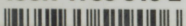




Architecture & Art

**Women's Voices in Architecture & Design
in the Middle East**

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Faryar Javaherian is an Iranian architect and curator, born in Mashhad, Khorassan, raised in France and educated in the United States. She studied at the University of Texas at Austin, MIT and Harvard and co-founded Gamma Consultants with F. Bader. Gamma Consultants is recognized as the leading office in Museum and Persian Garden design in Iran. Her buildings have been widely published in Iranian architectural magazines and established her as having a recognizable Iranian-Modern style. Most recently she has won the competition to build the new French School in Tehran, and is working on five museum projects. The exhibitions she has curated cover the fields of architecture, landscape, photography and cinema. She has been Art Director and set decorator for ten films including Hamoon and the Pear Tree, which are cult-films in Iranian cinema. She is the author of GARDENS OF IRAN: Ancient Wisdom, New Visions (Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art Publication, 2004), THIRTY YEARS OF SOLITUDE (Cambridge University Publication, 2007), and numerous articles in MEMAR to which she contributed as an editor. She has served as jury member on Memar Grand Prize and other international competitions. She has widely lectured in Iranian universities, as well as Oxford and Cambridge universities. She is one of the members of the Master Jury of the Aga Khan Award in Architecture this year.

20% of a DREAM

The article examines the gap between the clients' needs and the architect's dreams in two projects: one very briefly, in the Elahieh residential complex, where the client's conservative aesthetics did not allow for an innovative façade; the other, more extensively, in the Lavasan residence, Hadi Mirmiran's last executed project in which I was responsible for the interior architecture and the garden design along with Fereydoun Bader.

The Lavasan project has many architectural flaws, due to the clashes between the client's needs and the architectural criteria set forth by Mirmiran, and as such is an interesting case study. The prominent fact about this project is that the client was willing to spend so much money in order to have a "Mirmiran-brand" building which had nothing to do with the usual residential typology and which looked like the Water Museum previously designed by Mirmiran and Shirdel and never built. Mirmiran who knew that this project has no residential qualities, asked me to make it "residential and warm," a real challenge.

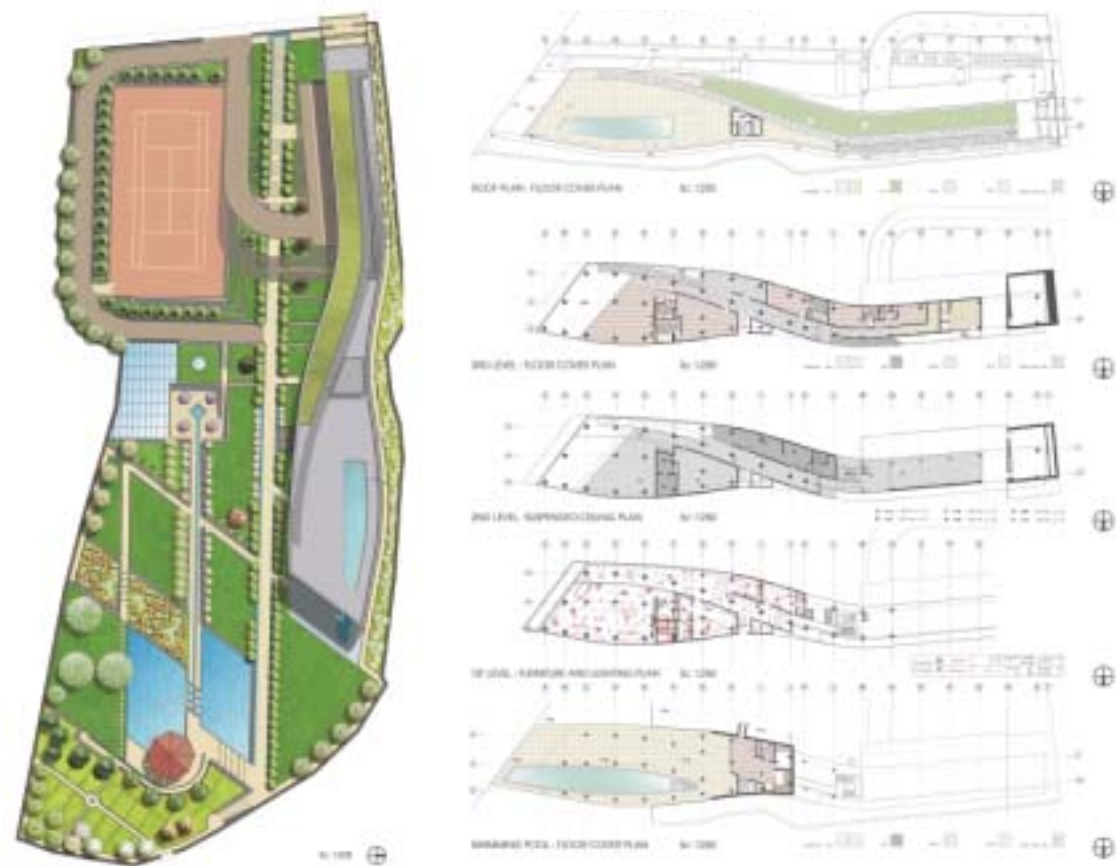
My collaboration began when the foundation, skeleton and some of the floor slabs had already been executed. At that time many of the original concepts had already been damaged.

Mirmiran's concept for this project was a roof slab, which would become an open-air living room, on the same level as the street. Using the steep slope of the site, all the other levels would be hung from this rooftop, but never really touch ground. He had therefore envisaged a very light skeleton where slim columns would give the building a very light and floating appearance. Unfortunately this did not happen in reality and the structural system was very redundant and heavy.

There were three systems of vertical circulation: ramps, stairs and elevator. I eliminated the stairs which cramped the corridor – gallery, as well as a very steep ramp outdoors which was completely useless, and in that space created a very lightweight stairs to create a better link between the residential floors and the garden. The garden which is based on the concepts of the Persian Garden – a concept which Mirmiran had also used in his Frankfurt Consulate project where he had mixed hi-tech architecture with the plan of the Fin Garden, was designed with my partner Fereydoun Bader, and was immediately accepted by Mirmiran and the client, and is therefore not the subject of this article. But for the interior architecture, weekly meetings with the client prompted many changes in the plans, which both Mirmiran and I accepted.

The article which begins with the slogan "the client is king" and goes through remembrances of a college-day user-participation in design, concludes that architects should be mostly concerned with actualizing their clients' dreams rather than their own.





Architect’s Response to the Interview

Recognition of womens' work/ voice has been controversial, assumed or rejected by thinkers in other fields. Susan Sontag rejected the category of woman's literature, Simone De Beauvoir believed that in essence there was no difference between feminine and masculine work except in how we look at it. While Foucault did not recognize subordination of the feminine but spoke of power relations, Gayatri Spivak pointed to the internal difference in voice for representation and form. Some have suggested a flickering mode, a back and forth of masculine /feminine positions to be at work in all. Practitioners and theoreticians of architecture and design contributing to this issue present a wide range of backgrounds, domains and structures of work albeit all connect to the middle east region either by birth, by professional interest or education. Many are displaced by choice or despite it, or albeit working in their home country find their discursive professions to operate beyond their immediate environment. The questions posed are meant to collect a sense of how significant contemporary women professionals in architecture and design view their position and what place they see the region and its traditions play in the execution of their work.

1- Do you consider that feminine voice in architecture and design- ie its structures, configurations, modalities of expression, sensibilities or power relations to be specific? Do you find it productive to focus on such differences?

□ Jung's theory that "animus" -- the male spirit -- and "anima" -- the female spirit -- co-exist in all human beings, was further developed by Erich Neumann who was versed in Indian philosophy and saw the balance of feminine and masculine principles as another aspect of ancient Hindu equilibrium between yin and yang. I believe there are men who are more feminine than women and vice-versa.

I was amazed to hear that some people who has visited two of my residential buildings without knowing I was the architect, had remarked to the owners that their buildings are very feminine and must have been designed by a woman. Whatever these feminine attributes are -- warm, soft, curvilinear... -- I am not aware of using them. So if there is something feminine that only certain people can detect and is not objectifiable, it remains very unclear. Moreover, in our millenarian history of architecture, we have just barely begun to have works by women-architects for a few decades, so that it is too early to state what distinguishes feminine and masculine architectures.

In principle I don't agree with the gender distinction and if we had equal rights with men, there would be no need for it. But unfortunately we don't, so it is acceptable to try and give some privileges to women to compensate for all the disadvantages that we suffer in a male-dominant society -- John Rawls's second principle of Justice.

2- Given that modernity and globalization have brought about a more fluid condition of boundaries, geographies and sense of belonging, how do you find identity politics whether in terms of regional affiliations or gendered organization of production/ reception of women’s work in architecture to be relevant to the location or structure of your professional practice of design or theory of architecture?

□ As a practising architect involved in all the stages of my profession, from the writing of the contract, to design, to construction and management of our office, I see that we are a small minority in Iran, continuously trying to prove that we are as good as men. But I guess it is not specific to Iran: my partner who has worked in large firms in the US for over 20 years, says that even there, the gap is not totally closed and women architects are rarely in contact with the BIG clients, they are always relegated to smaller projects or to interior design for the really large ones. There is a sense that architecture is a masculine profession. So it is not a national or cultural issue, it is the global perception that men are more suited for this job, unless the opposite is proven.

3- How do you see your work and your position vis a vis your professional work to be affected by being a woman? Do you see architecture’s performative processes, technologies of production or its relations of power effect how you conduct your design or production/reception of design as a woman?

□ As far as our office management is concerned, I run it like a woman, or better yet, as a mother. All our employees, invariably under 35, are like my children, and human values supersede the professional ones for me. I have never fired anyone, how could you "fire" your own child? The drawback is that I am very reluctant to enlarge my firm: how could I handle having too many children? But I am also very masculine in the sense that the supervision of construction is the most fun part of my job. What happens on paper is much less satisfying to me than the actual building process, and I am always surprised by some of the qualities of space which I had only intuited but could never express in the design process.

4- Given the specific traditions within which you have worked between the middle east region and outside it – globally perhaps- do you see any changes in the way women’s voice/ work, has affected the discipline and attitudes towards modernity and tradition in your environment?

□ 60% of the architectural student body is made up of women in Iran, and they are winning most architectural prizes and competitions and emerging as a potential equal in the profession. But the problem is that their role-models are men-architects. In trying to prove that we are as good as men, we tend to copy male architecture. We are still in the imitation phase of our emergence, and have not yet found our own voice. In Literature, I definitely think there is a feminine voice: the works of women writers are more intimate, more personal, more intuitive, they are willing to lay bare all the threads of their minds, they don't feel they have to wear masks as male writers and men in general, do. Simone de Beauvoir was very masculine in her works in that she too wore a mask of appropriateness, fit to the image of feminist writer she assumed. It is only posthumously that some of her feminine side emerged, namely in the letters she had written over two decades to her American lover, Nelson Algren. I was surprised to read in one of her letters how she begged Algren to marry her, pledging she would go and live with him, cook for him and mend his socks... Of course this must be taken with a grain of salt, but still it proves to me she could put down the mask of "strong feminist woman" for a moment. If we take the example of the most famous woman architect of our time, Zaha Hadid, I fail to see feminine attributes in her works. The male attributes -- cold, harsh, massive, obtuse angles... -- are more often displayed. However recently she is displaying more femininity -- time to put down the mask? --, in her shoe-design for instance, but then this is meant for women's footwear. I have this day-dream of women designing clothes and footwear for men and taking our revenge on centuries of excruciatingly painful embellishment for the sake of attracting and pleasing men. Let's have men showing their shaved thighs and walking on 15-cm high heels for a change! In the animal kingdom it is always the male who has to parade like a peacock in order to attract the female. I am definitely for going back to primitivism! So we have to go beyond the imitation stage, and then perhaps a bit of a revenge stage, before we can really hear what the voice in our feminine psyche is whispering to us.

Many thanks to all for your response in advance.
Homa Farjadi

