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A Lost World

Text / Ruth Sullivan

In Tamil Nadu in southern India, extravagant and eclectic mansions rise like mirages from the semi-arid landscape. Ranks of palatial houses stand sentinel in dirt-paved villages, many seldom used and in crumbling condition — though a few have been carefully restored.

This is Chettinad, home to the Chettiars, Tamil traders and financiers who, at the peak of their business acumen across Southeast Asia in the 19th and early 20th centuries, brought home wealth to build monumental mansions for their families. They also brought rich building materials: teak from Burma, satinwood from Ceylon, marble from Italy, tiles from Japan, cast iron and steel from Great Britain, chandeliers and glass from France and Belgium.

Drawing heavily on European architectural influences, the Chettiars blended in traditional Tamil elements and crafts such as woodcarving, silken plasterwork made from lime and eggshell, and patterned Athangudi tiles to create opulent interiors. The mansions evolved to meet the needs of family rituals surrounding births, marriages and deaths and the large gatherings that accompanied them.

Surprisingly for such grandiose dwellings, the mansions of Chettinad are the product not of architects, but of master stonemasons whose forefathers had built the magnificent temples of South India, many without plans. You nonetheless enter a lost world of architectural splendour as you step through the imposing and intricately carved wooden doorframes that mark a mansion's entrance. The eye follows a longitudinal axis from a raised portico entrance hall through to a grand reception room. Beyond, a series of colonnaded courtyards with marble floors, some with upper galleries, lead to the rear areas.

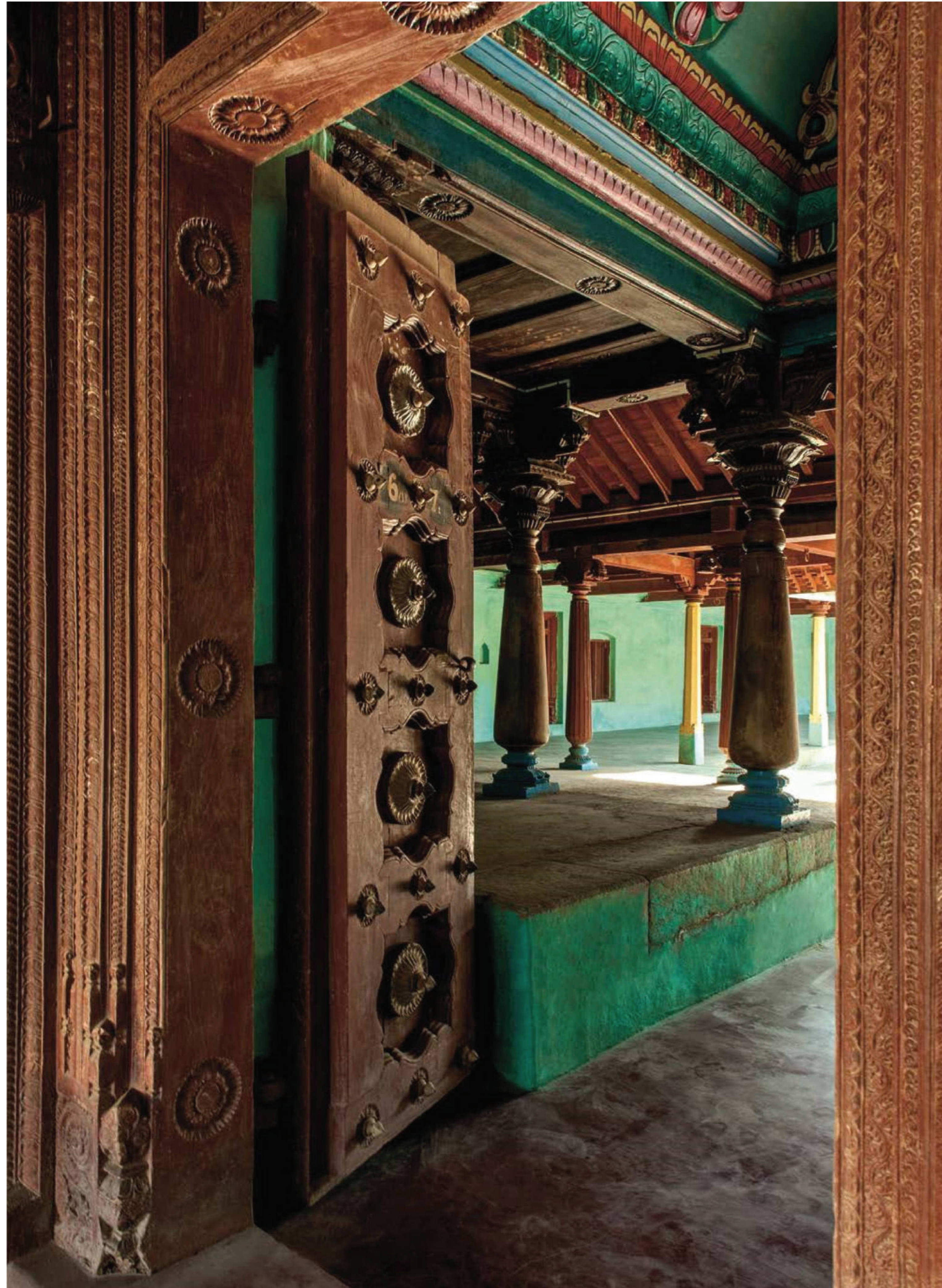
At Saratha Vilas in the rural community of Kothamangalam, a 1905 mansion has been

painstakingly restored by French architects Bernard Dragon and Michel Adment and converted into a boutique heritage hotel. 'We took charge of the restoration, becoming the project managers. Fifty local people came every day to work on it,' recalls Dragon. The elegant, spacious house with eight guestrooms is organised around an open central courtyard that gives off a cool peacefulness. In 2014, the two architects had the Chettinad mansions submitted for addition to the UNESCO World Heritage in Danger list — a move they hope will spark international and local interest alike in the homes' preservation.

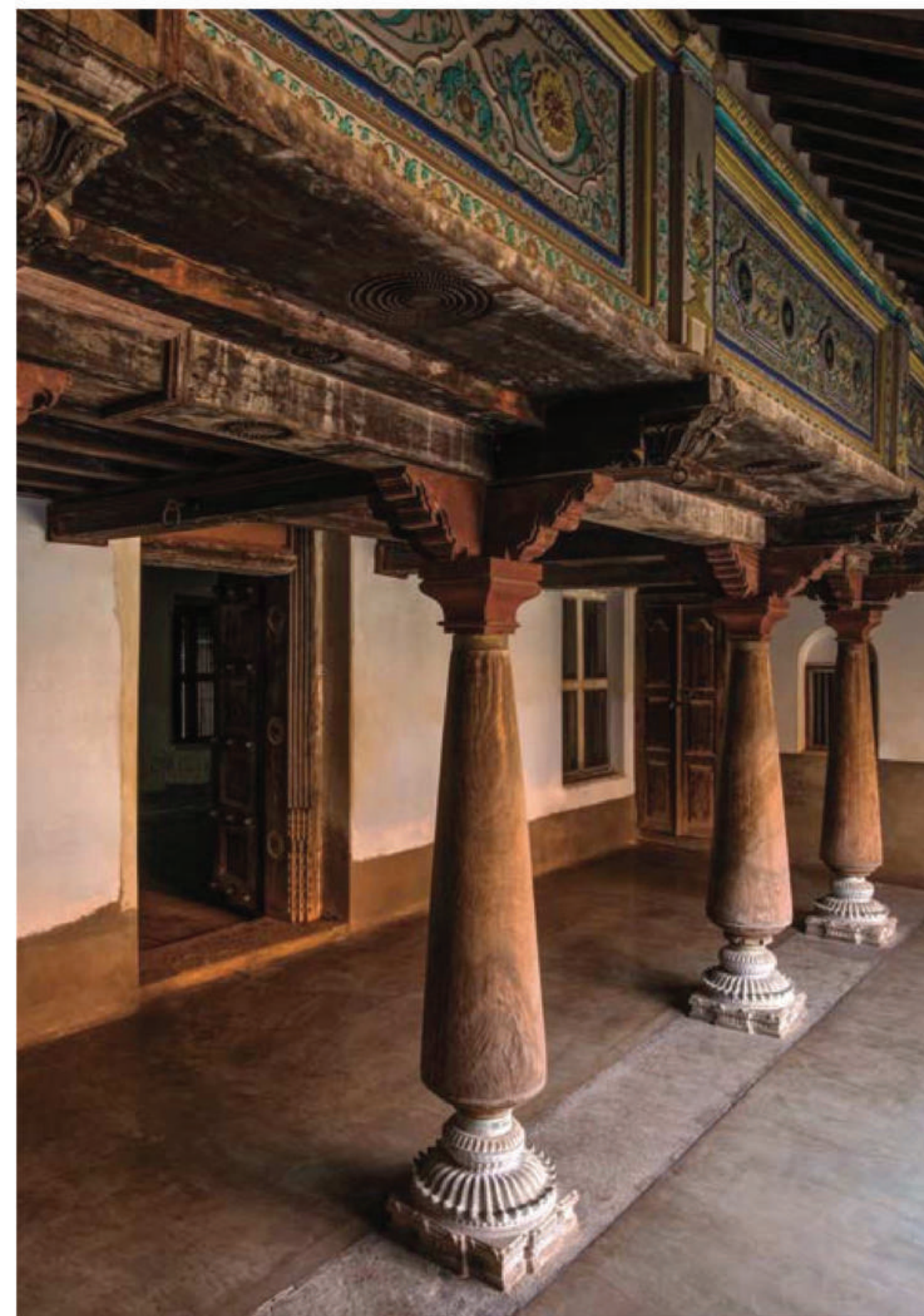
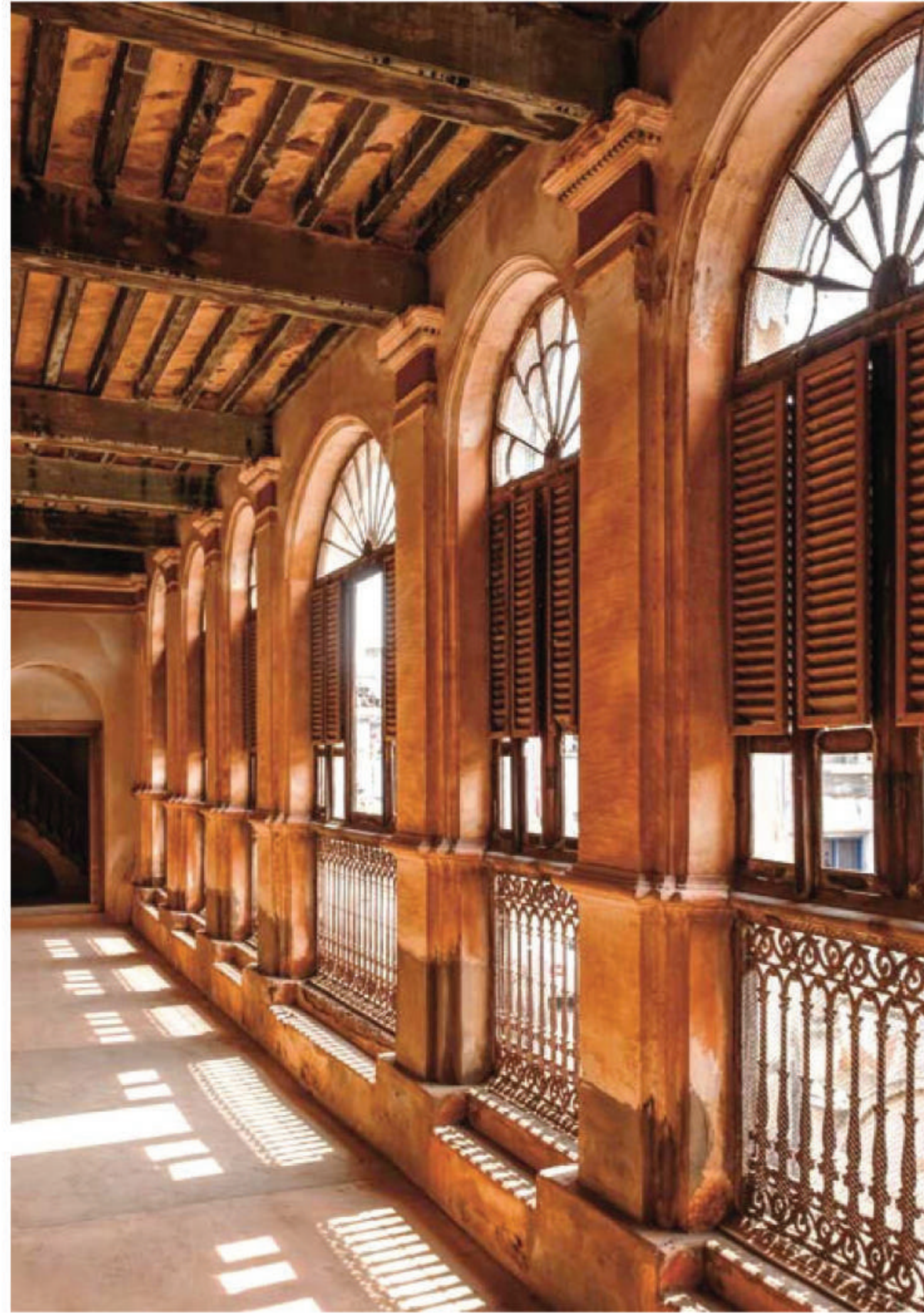
Chidambara Vilas in Kadiapatti, built in 1907, is another striking example of a restored mansion sensitively converted into a heritage hotel, as is the Visalam in Kanadukathan, a beautifully converted art deco gem with fine grilles and an upper gallery built by a doting father as a dowry gift for his daughter in the 1930s. Others are now regularly used for location work for the growing Tamil film industry.

The Second World War marked the end of the Chettiars' golden period of trade and building. Current generations work in information technology, finance or cinema in India's largest cities, returning to their family homes only for the occasional wedding and celebration.

Meenakshi Meyyappan, whose hotel The Bangala was one of the region's first mansions to be converted, hopes to see more restoration work in the community. 'There's a new spark of interest among the Chettiars in their heritage. What we need now is to catch the attention of the younger generation. The knowledgeable Chettiars who have travelled realise they have a jewel at home.' As well, a beautiful new book entitled *Mansions of Chettinad* by Graf Publishers documents the many resplendent details of these incredible mansions while bringing to life the stories of the Chettiars who gave them their form.

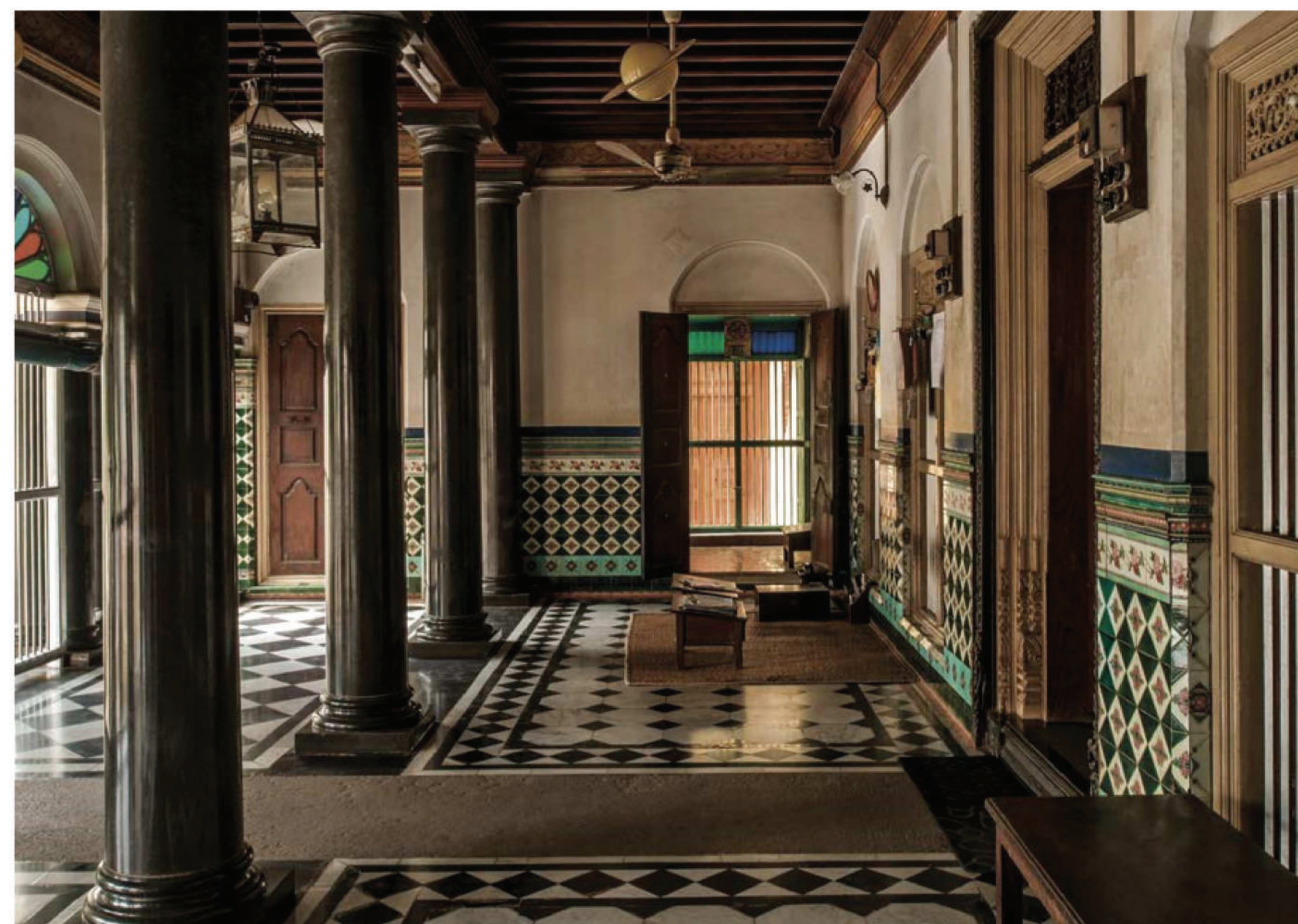


Imposing and intricately carved wooden doorways often mark the entry to Chettiar mansions in the south of India. Image by Bharath Ramamrutham from *Mansions of Chettinad* (Graf Publishers)



As international merchants and traders, the Chettiars often blended European architectural influences, such as louvred windows and arcades, with local craftsmanship and woodworking techniques. Images by Bharath Ramamrutham from *Mansions of Chettinad* (Graf Publishers)





Facing page: In the rural community of Kothamangalam, the 1905-built Saratha Vilas has been painstakingly restored and converted into a boutique heritage hotel by French architects Bernard Dragon and Michel Adment. Image courtesy of Saratha Vilas

This page: A front veranda and an office alcove in patterned Athangudi tiles from the region. Image by Bharath Ramamrutham from *Mansions of Chettinad* (Graf Publishers)