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Explore this lush green wonderland carefully preserved inside a stunning estate in Chattarpur

The late Charles Jencks' s lifelong interest in cosmology, the science of the planets, is realised here in his design for this Chattarpur house and garden, which seeks to symbolically bring down to earth, the sun and the moon and the stars

Nonie Niese wand PUBLISHED: JAN 15, 2020 | 06:00:11 IST

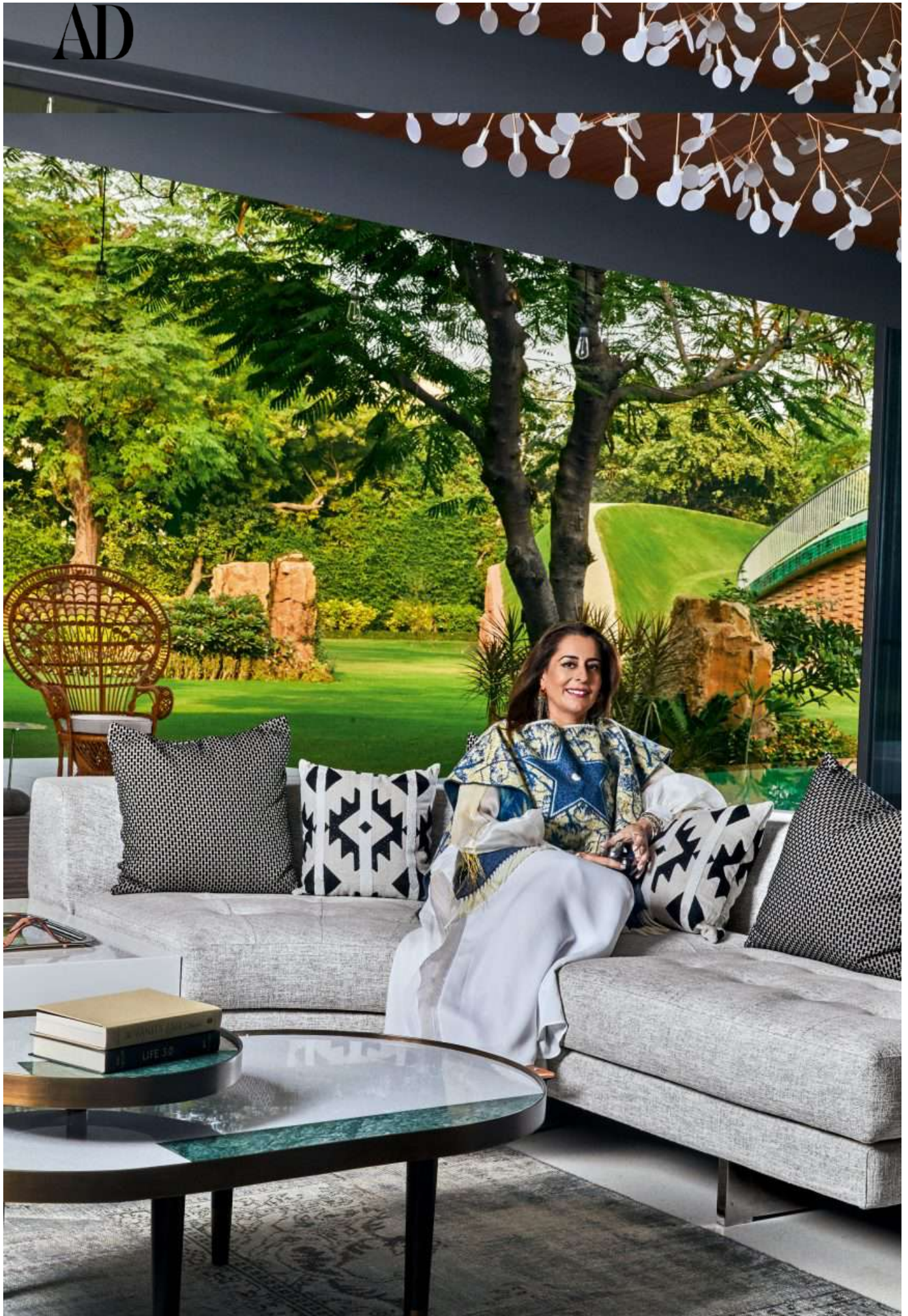
Samir Wadekar

Ashish Sahi



Take a look inside this expansive, design-rich home in Chattarpur

The House of Light in New Delhi is a monument to the most original architect and landscape artist of the 21st century, Charles Jencks (1939 -2019). After seeing his own Garden of Cosmic Speculation in Scotland, Shalini Misra asked Charles with his daughter Lily, partners in Jencks Squared, to collaborate on the design of her family house on four acres of farmland.





Back in the Day

Shalini first visited the farm in 2013 where she discovered “a 92-year-old widow living there in a tiny cottage. She was bedridden, chain-smoking, having a gin and tonic and I thought ‘What a woman!’ I liked her spirit. There

breaks all boundaries in its spiralling, circular form. At its core, a courtyard represents the strong centre of gravity that pulls the international couple and their three children back to India, their spiritual, and actual, home. An infinity pool closes that figure of eight.

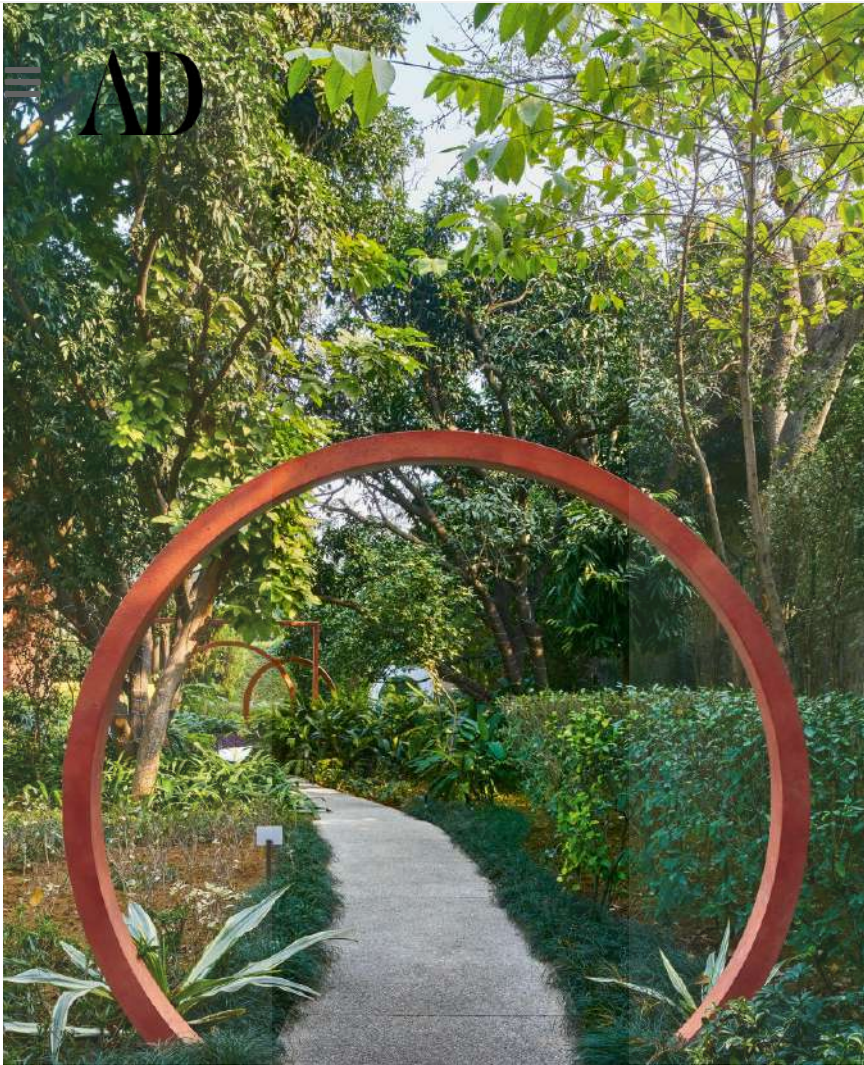
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Designer Shalini Misra, on the grounds of her farmhouse, which was landscaped by Charles Jencks

The Right Fit

The landscape imagined by Charles and installed on site by Integral Design, tracks that cosmic swirl in twists and folds. Seven moon gates rise along a meditative path (known to younger members of the family as the jogging path) based on the Hindu philosophy of vyatireka. Five huge, spiralling turfed mounds represent the life force, or chakra, with an amphitheatre scooped out of the earth for performing arts as part of the Misras’ Vahani scholarship programme. Standing stones like lightning bolts, a golden brick wall designed to capture the last rays of the sun, rills of water that reflect the sky, a fountain to Shiva, are features. The point where the earth meets the sky as the turfed pathway rises to the top floor of the house, Charles called the morphing moment. “Symbolic architecture takes time to build and must be consciously pursued,” Charles wrote in his book on the subject. “It takes a good client and a good architect.” Few clients presented with a cosmic swirl of a master plan would have had the vision—and the stamina—to realise their dream house but Shalini and Rajeev Misra, the latter, CEO of the Vision Fund and Softbank, did. “They’re great patrons of the arts,” observes Sonali Rastogi from Morphogenesis Architects, appointed on-site architects by the Misras.



This is the meandering path around the periphery of the site. Shalini designed seven “moon gates” to symbolize the seven chakras of spiritual

jogging), and gradually leads from the meditative garden, to the vegetable garden, towards the sunset wall and on to the fruit orchards and so on. The idea is to slow down and think about the chakras that each gate represents.

Design Idol

“Not since the Mughals has so much craft work been commissioned from all over India,” Rajeev says as, indoors and out, Misras revives age-old Indian craftsmanship with her contemporary designs. Now the thikri mirrored tiles that adorned centuries-old Indian palaces cover a contemporary cabinet at the entrance, and line a skylight to effectively bring the sky down into the prayer room. Hand-ground Indian stone terrazzo floors and wooden doors patterned with inlaid brass concentric circles and hexagons create a bold background. Bronze doors incised like paper cuts with slits through which leather peeks, coffered ceilings, chandeliers aflutter with glass leaves, a mural of a 17th-century William Daniell lithograph— all are one-off designs. Soft furnishings, too, have the luxury of bespoke design. “A velvet jacket can make you feel seductive, glamorous—just like a plush velvet sofa adds instant panache to a room,” Shalini’s website insists, alongside photographs of glamorous interiors for her celebrity clients. Landing in her own home, pieces upholstered in velvet anchor the swooshing curves, and windows and beds are dressed with exquisite Indian silks, cottons and muslins.



The custom-designed granite fountain representing the Shiva lingam was designed and landscaped by Integral Design

Making of a Masterpiece

Every space was debated for almost a year before construction began. On average, Shalini, Lily and Sonali spoke once a month on Skype, a most unusual design process. Mathematicians would recognise the result as a hyperbolic paraboloid aerodynamic structure but the complexities of making it were challenging. “There’s an engineering marvel going on in there,” says Sonali. “Only two columns supporting such mass and volume are visible on the outside. The rest are hidden within walls.” Even the mounds that appear to rise simply from the ground have steel beams hidden within to support them during heavy monsoon rains and seismic activity.

Orientation diagrams and computer simulations tracked the sun to position entrances. Brick jali walls that either block sunlight or filter it were configured to bring light and shade and wind movement right into the very centre of the house. Every brick, and every single window, was modelled on a computer. Glass walls that wrap around the courtyard at the heart of the house are really square panes, strategically placed within brick quoins to make them appear circular. Even the undulating roof cantilevered out from the building is designed to provide shade at the entrance throughout the day.

Charles, alas, died in 2019 before seeing his House of Light. He would have made the most entertaining guide. Back in the 1980s, visitors to his family home in Los Angeles were encouraged to tour it with copies of the 17th-century poet John Milton’s *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* to interpret epigrams like the ‘Loathed Melancholy of Cerberus’ stencilled on rustic telegraph poles over the garage. And within the disused open cast coal mine in Crawick, Scotland he turned a dump into a cosmic landscape, charting intergalactic activity with boulders and earthworks.



Fondly referred to as “the library”, this room holds the family’s collection of books. Placed on an old kilim from the family’s collection, the

form the pattern on the ceiling

An Unmatched Legacy

I first became aware of Charles’s interest in otherworldly things some 30 years ago when I introduced his Nile furniture collection to House & Garden readers. Nine golden lacquered blobs representing the nine planets climbed up the legs of his ‘Sun’ table. More throne-like than a chair, the ‘Sun’ seat had a sunburst-flared chairback. He called his shelving unit adorned with scarabs ‘The Egyptian Telephone Kiosk’. Some might call it kitsch. But then, as pun-loving Charles observed, “If you can’t take the kitsch, get out of the kitchen.” Today you will find this collection in his London house, built in 1840, which he gutted to introduce Cosmic Rooms so dazzling they would make the Sun King blink. The house will open as a museum to postmodernism. As an architectural critic, he coined the postmodernist movement in a book so weighty, the joke was that if you put four legs on it and glazed the cover, it would make a chic coffee table. In the spirit of the House of Light, Shalini says, “Whatever we design, it will always be the continuous liveliness of the family and friends who come to the house that completes the space, filling the design with life, love and laughter for generations to come.”



The chandeliers were custom-designed for the space by Paul Matter. The wooden staircase, the bespoke terrazzo floor and the ceiling all follow the curves