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**Three enchanting hillside resorts by
SpaceMatters, New Delhi**

The Hills are Alive . . .

Amritha Ballal and Suditya Sinha of SpaceMatters, New Delhi, take us on a ramble to three hill resorts in Uttarkhand and Himachal – each cosily nestled in its distinctive environment.



Seclude Mussoorie



Seclude Palampur



Seclude Ramgarh

These three resorts provided an opportunity to reinterpret prototypes for building in the hills. 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 location with the use of contemporary technology and sensibility,' says Suditya Sinha, Founding Partner and Core Design Management Resource Head, SpaceMatters.

'There have been drastic changes in construction in the

Uttarakhand and Himachal areas, driven by the increasing outside investment in the building industry rather than local construction, putting pressure on environmental resources. Simultaneously, the combination of seismic building codes and predominance of framed construction has led to the rapid disappearance of time-tested building techniques and materiality which promoted the use of local human and material resources,' adds Amritha Ballal, Founding Partner.

The Seclude resorts at

Mussoorie, Ramgarh and Palampur respectively, are a passion project for the client Rohit Sethi. 'I wanted to create places which reflected the unique charm of each carefully chosen location, and recognised that thoughtful design was the best way to achieve this vision'.

For SpaceMatters the ambition was to create an atmosphere of inspiring solitude. The built form needed to enhance each location without competing for attention – the architecture needed to make its presence felt – rather than announced.

TEXT: AMITA SARWAL

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANUNAYA SOOD, AAKASH KUMAR, SANJEET WAHI & SUDITYA SINHA, COURTESY SPACEMATTERS & SECLUDE



On the front terrace outside, logs serve as casual benches around a bricked area with a bonfire pit.

Mussoorie

The site, providing panoramic views and easy accessibility, minus any noise and clutter, is located on a high outcrop just off the popular Mall Road. The resort is instantly identifiable by its vibrant blue roof and sunflower yellow façade. The existing building, refurbished into a comfortable homestay was an incoherent mix of stone, and RCC. and required extensive redevelopment. A major design challenge was the opening up of dark, oddly-placed existing spaces to let in daylight, and display the scenery. Major structural alterations were



Author Ruskin Bond has been an integral part of Mussoorie since he moved there in 1963. As a tribute to the writer, local sign artist Ashok Kumar painted lines by him on the walls, capturing the essence of Seclude Mussoorie.



Colourist and street artist Anpu Varkey brings the wild beauty of the outdoors, indoors. A large single log communal dining table becomes an interactive place for guests. The dining area opens into the sitting area.



The multipurpose lobby, library, viewing and sitting area with its conical roof and an eclectic mix of cushions, lights, books – becomes the vibrant heart of the building.



The aqua and lime green room has a niched sitting area.

avoided given the ad-hoc construction of the building. 'The structure we inherited was an awkward block, lacking in obvious elegance, yet over time revealing an eccentric charm. In fact, this quality offered an intensity of its own and by extension, had potential for play in design. We used local inspirations,

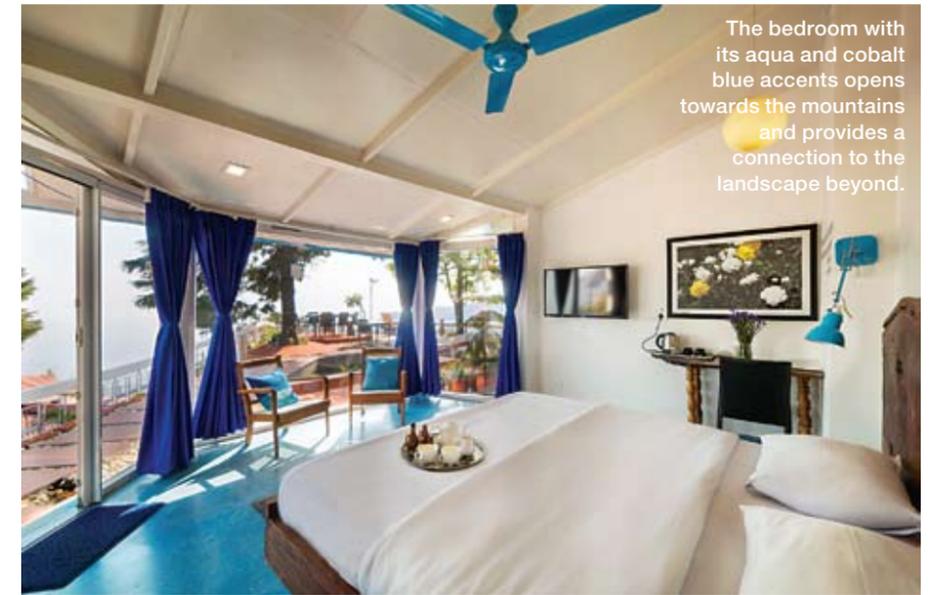
materials and artisans to add playful accents – hand painted wall signage, vintage sewing machines supporting tables, bird cages from the local thrift shop as light fixtures etc. The place became a part of the social and cultural milieu of the town,' describes Ballal. The nostalgic charm of a bygone era of Mussoorie is



The glass walled corridor along the length of the resort offers uninterrupted scenic views.

evident through the mingling of writers, artists and travelers' creations. A mural by renowned colourist street artist Anpu Varkey brings the wild beauty of the outside landscape indoors. A large communal dining table carved from a single log has become an interactive place for guests. The dining space, together

with the multipurpose lobby, library, viewing and sitting area with its conical roof becomes the vibrant heart of the building. The eight ensuite bedrooms have individual themes and colour palettes, highlighting themed lyrics from popular songs from the Beatles' Yellow Submarine to Prince's Purple Rain.



The bedroom with its aqua and cobalt blue accents opens towards the mountains and provides a connection to the landscape beyond.

Author Ruskin Bond has been an integral part of Mussoorie since he moved there in 1963. As a love note to the writer, local sign artist Ashok Kumar painted lines by him on the walls, capturing the essence of Seclude Mussoorie. This is a conversational point – and a favourite backdrop for selfies!

FACT FILE

TYPOLGY: Resort
PROJECT: Seclude Mussoorie
LOCATION: Mussoorie, Uttarkhand
CLIENT: Rohit Sethi
ROOMS: 8
SITE: 12,000 sq ft
BUILT-UP AREA: 8000 sq ft

COMPLETION: 2015
ARCHITECTURAL FIRM: SpaceMatters, New Delhi
ARCHITECT: Amrita Ballal
SITE CONTRACTOR: Mathura Prashad Raju
LANDSCAPE & LIGHTING: SpaceMatters

Helming SpaceMatters



Amritha Ballal Architect, Urban Planner & Founding Partner.



Suditya Sinha core design management resource head & founding partner.

For Amritha Ballal, founding partner, 'pursuing architecture was not a planned decision'. Suditya Sinha, came into architecture through different ways. 'Our work has been a mix of planned and accidental occurrences,' says Sinha. Both graduated from the School of Planning and Architecture (SPA), New Delhi. Ballal further studied M.Sc in Urban Ecological Planning at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway.

Founded in 2005, SpaceMatters' winning of the national level Bhopal Gas Memorial competition was one of its defining projects. The revitalisation of the post-disaster industrial heritage precinct of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy led to Ballal co-editing the international publication "Bhopal 2011 – Landscapes of Memory".

'This continues to stand out since we have, over time, engaged with various issues through the project. It has introduced us to working with stakeholders, conducting

workshops and research. This process has defined our practice – being aware both of the possibilities and limitations of architecture,' avers Ballal.

Sinha's competence with the actual business of crafting built form and producing tangible and realistic solutions are key assets which have won him several awards.

Says Ballal, 'During the design process we constantly ask whether various possibilities have been explored beyond the objectives for the program, process, design and overall project. We strive towards design that balances the needs of the people, place and time it is designed for, while promoting flexibility of use and a certain timelessness. A certain balance of specificity and abstraction, issues of social inclusion and environmental sustainability are of interest to the practice.'

'It is important to visualise each project in its totality. Design is not considered a frill or indulgence but

as having an impact on society. SpaceMatters is a means – through our projects, research, and advocacy – to inform, impact and transform how design is perceived and practiced', continues Sinha.

SpaceMatters was recognised by the Architecture Journal, UK as one of the noted women-led practices in the world. 'Gender issues were something we encountered and dealt within the confines of our practise. This award involved us in a broader conversation and movement within the international architectural community to address issues of gender imbalance,' says Ballal.

Moving ahead? 'We want to create inclusive, egalitarian and sustainably built environments. From restoration of post-industrial Brownfield sites, to working with rural artisans in reviving traditional building crafts. Through our studio, we wish to develop a platform for young talent to collaborate, grow and create opportunities together,' affirms Sinha.



The prime building with large openings and green cover allows light to filter in and helps blend the built structures with the surroundings.

Palampur

Set in a valley, surrounded by acres of fields and ringed in by mountains, this resort comprises of two homestays – the prime Seclude Palampur, and the single-roomed Red Cedar Cottage which has a cedar tree growing alongside.

'The specific character of the landscape, location and resources provided the guiding principles of the design. Locally prevalent techniques, materials and contractors were used, reducing costs and increasing convenience. The design process was undertaken on the site itself, incorporating a series of on-site workshops with the client,



The single-roomed Red Cedar Cottage gets its name from the tree nearby. Its adjacent machan is popular for picnics and lazing on.



The four-poster bed was designed and made on site. The skylight lets in sunlight while the bay windows offer access to the outdoors.



Each of the bedrooms has wide windows overlooking the open space beyond.



An open verandah with a glass ceiling provides an ideal sit-out area.



Seclude Palampur is located in a valley surrounded by fields and ringed in by mountains.

FACT FILE

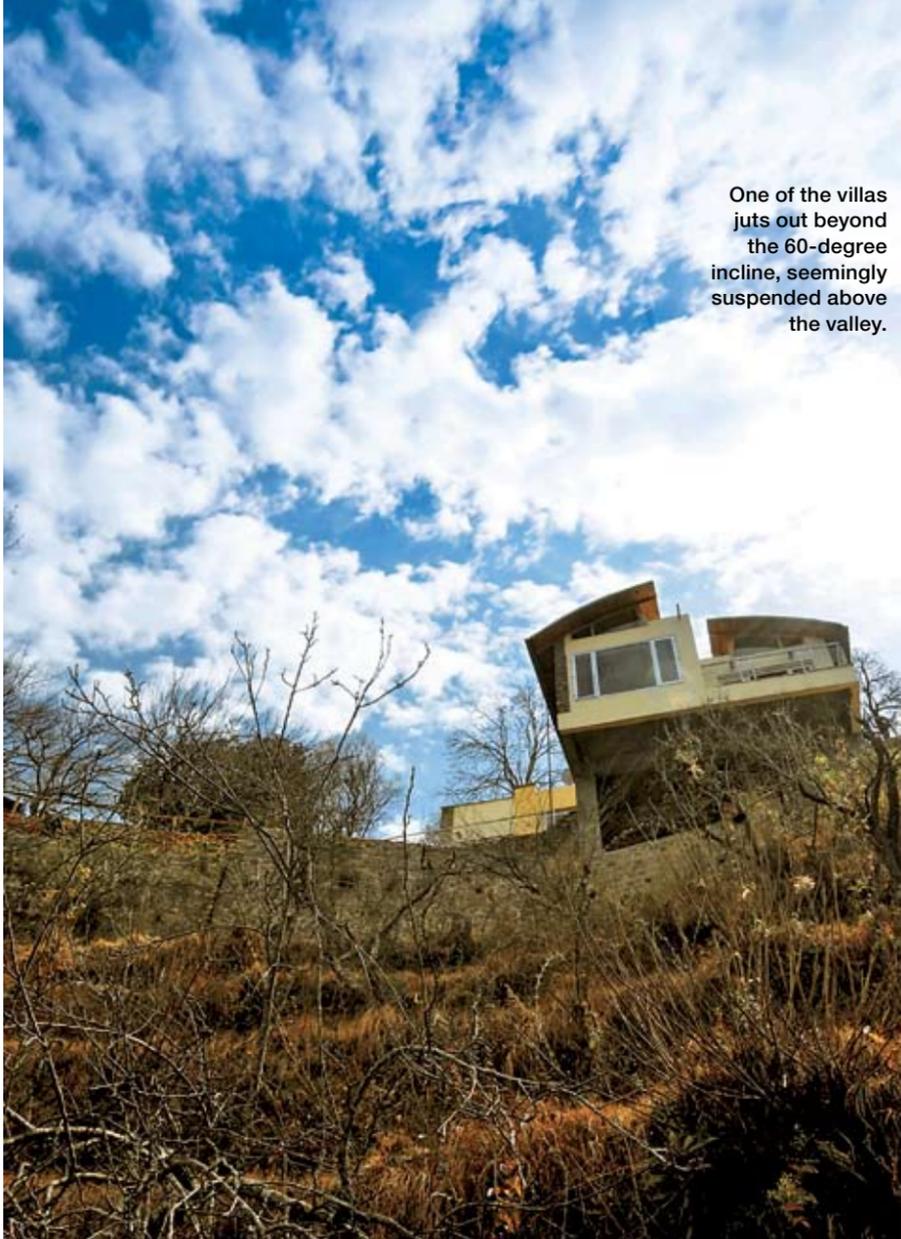
TYPOLGY: Resort
PROJECT: Seclude Palampur
LOCATION: Palampur, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh
CLIENT: Rohit Sethi
ROOMS: 6
SITE: 10000 sq ft
BUILT-UP AREA: 5500 sq ft
COMPLETION: Main Building – 2007, Red Cedar Cottage – 2016
ARCHITECTURAL FIRM: SpaceMatters, New Delhi
ARCHITECT: Suditya Sinha
SITE CONTRACTOR: Ramesh Chand Local
LANDSCAPE: Kashika Farms
LIGHTING: SpaceMatters



Using wood as a main part of the interiors, the walls and ceiling are lined with local timber.

mason and carpenter. This resulted in an organic eclecticism and intimacy by allowing for flexible, on-the-spot decisions.

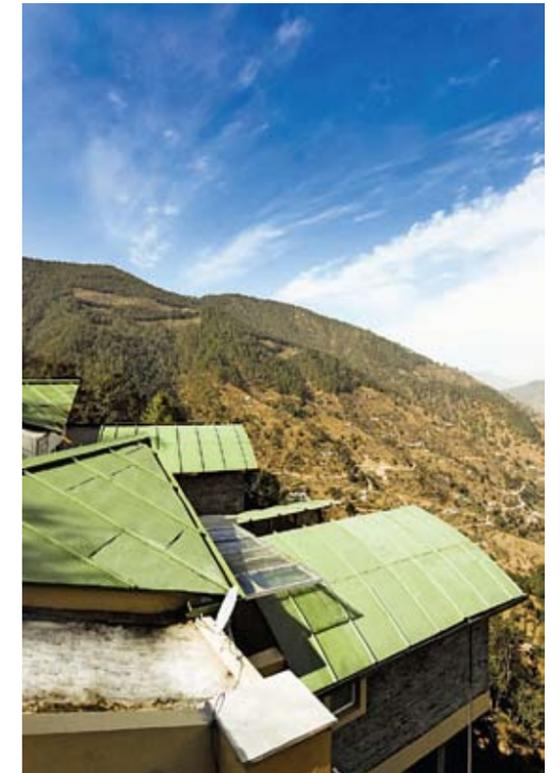
We experimented with wood, bamboo, earth and stone to find viable, low cost construction materials. For example, we found a local contractor who owned a machine for soil-compressed bricks. Building with this technique, expertise and material brought down costs substantially while adding a novel value to the design', details Suditya Sinha.



One of the villas juts out beyond the 60-degree incline, seemingly suspended above the valley.



In order to retain its terraced nature, the built form was designed in levels rather than a monolithic as entity.



The metal roofs, providing distinct focal points, were designed to take the winter snow loads – inspired by the traditional wood and galvanised iron roofing designed for British-era buildings.

Ramgarh

The client wanted private luxury villas to serve as holiday homes for personal use – or rented as guesthouses. The one-acre, elongated site located on an extremely steep slope with a 60-degree gradient, had to accommodate six villas of 1750 sq ft each, high above the Ramgarh valley. A critical consideration was the north facing site and its slope lying in a shadowed area drastically reducing exposure to the direct southern sun.

'The site determined devising appropriate footing to anchor the units with minimum excavations. In order to retain its terraced nature, the built form was designed in levels rather than as a monolithic entity. Furthermore, each unit provided three differently built characteristics, partly sitting on the slope, partly inserted within, and partly jutting out, seemingly suspended above the valley,' says Suditya Sinha.

'Each unit adapted to its particular setting while retaining an overall cohesive



Each terrace offers total privacy and your own special unrestricted of the mountains and valley.



Extensive use of glass to allow in bright sunshine, daylight and panoramic views was one of the requests of the client.

Resorts



Each bedroom has total privacy while being given a panoramic view.



Extensive use of glass, wood and stone adds character to the rooms.

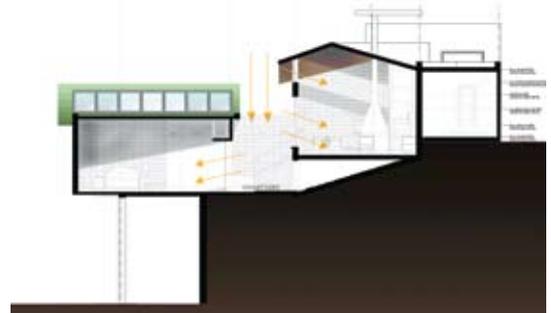
structure, becoming an extension of the topography. Seemingly sculpted out of it with the villas punctuated with a series of terraced gardens and private courtyards. The inclusion of existing floral and fruit bearing trees contributed in retaining the natural stability of the site along with random rubble stone walls,' adds Moulshri Joshi.

While the structural system was RCC, the infill and simple detailing relied upon skilled manpower and local material. The metal roofs, providing distinct focal points, were designed to take the winter snow loads – inspired by the

traditional wood and galvanised iron roofing designed for the British era buildings. The wood and stone masonry, weathering beautifully in the extreme climate, gets covered by increasing overgrowth, and blends with the ambience. Extensive glass usage provides visual connectivity with units on different levels. The evolution of the roof form was based on overcoming the challenges of a sun shadow site. Skylights and internal courtyards allowing a dynamic play of lights and shadow, maximise exposure to sunlight through the day. 



The enclosed courtyard with its glass ceiling not only allows sunshine and daylight but acts as a heat trap as well.



FACT FILE

TYPOLGY: Resort

PROJECT: Seclude Ramgarh

CLIENT: Rohit Sethi

ROOMS: 4

LOCATION: Ramgarh, Uttarkhand

SITE: 1 acre

BUILT-UP AREA: 6 Villas x 1750 sq ft each

ARCHITECTURAL FIRM:

SpaceMatters,
New Delhi

ARCHITECT: Suditya Sinha
& Moulshri Joshi

SITE CONTRACTOR:

RRK Constructions,
Rajeev Khattar

LANDSCAPE: Kashika Farms

LIGHTING: SpaceMatters