

A Smart Magazine for Women
Issue 8

Riposte

N°8

In this issue:

Ericka Hart,

Farshid Moussavi,

Molly Goddard,

Dana Lixenberg,

& Ruqsana Begum.

Farshid Moussavi





Far from trying to find the perfect work-life balance, the Iranian-born architect Farshid Moussavi thrives on disequilibrium as a source of innovation. But then she's not interested in playing to stereotypes. She has thrived in an industry with few female role models, instead creating her own path, measures of success and ways to solve the most complex of problems.

Words by Natalie Rigg, Photography by Paul Phung

The discreet London office where Farshid and her namesake practice, FMA, are based is under construction. "We are a work in progress," she says warmly on my arrival, gesturing to several empty ceiling cavities. Despite this being a dreary afternoon, she possesses a vibrant disposition.

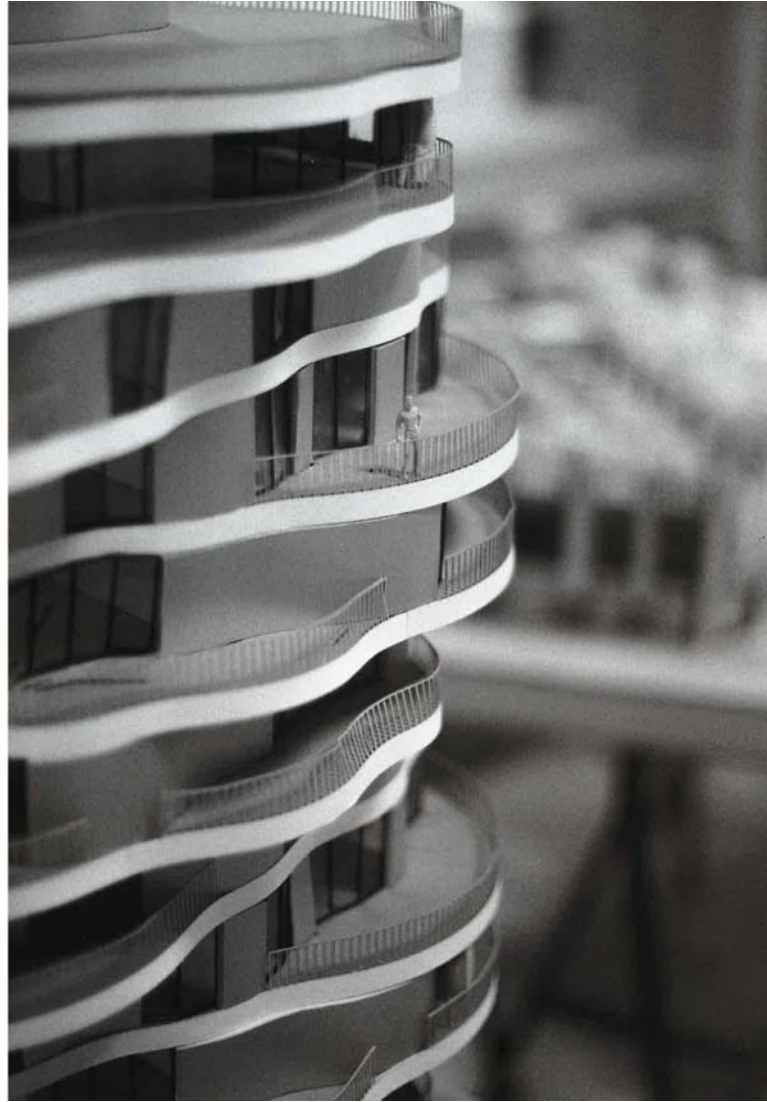
At 51, Farshid is one of the world's most lauded and in-demand architects. She is also—deep breath—a professor in practice of architecture at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design; a board member of the Whitechapel Gallery and the Architecture Foundation in London; a Royal Academician; and the author of three acclaimed books based on her teaching and extensive research at Harvard. She lives with her 16-year-old daughter, Mina, in a "pragmatic, modern house" (of her own design, naturally) in Pimlico.

Farshid's love of architecture can be traced back to her "very happy and relaxed" childhood in Sari, a city by the Caspian Sea in northern Iran. She fondly recalls visiting the construction site of the contemporary family home that her parents—progressive, open-minded academics—commissioned an architect to create. "I went to meetings about the construction

with my father and I remember being really excited," she says. "The architect had graduated in California and was influenced by Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler."

In 1979, at the age of 14, her life took an abrupt turn after the unrest of the Iranian Revolution prompted her parents to enrol her in an English boarding school. "Integrating myself into a completely new culture, learning sufficient English to be successful at O-levels and A-levels in four years was a huge undertaking," she explains. "I remember my father, as he was leaving me, saying, 'From this day, you make all the decisions that are good for you—he never told me what to do. I have only recently realised what a profound gesture that was.'"

His advice held Farshid in good stead. She went to study architecture at the University of Dundee in Scotland, filling her summer holidays with internships at Zaha Hadid's office in London, and at the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London. For her master's at Harvard she studied under the creative steer of the visionary Rem Koolhaas, who subsequently offered her a job at his practice, the Office of Modern Architecture, in Rotterdam.





"While male architects have role models in the profession to emulate, there are very few female role models... This makes us female architects uniquely flexible."

From 1993-2011 Farshid ran Foreign Office Architects with her husband, Alejandro Zaera-Polo, but went on to establish her thriving practice, Farshid Moussavi Architecture (FMA), after the end of their marriage. Though she refuses to pinpoint a favourite building—"It would be like asking someone to say which one of their children they like the most"—I put the extraordinary Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Cleveland, Ohio (2012) and Victoria Beckham's flagship store in Mayfair (2014) on the table. "Well, I do love the fact that MOCA is a highly flexible museum, not your typical 'White Cube'," she says with a smile. "And I think the Victoria Beckham boutique fundamentally rethinks what a store should be in the age of online shopping." Notably, none of FMA's buildings look alike. They are instead connected by the way they engage with their contexts through a unique response—physical, environmental, social and cultural. "FMA is committed to both great architecture and being inclusive, as a social or common good."

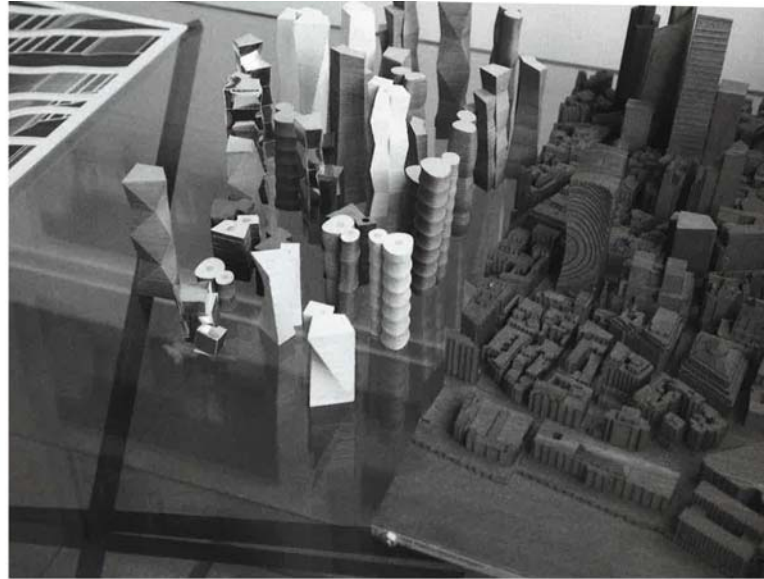
Her drive, dedication and focus are palpable. In the few hours we spend together, it lights a fire in me. I imagine she has this effect on many people, especially her students. "The fact that I teach and practise has probably had the greatest influence on my career," she says. "The shifting back and forth between academia and practice creates the agility that's needed in the contemporary reality we face today—which is hallmarked by change."

I ask her how the present spate of political unrest, fuelled by Brexit and the increasingly tumultuous reign of Donald Trump in the United States, might affect architecture. "Well, Brexit means we might not be able to hang on to our highly qualified European staff," she says. "Our building materials might become limited and we will not have access to European projects. I think borders of any kind are bad." Whether or not she will be able to continue to teach at Harvard in the US remains uncertain. "Who knows," she shrugs. "But the wave of activism we are witnessing in America is very positive in my opinion. It has propelled everyone to take a far more active role in how politics represents them."

"Buildings have a practical function, but they also contribute to the culture of our urban and rural landscapes," she notes. "They can therefore be examined as ideas too, and how those sit within the history of ideas in architecture and art." Farshid pauses to look at the swiftly developing city skyline that looms from a large glass window to her left. She then draws our conversation even closer to home, to London, and vocalises several concerns about the present state of building development. "There is clearly a shortage of affordable housing in the capital. I think there are lessons we can learn from other countries, such as France," she says. "We also need a wide scale design review



Top to bottom: Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, USA, Yokohama Port Terminal, Japan, and Victoria Beckham Flagship Store, London.



"Buildings have a practical function, but they also contribute to the culture of our urban and rural landscapes."



body in London, because different boroughs are making their own decisions that ultimately affect the city as a whole. We are seeing towers built in Wandsworth and Lambeth that would not get permission if they were in Westminster or the City."

Assimilating problems that need to be solved, however, seems to be what makes her tick. "I love architecture because there are never any written answers for a project and, in fact, the problem itself is never crystal clear to begin with," she says. Needless to say, Farshid relishes a good challenge. After all, she is just one of a handful of female architects—including Kazuyo Sejima, Annabelle Selldorf and Amanda Levete—who continue to flourish in a fiercely male-dominated field. Perhaps this is because she has no qualms about her gender, viewing it as not only a positive, but as an advantage. "While male architects have role models in the profession to emulate, there are very few female role models," she says. "This makes us female architects uniquely flexible. It gives the women the creative freedom to outdo the stereotype. Rather than championing for homophony between men and women, we should embrace the notion of exteriority as a source of creativity."

Right now, business is booming. Farshid and her team are on the cusp of finishing an intriguing housing project in Paris that blends affordable housing, student dorms and luxury flats. They are also reinvigorating the famously opulent toy department at Harrods, designing a residential development in central

London, adding an extension to London's Zabudowicz Collection and entering a museum competition in Tampere, Finland. "No two days are the same. The only thing that remains a constant is taking my daughter to school."

Given the demands of her practice and output, I wonder how she finds a balance between her personal and professional life. But she dismisses the very notion. "Interesting things happen when you're not in balance. Disequilibrium can be a source of innovation and, as women, we are forced to butt up against it on a day-to-day basis." She then leans in and confides that, before the birth of her daughter, she was in the office just hours before going into labour. "And I will not tell you how many days after that I was back at work again. I make personal sacrifices with the understanding that I'm not trying to create what other people consider to be a 'balanced' life."

When she's not working, however, her time revolves around Mina. "We love to see exhibitions, meet friends, watch the ballet and shop," she says. "When she grows up, I want her to do something that she really loves, that doesn't feel like a job—that's how I feel and it's empowering."

Over the next few months Farshid is lending her expert eye to the Royal Academy of the Arts in London for its 249th annual Summer Exhibition, which gives a platform to emerging and established artists to showcase works across painting, printmaking and photography, to sculpture, architecture and film. She will curate the architecture gallery and, true to form, has come up with a unique theme. "I wanted to concentrate on exposing what architects specifically do, which is to produce a set of construction coordination drawings," she says. "Although these are mostly computer-generated nowadays, I believe that they are nonetheless beautiful and show a view of buildings rarely or never seen by the public."

If gazing at these intricate building plans sounds like a snore, she's keen to prove you wrong. "I'm convinced that if we expose the tapestry of layers within a drawing in different colours they will be enticing and anything but dry," she laughs, adding: "I'm hoping to have some really great submissions from young architects." To that end, what advice would she give to those wanting to explore or forge a career in the field? "Take in everything that surrounds you, but also learn about the history of architecture, which is so rich in ideas," she says. "I think that a successful building is one that's active within, as an artefact and the context it sits in. This means it shifts the conventions associated with it, inspiring new forms of appropriations and new possibilities for the people within it—which, actually, can be magical." ♦