

Academy Artists



In the studio: Farshid Moussavi RA

The grandeur of a Pimlico townhouse belies the architect's cool minimalist studio within, writes FIONA MADDOCKS. *Portrait by* BENJAMIN MCMAHON

Occupying the corner of a grand square in Pimlico, the white stucco building where architect Farshid Moussavi RA has her practice evokes a London long past: magnificent staircase, high ceilings, cornices, mouldings and fireplaces. All is white and minimal, staff sitting quietly at computer screens, but the interior structure is rare in being unchanged, each room airy and spacious. Perfect for a commercial developer to turn into luxury apartments and make a fortune.

That first impression proves accurate. 'This was where Thomas Cubitt and his company worked – and this meeting room where we're sitting was once his office,' Moussavi explains. Cubitt (1788–1855), one of London's great master builders, left his imprint on Belgravia, including Eaton Square, Buckingham Palace and more. 'We arrived here five years ago. I knew it had been Cubitt's office, and I live in a flat next door – ideal, as I usually work late! We enjoy working here' – she has a team of around 20 people – 'and for a building in this area not to have been converted is amazing.'

The room we are in is dominated by a table made of two plywood doors propped on Moussavi-designed steel trestles. Images of current or recent projects are propped against walls, including a panel of nine photographs in shades of yellow (pictured far left) showing the inside of a double-decker staircase at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, Ohio, that doubles as a sound-art gallery. The museum is a stunning, six-sided building clad in mirrored black stainless-steel, which opened in 2012.

Petite, stylish and energetic, Moussavi has a rapid smile, clear hazel-green eyes and formidable charm. Dressed in a black quilted shift and chunky wedge platforms, Moussavi is a match for any fashionista. She was born in Iran in 1965 and came to Britain at the age of 14. Her arrival was dramatic. 'I was here with my parents on a summer holiday. Our visit coincided with the Iranian revolution, which forced the Shah into exile. There was a lot of turmoil in the country and it was unclear whether schools and universities would remain open. My parents decided to get me into a school in Sussex, and left me while they went back. It was quite a big adjustment, but now I see it was so

brave and unselfish of them. I have a 15-year-old daughter. I can't imagine doing anything similar myself.'

A make or break moment for the young Farshid? 'Well yes, it was of course, but children are incredibly resilient. I already had a brother at school in England, so that helped. I spoke some English, but it certainly wasn't good enough to understand maths or chemistry or physics. I had a lot of work to catch up on. My parents, both academics, came two years later.'

Moussavi triumphed at school, went to university in Dundee and University College London, then Harvard to study architecture, where she has been a professor since 2006. She worked for Renzo Piano in Italy, then for Rem Koolhaas in Rotterdam, and after several years in a joint practice (she was co-founder of Foreign Office Architects) she set up her own, Farshid Moussavi Architecture (FMA), in 2011. Big completed projects include: a passenger cruise terminal in Japan; a John Lewis department store in Leicester; Ravensbourne College in Greenwich Peninsula; and, also in London, the Victoria Beckham flagship store.

'Our buildings are more about assemblage than about trying to achieve an organic whole that unifies a building through a single "language". I think this makes buildings monotonous. An assemblage leads to buildings as multiplicities, rich in diverse experiences. Today, an architectural project may take six to ten years and it is exposed to unforeseen forces, most of which can lead to new ideas, complexity and unseen levels of refinement. Sometimes the process feels like sailing into choppy waters – but it's a pretty amazing business.'

Unforeseen forces also mean Moussavi and her team will soon have to move. After a long planning battle, the building is being sold for development. She refuses to dwell on the anguish they all feel at the prospect. FMA's new premises will be within one of her own projects, her tallest building so far, offices in Fenchurch Street. 'Yes, it will be hard moving. But how could I possibly complain about going to work in one of my own buildings?' As a world-class architect, she has a point.