

In Residence

Located a short drive from Ahmedabad, the house's spacious living and dining areas open on to a large courtyard, which is home to a pair of pre-existing sapodilla trees

GREEN LIGHT

A contemporary country retreat in Gujarat, India, is rooted in the dappled shade of two ancient sapodilla trees

PHOTOGRAPHY: ISHITA SITWALA WRITER: VAISHNAVI NAYEL TALAWADEKAR

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Architects Sönke Hoof and Khushnu Panthaki Hoof, of Studio Sangath, have an uncanny gift for noticing the almost invisible – that fleeting detail, or lack thereof, that others might overlook. Yet on a summer's day not so many years ago, as they left their office in the golden clamour of Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat, for the languid green of its hinterland, the husband-and-wife team arrived at a site that appeared to offer almost nothing at all.

Like many such plots on the city's outskirts – some 30-40 minutes away, beyond the tightening grip of urban density – the land held no preordained landmark, no obliging ruin, no obvious architectural cue. What it did hold was a tumbledown one-room cottage, once a weekend getaway, which went largely unnoticed. And, at the centre, two old sapodilla trees, which decidedly did not. 'The trees immediately anchored the place,' recalls Panthaki Hoof. 'Everything else felt negotiable.'

As it turned out, the trees were as central to the owners' memory as they were to the

land – silent sentinels to long-ago summers, to afternoons spent with parents and, years later, to gatherings with children, all instinctively drawn to the same pocket of shade. Best loved for its sweet, succulent fruit – chikoo to the locals – the sapodilla is often seen as a symbol of nourishment and seasonal abundance.

To the architects, however, it offered something far more enduring: a generous, living shelter. Its thick, low-hanging leaves filtered the sunlight into a gentle, dappled glow, turning the space beneath into a haven of calm. The earth remained cool, the heat held at bay, so that the body sensed relief before the mind registered it. 'In this climate, shade was not an abstract idea,' Hoof says. 'You felt it in your body the moment you stepped under the tree.'

In many ways, the sapodillas laid the groundwork long before the architects could, shaping a project that became one totally different from what might otherwise have emerged. Rather than treating the trees as obstacles to be negotiated, the architects instead allowed their trunks and foliage to

dictate the rhythm, orientation and spatial sequencing of the house. A large wraparound veranda now envelops the trees, creating a shared threshold between inside and out.

Windows are carefully placed to frame distant foliage, while in other moments, leaves are invited indoors, blurring distinctions between built form and landscape. Once pruned – not for effect, but to make the site more inhabitable – the sapodillas became an effective filter against the sun. Unlike the family's former city home, which struggled with light and relied heavily on artificial illumination, this house allows daylight to remain present throughout the day. 'The trees do the work for us,' Hoof says. 'They modulate the light far better than any device we could introduce.'

If there is one thing Hoof and Panthaki Hoof resist instinctively, it is the comfort of rules. This aversion reveals itself in the architects' insistence on designing from the inside out – shaping spaces around life rather than façades – and in their »

Art direction: Kunal Pratap Das



This page, a terracotta bull, by Samvit Sarabhai of Rajka Pottery, guards the staircase in the entrance

Opposite, left, the dining area features pendants custom-designed by Rock Paper Scissors for Studio Sangath. Right, one of the bedrooms, with views of the garden below

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fascination with delayed revelation. Here, architecture unfolds gradually. Passages narrow and release, thresholds multiply, and views are withheld just long enough to make their eventual appearance feel earned.

Bedrooms, both cocooning and outward-looking, tuck themselves discreetly into the plan, offering edited glimpses of the garden. A family lounge, meanwhile, occupies the first floor, complementing the larger living space on the ground level and rising deliberately to the height of the foliage to meet the sapodilla canopy at eye level. 'It's a completely different way of engaging with the landscape,' Panthaki Hoof explains. 'You're no longer looking down at the garden or up at the trees – you're inside that layer.' She describes the sensation as one of gentle levitation, a kind of bird's-eye view that subtly shifts perception and induces calm.

In the opposite wing of the house, a gym and spa spill out to a lap pool that dissolves into a wild, untamed landscape. Developed with Ahmedabad-based landscape practice Studio 23N72E, the grounds resist manicured perfection in favour of seasonal rhythms and local species. Monkeys frolic freely, and peacocks parade the edges; these interruptions are treated as part of daily life, not intrusions. 'You can't design this kind of setting and

then expect it to behave,' Hoof reflects. 'The idea was always to coexist, not to curate.'

The architects approached the landscape much as they did the house itself: as something unresolved, composed of hidden corners and meandering views that invite non-linear exploration. Hoof attributes this quality to intuition – a state of flow in which logic steps back, allowing site, climate, family aspirations and memory to guide. That balance between recall and reinvention surfaces again in the home's sloping roofs, which quietly reference the family's city residence. 'Memory can be a guide,' Panthaki Hoof says, 'but it shouldn't become a constraint.'

Indeed, the most delicate challenge was knowing where to stop, allowing the house to emerge while resisting the temptation to resolve every corner. This ethos of restraint finds material expression in a carefully calibrated palette of grey stone, concrete, teak, charred wood and muted colours. Despite their apparent austerity, the materials carry a subdued warmth, their tactile qualities revealed slowly through wear, light and touch. For the architects, such paring back expanded rather than narrowed possibilities. 'When you reduce choice,' Hoof says, 'you start paying attention.' Hand-built elements

reinforce this sensibility. The staircase, in particular, carries a quiet irregularity. 'People respond to it instinctively,' Panthaki Hoof notes. 'There's something deeply human about objects that reveal how they were made.'

The collaboration hums with a quiet resonance: Panthaki Hoof's grandfather – the great modernist Balkrishna Doshi, with whom she worked until his death in 2023, and whose famous Sangath office complex is also where Studio Sangath is located – had once known the owner's father, and decades later, she and Hoof's daughter would celebrate birthday parties of the owner's child beneath the same sapodilla canopy. Long before the house took shape, life had already gathered here, folding time gently back upon itself. Today, memory and architecture murmur with the landscape, shaping a home defined as much by what is left open as by what is built – a place where past and present converge beneath the enduring shade of the sapodillas, carrying the weight of countless quiet summers. ✦ studiosangath.org

Below, the bar area opens on to the sapodilla courtyard. Its dark latticed ceiling and walls contrast with the golden tones of the furnishings, including an 'Aria Gold' chandelier by Zaha Hadid for Slamp

