

'We wanted a home that kept out the Indian city'

Randeep Ramesh visits an extraordinary pocket of uncompromising modernism that stands proud in the midst of the messy, urban sprawl that is Surat. Photographs by Michael Franke



There are few pretty sights in Surat, a city of four million people that squats in the lush, green fields of western India's Gujarat state. As far as the eye can see, the land is flat, save for an extraordinary mix of haphazard construction that defines the country's urban sprawl. Next to plots of paddy and sugar cane sit imposing porticoed mansions.

Much of the city's space gives way to brown, low-cost residential colonies, and featureless tower blocks hung with ornate balconies overlook half-complete malls clad in scaffolding.

In this potpourri of design, one structure in the heart of the city stands out: it's the home of Parag Shah, a 40-year-old businessman whose real love, he says, is design.

The house that Shah built pays homage to his favourite architect,

Japan's Tadao Ando, winner of architecture's version of an Oscar (the Pritzker prize). Ando's trademark features – the creative use of light, smooth concrete and blending nature into design – are evident in the five-bedroom home, built for Shah, his wife Meeta and their children, his elderly parents and their half-dozen servants.

Two materials emphasise its modernity: concrete and Italian

travertine. The house is encased by two concrete skins, which act to keep the interior cool – essential in the hairdryer heat of an Indian summer.

Three other elements locate Shah's house firmly in the subcontinent. The bedrooms are covered in Burma teak, giving them a warm brown coating. A black stone called kadapah, mined near Chennai in southern India and used to absorb

sunlight, covers the floors. And the house revolves around its open courtyard, covered in red sandstone, a nod to the family's ancestral lands in Rajasthan where the rock covers the landscape. "The courtyard is the most important space," Shah says, "because you can be outside in the air without anyone else looking in."

This is the house's overriding theme: to keep the outside world out. "I wanted it to be a criticism of

India's urban centres. Too much in this country is gaudy and ill thought-out. We wanted a home that kept out the city," he says. With that in mind, there are no windows that look out on the street. Shah takes me outside and points at the buildings next door – an ugly, low-slung grey block and a 10-storey concrete tower. "The beauty of my house is that you would never know all this existed."

Light tumbles in through the roof

and spills out of foot-level strips of glass. The children, Siddhant, 17, and Sumeet, 10, have bedrooms with windows that open on to a courtyard view of a forest of bamboo stalks.

Inside, the home is full of design delights. From the thin, informal lobby, the entire layout is apparent: bedrooms to the left; kitchen to the right; courtyard straight ahead, with the entrance to the main room visible at the staircase. Works of

modern art by local artists hang on the walls. There is no television in the expansive "living space".

"Television occupies and invades family time and space," says Shah. "Both Meeta and I thought that evenings should be spent as a family. The kids have a television in their play area. That is their space."

For all their modern outlook, the Shahs are in many ways a traditional Indian family in which men make »



Inside out: The house's windows look out on the central courtyard (previous pages), where the red sandstone makes a nod to the family's ancestral links with

Rajasthan. Clockwise from below: The main living space – there is no television because it 'invades family time'; the courtyard; owners Parag and Meeta Shah; the kitchen



'The courtyard is the most important space in the house because you can be outside in the air without anyone else looking in'



the decisions and women abide by them. Later, when we sit down for dinner, Meeta waits for her husband, myself, her eldest son and her in-laws to eat before serving herself. Meeta, who is starting a fabric business, says her favourite room is the kitchen – it is dominated by a stainless-steel cooking island with ovens, deep freezers and microwaves. And she also admits to liking the playroom. "It is a place

where [the children] are happiest." Perhaps the most traditionally Indian room on the ground floor is the puja, or prayer room. Dominated by a large statute of Mahavir, the monk-prince who founded the Jain religion to which the Shahs belong, the room is filled with the scent of sandalwood and incense. Gurjit Matharoo, the architect who designed the house, trained in Europe, which accounts for many of

the western flourishes. He and Shah travelled to Italy and Switzerland to scout for appropriate "styles" before Matharoo went to buy the furniture. He spent more than \$100,000 on fixtures and fittings. "We both have business in Europe, so we would add dates to the itinerary whenever we thought we might find a piece of furniture that would work," Matharoo says. The result is that the interior

resembles a modern furniture museum. The family dinner table, made of glass and steel, is an original by Rem Koolhaas. Above it sits the iconic copper and plastic PH Artichoke lamp by late Danish designer Poul Henningsen. Upstairs in the library, stocked with books on architecture and design, we sit on chairs designed in 1928 by Mies van der Rohe. From the shelves, Shah – who

makes his living running the family diamond-cutting business – pulls out a book on Tadao Ando to show me what he considers the ultimate inspiration for his home: the architect's Church of Light in Osaka in which light streams through a vast cross cut into the end wall. "He created a space that no one else could. That's what I wanted." Although the family and the

architect agree on most things when it comes to the house, there is one room about which they feel very differently: the basement. For Matharoo, it is the most important part of the house, partly lit by sunlight and dominated by a concrete pillar. The family would happily have done without it. "Complete waste of space," Meeta says. "It is so dark. We just fill it with junk." ●