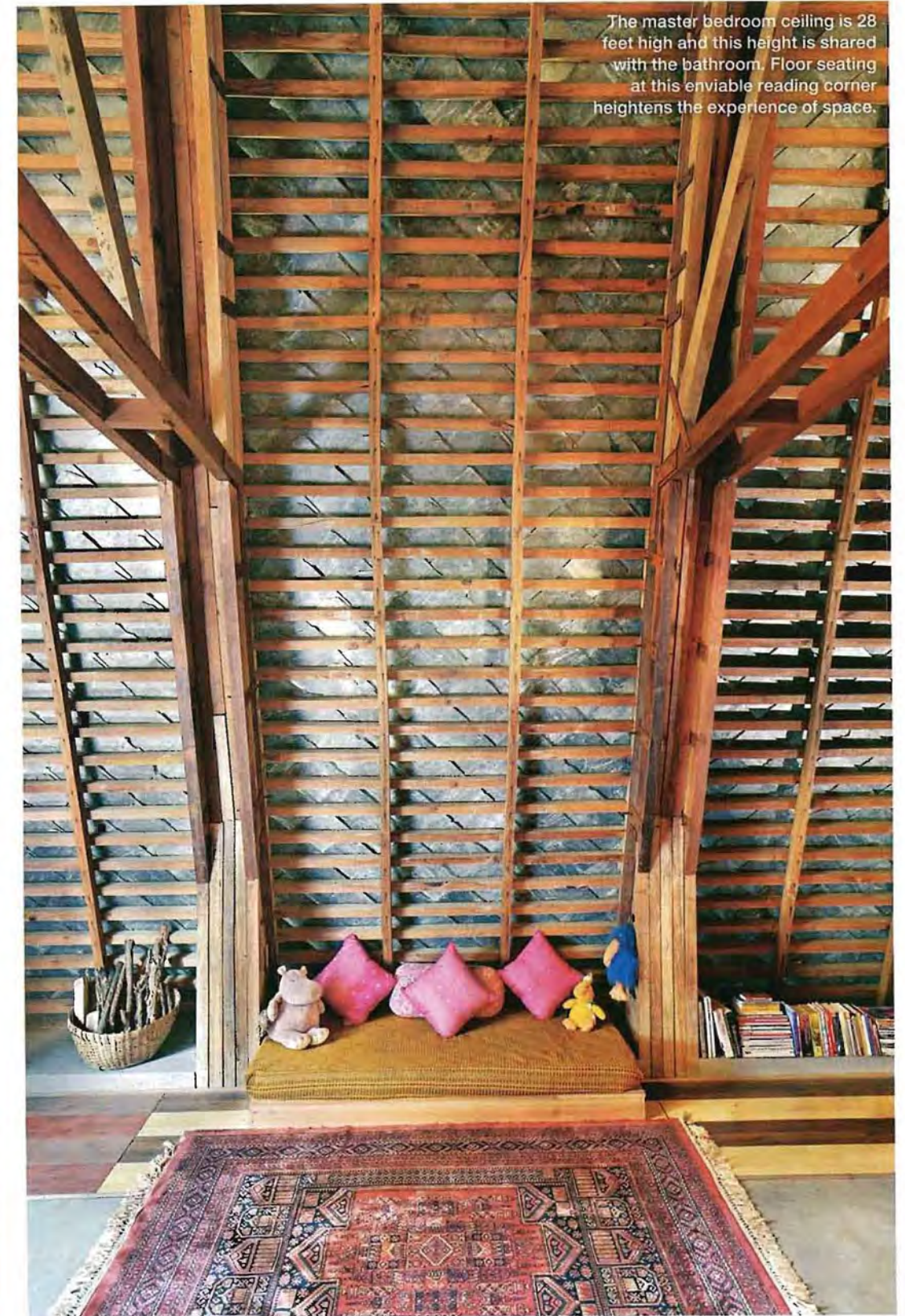
For Sharat, an ex-banker who quit the corporate world at age 40 to follow his heart, a home in the mountains was high on the agenda. Radhika, who specialises in terrariums and is an ardent naturalist, also wanted a place in the mountains which would be a playground for her green fingers. Her interests are varied and she needed an appropriate canvas. It's not just plants; she also follows her hobby of bee-keeping and growing exotic mushrooms at their farm.

'Initially I was very apprehensive because we could not see the mountain ranges from anywhere on the site but Romi promised that he would bring the mountains into my drawing room and I kept asking how. He proclaimed, and rightly so, "I am the architect, it is my job to do so and I will!" And he did!

'We had no idea of what the house was going to look like, but were sure that Romi would cast



This cosy reading corner is heated by the ducting from the fireplace in the room below.



The master bedroom ceiling is 28 feet high and this height is shared with the bathroom. Floor seating at this enviable reading corner heightens the experience of space.





his magic. The plans and drawings were not shown to us till quite late. Site planning, plotting and master planning done, his contractors started the work as we sat and waited in excited anticipation.

'The outhouse came up first. At that point, we could not comprehend Romi's insistence on the outhouse and its positioning. Now that we have started living here, we realise how crucial that decision was. The length and height of the house cordon off the noise from and the sight of the ugly structures on the other side of the road, leaving our house and us in the exclusive company of the mountains and the flora and fauna.'

Says Romi, 'We started on the premise that we had to build with local materials because the house is set in the midst of a rural community. We wanted the Anands to look out onto something aesthetic besides the overwhelming view of the mountains. Building a unique house, with the local materials, which did not follow the local form, was a challenge. From this emanated the need to train the workers to build differently.'



The mighty Dhauladhars seem just about an arm's length away from the living room. As promised by Romi, Radhika got the mountain view right into the house.





Scarp wood put to good use as shelves, tables and armoire.

True to Romi's style, the bricks were made with the mud that was dug out for the foundation and slowly the walls on the concrete foundation slabs started rising. 'Building in the mountains is not easy and certainly not cheap... that we knew but to what extent "was" the big question. Nonetheless, having Romi on our side was a huge help in circumventing a lot of costs.' Radhika moved to the site in 2008 to be personally involved with their house construction, recounts Radhika.

At that point, only the lower rooms had a roof, which means that the living room had a floor like a cemented platform. The room below had no door. It was a half done site with all materials strewn and open on all sides. There was no fencing and dogs and other animals roamed freely. Radhika made this her home for the next few months and got about getting things done bit by bit. She was convinced that she was going to stretch the buck to the maximum, which she did splendidly. 'Today, as I look back, I



The kitchen counter is painted an arresting cobalt blue. Taking the mundane to vibrant are the bright fabrics on the blinds. The sideboard-cum-bar was a present from a dear friend.





All discarded furniture has found pride of place in this holiday home. This dining set was bought in Dubai. It made way for Radhika's garden dining table at their apartment in New Delhi.

marvel at the finished product!' chuckles Radhika.

An environmentalist and conservationist by nature, Radhika was naturally against any ostentation. Not only that, she even got the budget under control by her innovative and very practical application of the materials around the site. For the living room flooring, she collected left-over odd boxes of laminate from shops in Kottla, a hardware market in New Delhi. She decided the kitchen platform would be just plain plastered cement, and then she painted it royal blue, to coordinate with the narrow blue strip in the living room. All the wood that was lined up for junk was revisited and each and every bit put to use. 'All the benches and tables in all the rooms, the entire shelving in the kitchen, the lobby, and everywhere that you see, is made out of discarded wood that was about to be thrown away.' In the



A steep ladder is the access to the attic which awaits a new usage description.



The huge bedrooms on the lower level have fireplaces to keep the guests warm during winter.



## holiday home



kitchen and in the bathroom one can see slate shelves perched on a pile of locally found river stones. 'I kept placing the stones and asked the mistri to keep applying masala over it. They all thought I had gone cuckoo!'

Simultaneously, Radhika was lapping up all and every bit of furniture that the extended family and friends were discarding. The sofa in the living room is from Sharat's grandparent's home in Jammu; even the fabric on it is its original covering! The dining table and chairs are a set that Sharat and Radhika had bought from Dubai for one of their homes during their bank days. The sideboard-cum-bar unit was a friend's mother's. The friend's father, a fighter pilot, who was killed in the 1965 war, had it made somewhere in the east. The mother, who was shifting into the daughter's very contemporary residence wanted a home for this prized possession and Radhika, who had done up

their garden, was just the person for it.

As per Romi Khosla's original design, the ceiling on the inner side needs to be covered with cement board and completed! But Radhika and Sharat love it as it is. 'Sure it gets very cold in the winters and hot in the summers, but we have the rooms below which are warmer and cooler respectively. Fireplaces in all the rooms keep them warm.' The elevation of the house was sacrosanct for Romi, who even created an attic to put the overhead tanks in there.

The garden wears a wild look with a pond and rustic benches around it. A little bridge transports the Anands and their guests into a world created by great minds and the humble hands of their local help 'chachu' and 'Sumandidi'. After years of nurturing the mountain garden she gets her annual lot of turmeric, onions, potatoes, garlic and corn from here. 'The land is so fertile and we have enough rain

Mud bricks have been plastered with a local mud mixture. The fireplace (which Sharat's father jokingly calls a 'bakery' is good to make wood fired pizzas. Incidentally the blinds in both the rooms are Radhika's old Dhakkai sarees put to use!

so all I need are "cuttings of new plants" and they thrive! Sounds easier said than done! A little temple near the fishpond is in keeping with the local tradition of having a little place devoted to the family deity who will take care of the house when the owners are away.

Surrounded by Didi Contractor houses and of course, Romi's own house not too far away, the property is a world within itself...and it is difficult to imagine the real world is just 100 yards away. Being here is like a dream. It's you, the mountains, the cherry blossoms (during November), the plants and the crisp autumn air. The bees buzz as they come for cherry nectar and cows moo in the distance. Is this real or am I in a reverie...? 