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Architecture Brio weaves together water features, stunning gardens and graceful compositions to create a serene retreat near Mumbai

PHOTOGRAPHY: RANDHIR SINGH WRITER: STEPHEN CRAFTI



In Residence

Lined with Baroda Green marble, the villa's pool contrasts with its sand-faced plaster walls





A short boat ride from Mumbai, Dua Villa, in Alibaug, is the perfect getaway in all seasons, from the monsoon's torrential rain in July to the scorching high temperatures through May. Built by Architecture Brio, an award-winning firm with offices in Mumbai and Rotterdam, the home was designed as a refuge from the city throughout the year.

The house and grounds – five acres of gardens designed by Kunal Maniar & Associates – were conceived as one, with water features and a swimming pool beautifully enmeshed in the spacious home. For the owners, a couple with three teenage children, the villa's chunky brick walls set up a cosy enclave, sheltering them from the unpredictable weather. 'Our clients wanted to be able to get away from the city and feel immersed in this landscape, while still feeling cocooned from the elements,' says architect Shefali Balwani, who worked on the project with partner and co-founder Robert Verrijt.

While the architects refer to the design of the house as being relatively simple, it is, in fact, a highly complex composition, expertly made to appear straightforward. The gently curvaceous, rendered brick walls, with arched windows, doors and enfilades, are cleverly juxtaposed with an orthogonal floor plan. 'The design is partially about experiencing the movement of the sun throughout the day, creating silhouettes across the interior, not dissimilar to a sundial,' says Verrijt. The two main bodies of water, the pool and the trough-like water feature at the entrance,

further animate the surrounding surfaces, inside and out. The walls' material palette – a sand-faced plaster exterior and a lime plaster interior – allows the light, as much as the surface composition, to come to the fore.

The house features formal living areas towards the front. Two courtyard gardens loosely delineate the more public areas from the generous sleeping quarters and guest accommodation, with various sheltered outdoor spaces blurring the division between inside and out. The living room is laid out with a built-in terrazzo table and benches set within a deep curved arched window that provides both a protection from the elements and a connection to the garden. The same attention to detail can be found in the library's pale stone built-in bookshelves or the dining room's olive limestone-bordered marble floor. Resembling a handwoven rug, it is as bespoke as the circular brass panels on the door handles. 'These panels were inspired by Mies van der Rohe's German period,' says Verrijt, who enjoys integrating historical nods into many of the practice's designs.

An external staircase leading to a water tower that extends 6m above the walls offered the architects an opportunity to elevate the functional to an art form. 'We saw these stairs more akin to sculpture,' says Balwani, who considers the landscape as pivotal to the success of this project. Four bottle brush trees, framed by large boulders at the foot of the external stairs, add a poetic touch.

It's difficult to reconcile the quiet ambience of this property with its proximity to the busy Indian metropolis. 'It's like time has stopped here, like walking through the spaces in slow motion,' says Verrijt, pointing out the gentle curves of the exterior wall as they meet the clear blue sky. ✨

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Left, the main corridor culminates in the pool, leading the eye out towards the gardens

Below, an alcove in the living room was inspired by the medieval stone window seats of the Santa Maria do Bouro convent in Portugal

Opposite, circular skylights illuminate the guest corridor's lime plaster walls



