

process of liberalisation since last May, when President Mohammed Khatami was voted into power, although Ayatollah Khamenei remains Iran's supreme spiritual leader.

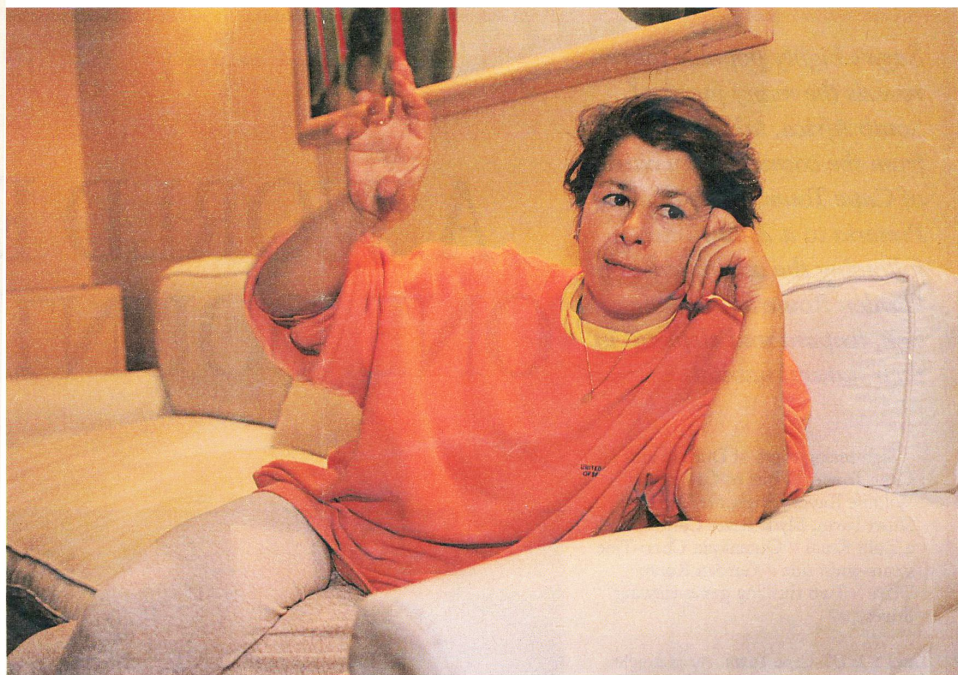
Iranians generally conduct family life behind closed doors and do not readily display themselves or their wealth. So in the early Nineties, when Karbaschi decreed that buildings could go skyward in order to house a growing population (currently about 18 million), it caused outrage: high-rises meant that most homes would be overlooked, and privacy would go out of the window. But Teheran is booming and there is only space to go up. 'It is very difficult to manage an enormous city,' Firouz explains. 'Just cleaning it is a great achievement, so if we have a few badly placed towers we just have to deal with it. I think that is a minor thing compared to all the things that the mayor has been able to achieve to greatly improve the city. There is not the space to build horizontally; it has to be vertical. We have to be practical.'

Ironically, the modernisation has set off a new-look revival of old Iranian style. This renaissance is centred on a new generation of architects – of which Firouz is one – who are attempting to offer an alternative to glass and steel, and are fighting to preserve an element of traditional style, while at the same time combining it with a modern edge. Their way of 'dealing with it' is to look back in order to move forward. These designers prefer to build 'small', using brick and stone provided locally, and according to traditional Persian tastes. The revival is centred on the northern middle-class districts where people still have the money and space to build low. It is their new low-rise properties that are leading the way for some of the best design ideas to have come out of Teheran in years.

Up until the early Sixties, a typical Iranian house was built around a courtyard. It was one or two storeys high, with arched windows and doors, and rooftops were usually domed. Inside, some were as kitsch as kitsch can be. But in general, their style harked back to the Safavid period, some 500 years old and as inspiring to Iranians as our own Georgian era is to the British. For architects and interior designers alike, the focus of the revival lies in the details of this period: proportion, decoration and the idea of outside-inside living. Potted down, these elements become surprisingly contemporary.

'There has been a lot of confusion in design, if not ugliness,' explains Shadan, who was a computer expert before she trained in London as an interior designer. 'But there is increasing interest in our own heritage and style. The great push is in developing something new from old. There is so much potential, we have so much beauty here.' Shadan, who is 32, returned to Teheran three years ago in order to design houses, but she has also just finished a collection of accessories – coffee tables, glass-fronted cabinets and ironware – which she intends to export.

It takes guts to do what Shadan does. Everywhere she goes, she is covered with raincoat and scarf – even when she is briefing her craftsmen behind closed doors – in accordance with Iran's strict Islamic dress code. Her regular two-day sourcing trips to the cities of Isfahan and Shiraz turn into a fiasco of flying in and out in a day as single women are not permitted to stay in a hotel overnight. 'That is not the hard bit though,' she says. 'Getting my craftsmen to forgo what they have been asked to do for so many years, and to just make things beautifully and simply, has been the most difficult task. It has been more about changing their perceptions than anything else.'

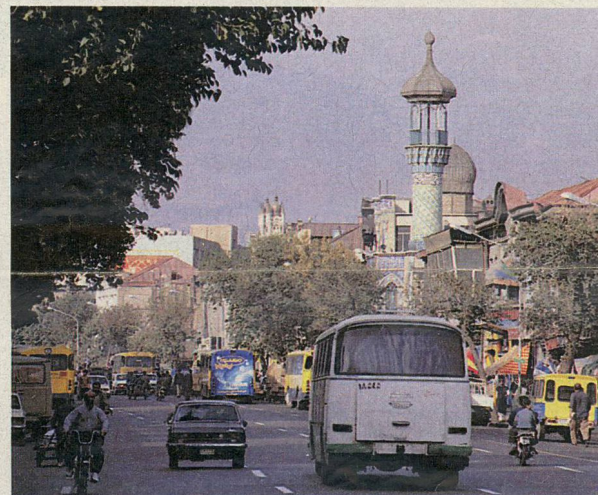


Red Brick House designer Faryar built her villa complex, left, for six separate clients, each of whom had a say in the layout of their flat. She says, 'I love the way buildings are built by hand in Iran. You can stand by your stonemason and choose the stones or bricks. I had to hide the fact that this building is not designed to be exactly symmetrical – it was not practical – so I found a way to make it look balanced.' Faryar's signature is patterned brick and woodwork, but she went to great lengths to create new types of windows and doors. 'The most important thing about the interiors is that each had to suit a different character. The client is king. Some are very open plan and others are traditionally divided into several rooms.' Below, the courtyard and swimming-pool are used by all six families



Until now, Iranian homes have remained hidden from Western eyes. But behind the walls a new style revolution has been born. For the first time, Teheran's young designers open their doors to **Sarah Stewart-Smith**

IRAN'S INNER SPACE



'IT IS ALL GOING ON IN TEHERAN,' SAYS the Iranian architect, Firouz, almost as a warning. 'There is the kitsch, the modern and the traditional.' There is also the shock. Every time you walk through the outer gates of a house and on into a courtyard or garden, you cannot quite believe the difference. Outside on the street it is chaotic, dusty, noisy. Inside, suddenly all is calm. This outside-inside contrast is a truly Iranian trait.

From the outskirts, Teheran is a remarkable sight. It is a vast and sprawling modern city, with a forest of high-rise buildings cutting into the sky. Motorways slice through the suburbs, and in the background the mountains sit like plump, oversized cushions.

Once in the city, wherever you look there are endless walls and gates – the remnants of Persian and European architecture – and the looming skyscrapers. Almost all the original Teheran houses have either disappeared or have been turned into embassies and museums. Standing in their place are modern apartment blocks and American-style glitzy villas (the trend in the so-called 'petrodollar years' leading up to the revolution in 1979).

Teheran has been under transformation for nearly 10 years, since Gholam Hussein Karbaschi took over as mayor, charged with rebuilding the capital. The country itself has been going through a