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Farshid Moussavi

“Architecture is, in fact, an instruction-based art”

Interview by Peter Smisek
Portrait by Phil Sharp

Farshid Moussavi’s eponymous practice is currently based in a nondescript office block in the City of London, for which it has designed an enigmatic replacement in dark, fluted-glass panels. The project has been pushed back somewhat, owing to general Brexit anxiety, but Moussavi is plenty busy anyway. As well as curating this year’s architecture section at London’s Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, she is currently working on a handful of projects in London, a lounge chair, completing a housing scheme in France, and competing for high-profile international projects.

ICON How did you get involved with the Summer Exhibition?

Farshid Moussavi I became a Royal Academician two years ago. Eileen Cooper,

this year’s coordinator, asked me to curate the architecture section. I’ve been unhappy about how architecture appears in the Summer Exhibition. The gallery it takes place in has always had a mix of everything – models, diagrams, drawings and photographs – but it’s not that big, so having all those different things next to each other makes it feel very cluttered.

ICON What made you decide to focus on construction coordination drawings?

FM I think it is interesting to show a different slice through architecture each year and use that to develop different dialogues with the public. So, this year I thought we could focus on just construction coordination drawings, because architecture is, in fact, an instruction-based art: we produce instructions for others to execute and

the final act of the architect is a set of drawings. What I call construction coordination drawings are distinct from straightforward details – what I am hoping the exhibition can show is the physical form, plus all the other parameters that are involved in giving a building its various qualities. This can be a plan, elevation or section that denotes the physical form, and other parameters, such as construction sequencing, space planning, security, rights-of-light, fire engineering, sustainability and facade engineering, health and safety, and so on.

Today, architects use these different layers inside a digital model, switching between them to check and make decisions across them. For construction, the layers are printed separately for the sake of legibility. For the exhibition, I am hoping for drawings that show ►

the layers on top of each other, so that visitors to the exhibition will be able to see the complexity of the buildings. Like an X-ray, I hope the drawings will reveal the architecture of buildings beyond the visible and show that architectural decisions are at once practical and aesthetic.

ICON Would you say that this exhibition has strong links to your research? In your books, for instance, you present

emotionally draining. The two French projects we're currently finishing had a year's worth of interruptions for various reasons. The one in Nanterre was delayed because our neighbour, who was meant to give us access to the site, had delays, the other one in Montpellier was a knock-on effect because it had the same client. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland had a year of delays owing to the 2008 recession, and our building in London is experiencing delays because of

“The longer a project takes, the more time we have to develop it”

style, function, ornament and form as intertwined concepts. Is this, in some way, an extension of your publications?

FM I think so. The books are, also, different kinds of slices through architecture. For example, *The Function of Style*, which is my latest research publication, was a slice through architecture looking at the interrelationship between functional typology and style: the interface between organisational and aesthetic issues. For it, we drew all the selected projects in a similar way to focus them on the theme. In the case of the Summer Exhibition, I am not in control of people's submissions ► and the way they will ultimately respond to the theme, so we'll have a mix of approaches – it will be interesting.

ICON You founded your own office six years ago. Did you feel you had to start over in a certain way, especially since projects take a long time to complete?

FM I have a love-and-hate relationship with architecture's long timespan, as it makes it exposed to unforeseen forces that often bring delays, which are

uncertainties in the market following the Brexit vote. However, I have learnt that time is the biggest luxury for a project. The longer a project takes, the more time we have to develop it. It becomes better.

ICON Between the founding of Foreign Office Architects (FOA) in 1995 and Farshid Moussavi Architecture (FMA) in 2011, architectural thinking changed profoundly. Some would say the crisis made architects more aware of the existing structures and context. What kind of changes did you experience?

FM FOA was a response to its time; I would say we were the first generation of architects to really start designing with computers. Until then, there was a split between architects as designers and people being brought into offices to draft on computers. As a small office at the time, we were responding to larger-scale architectural problems that we could suddenly handle, as well as addressing organisational and construction problems in 3D. It was ultimately an investigation into formal complexity, and the associated engineering and construction issues. ►

RIGHT Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (2008–12)

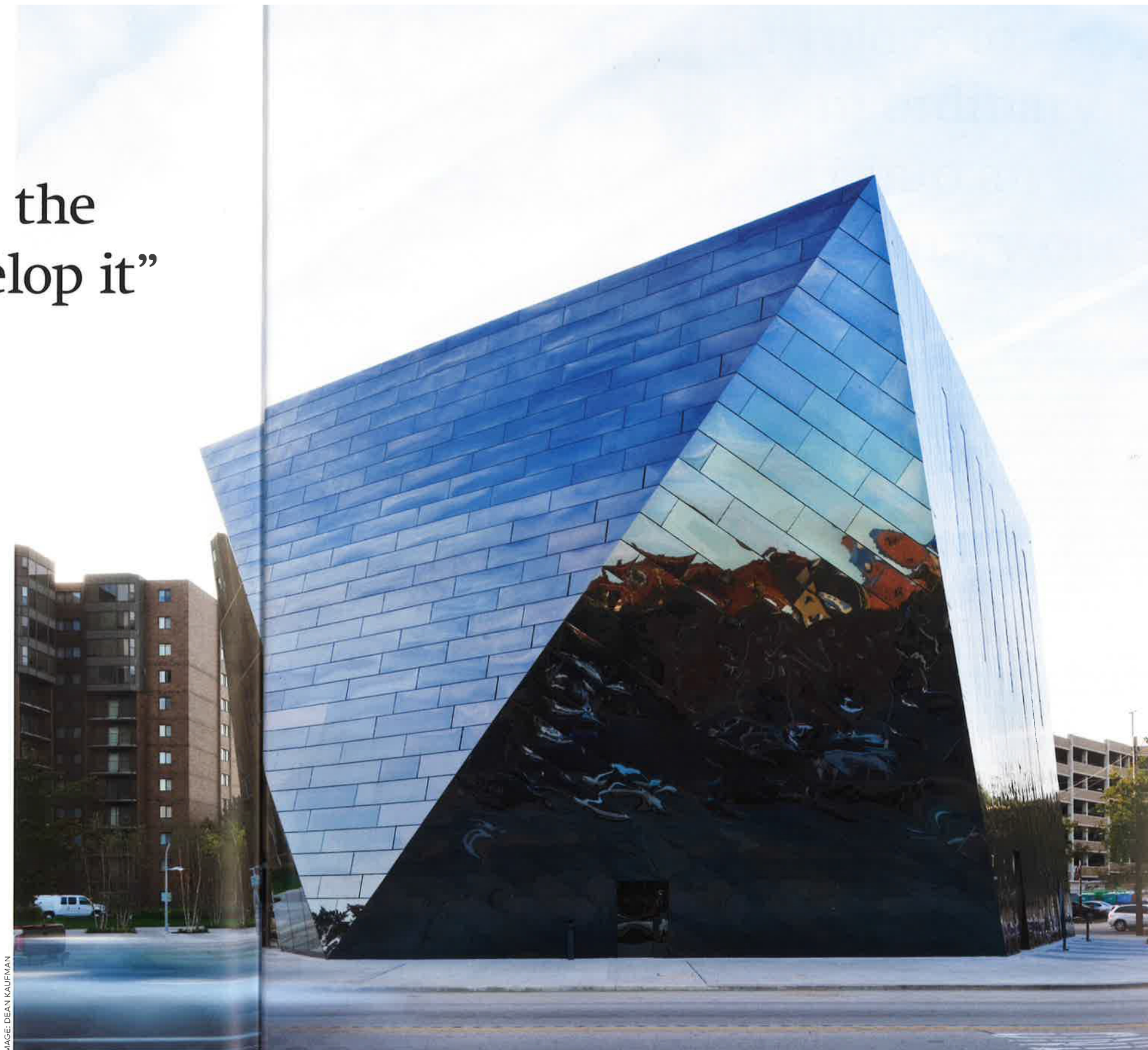


IMAGE: DEAN KAUFMAN



“Our role is to turn an ordinary project into an extraordinary one”

FMA is equally a response to its time. Since the early 1990s, the practice of architecture has indeed changed enormously; the design process has become very multidisciplinary. Also, because of the internet, the relationship between people and buildings has changed, since many everyday activities are now done online. We need to define other types of encounters between people and activities, which buildings can accommodate. In our Victoria Beckham flagship store, for example, we questioned what this typology could be in the age of online shopping. The building in Nanterre, like a Haussmann building, accommodates all social strata together – students, social, affordable and market housing – it questions the collectivity we want in the city today, given the diversity of its inhabitants and the different patterns that arise through new social media. We’re interested in using the practical matters of everyday life as the raw material of architecture, challenging how buildings are conventionally assembled and the experiences they provide.

ICON Would you say that in the case of French housing, clients and planners and architects are more ambitious?

FM They have a fantastic system whereby the public sector sells land to developers at a competitive price in return for a particular design. In our case, both in Nanterre and Montpellier, once our client selected us, we had to go together and present a proposal to the mayor, which meant our client was selected for the site on the basis of their financial proposal as well as a specific design they were offering. This system makes housing ►

ABOVE A render of the 17-storey tower for 130 Fenchurch Street, London (2013–19)



“You get a lot of lateral thinking when people aren’t all from the same background”

design-led. I think it’s amazing, making housing in France a very fertile ground for experimentation.

ICON Maybe that was why architects liked the European Union: the possibility to look beyond their own countries and experiment with different typologies in countries where it’s easier. Do you think, after Brexit, you might need to set up subsidiaries in Europe?

FM As I’m personally involved with every project, I think subsidiaries would have their disadvantages. I am sad about the UK leaving the EU. It’s not good for any creative industry, including architecture. It’s not just about where you find your next commission – it affects, for example, the kind of materials we can use and source. I’m sure we’ll all adjust, but it goes without saying that architects have

benefitted enormously from the ability to secure work anywhere in the EU, and from working with EU nationals in their practice. You get a lot of lateral thinking when people aren’t all from the same background.

ICON You’re doing housing, you’ve written books, and are doing competitions for all kinds of buildings, from large department stores, such as Galeries Lafayette to museums. What keeps you going?

FM I think architecture is a platform for daily life and the way you approach it can make people’s experience of the everyday better or worse. This is what excites and motivates me. Great architecture is not about how much budget you are given, where and what scale it is. It is a matter of creativity targeted to inspire people. ►

ABOVE Victoria Beckham flagship store, Dover Street, London (2014)

It is, of course, not always equally enjoyable. You always go through a little heartbreak when you lose a competition. For example, we were declared joint winners with two other practices, for our proposals for the headquarters of the International Olympic Committee, after which they decided to call a new competition, which we did not win. However, ultimately, whether a project starts with a competition or as a commission, we approach it with the same level of motivation. I like to think that our role is to turn an ordinary project into an extraordinary one – take an affordable housing project and give it as much time and articulate it with as much

care as you would a building with a bigger budget or a more special site.

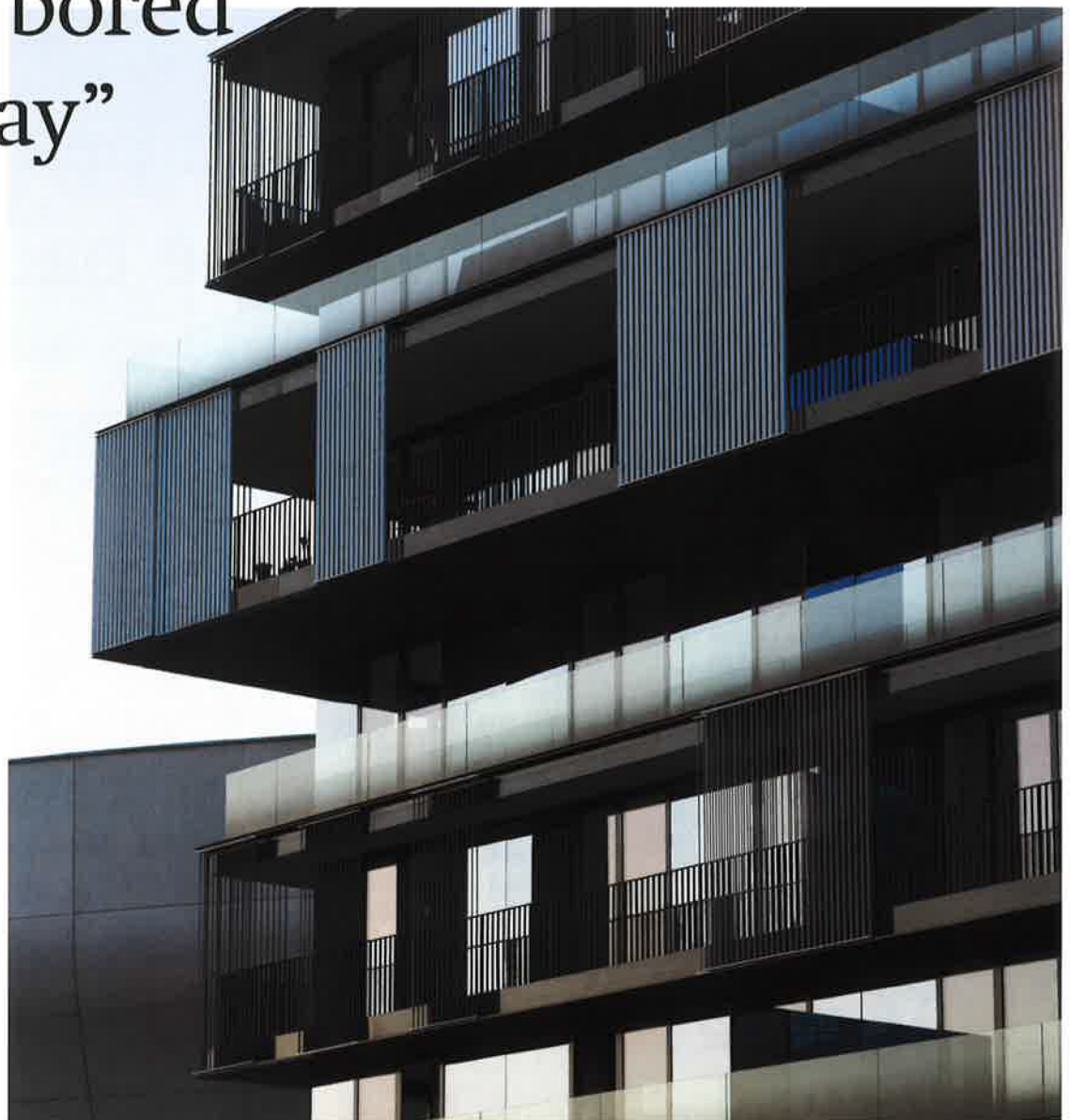
ICON On your website, there is a design for a chair with a ‘coming soon’ tag. Could you tell us a bit more about it? Do you want to engage more with industrial design, for instance?

FM Every now and again I think: ‘There aren’t many good office chairs.’ We use the Aeron chairs in our own office, because they’re so comfortable, but they’re not the best looking. If I had the time, I would design one, but I would want to know all about the ergonomics, the manufacturing, the marketing, and so on, in order to understand what an office chair

would have to do, which feels to me like acquiring another whole expertise. That’s why, generally speaking, I don’t find it necessary for us to work in all the scales.

For the Victoria Beckham store we wanted to approach the flagship store as a gallery so we designed the benches, as there wasn’t a suitable product on the market that would suit the configuration we envisaged. For the most recent chair, we were approached by a furniture company, which asked me to design a lounge chair. But overall, I don’t think we need to do everything. Buildings are complex enough and we have a very particular expertise, which we totally enjoy using. I am not bored in any way. ♦

“Buildings are
complex enough ...
I am not bored
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RIGHT The Ilot 19
housing complex in
La Défense, Nanterre,
Paris (2011–16)