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Architect and Interior Designer

Shirine Zirak

Interview by Araz Fazaeli

SHIRINE ZIRAK

De: Araz Fazeli

"Don't be afraid to express your creativity and use your imagination. Very often, even the craziest ideas are possible to make." (for Instagram)

French-Iranian architect and interior designer Shirine Zirak incorporates the best of two worlds, combining refined Persian influences with the savoir faire of modern French architecture. Having grown up in a family of doctors, she discovered her passion for monuments and technical drawings instead, thus pursuing her passion to become an architect. Today Shirine holds not one, but three diplomas in architecture: Architect DPLG (1990), Interior Designer in (1993) and Architect for Historic Monuments in (1995), making her one of the few among her peers to hold all titles within her profession. Having worked with some of the best in her field, she started her own company in 2007 and has been Karl Lagerfeld's personal architect and interior designer ever since. In this exclusive interview for The Tehran Times, Shirine shares her views on modern architecture in Iran, the place and purpose of beauty in Iranian culture and lifestyle and gives us a window in to the diverse and demanding world of architecture and interior design.

Ms. Zirak, please tell us about your vocation. What is your specialization and what kind of projects do you work on?

I have three degrees, one in architecture, one in interior design and one in heritage architecture. I have worked for a long time on those three subjects, but my passion goes for interior design. I have many projects and they vary between shops, hotels, restaurants, villas, offices, apartments etc...

You are French-Iranian. How has growing up bicultural influenced your life?

Growing up in a bicultural environment influences each and one of us in different ways. For one, I have very good relations with my clients thanks to my Iranian culture. In fact, I believe that this culture gives a taste of sociability and fine listening and I think that my Iranian side highly contributed to my refined taste. On the other hand, my perfectionism was shaped by my French culture, and consequently it also taught me the admiration of elegance.

Where does your fascination for architecture and interior design come from? When did you know you wanted to go in to architecture?

Coming from a family of doctors, you can imagine that architecture was not a path that was predestined for me. I didn't really know which direction to follow after college but I always liked to sketch on anything I found, particularly surreal graphic elements and everything in my direct environment- and I have always been interested in the history of art and architecture. One day I went to the school of architecture to register one of my friends, and while I was there it sort of became a revelation for myself. I saw all the models, the drawings and plans around me and was just fascinated... then I registered my friend...and myself! And so it began!

Success does not come easy. In some fields as a woman, you need to work harder to prove yourself. How is the position of women in the field of architecture today?

It's a fact that architecture is a man's world, well in its major parts anyway. It's something that you can notice especially on construction sites or in meetings. You would be surprised however, to see how female delicacy, as opposed to men's, encourages respect towards women in this field.

You are a renowned interior designer of French-Iranian decent. Looking at Iran and the study of interior design (as well as architecture), I've always wondered why so many women choose to go in to this field compared to students in Europe. What is your view on this?

Everywhere in the world you need a sensibility to work on interior spaces because it is in direct correlation with our daily life. That is why women are attracted to this field, as opposed

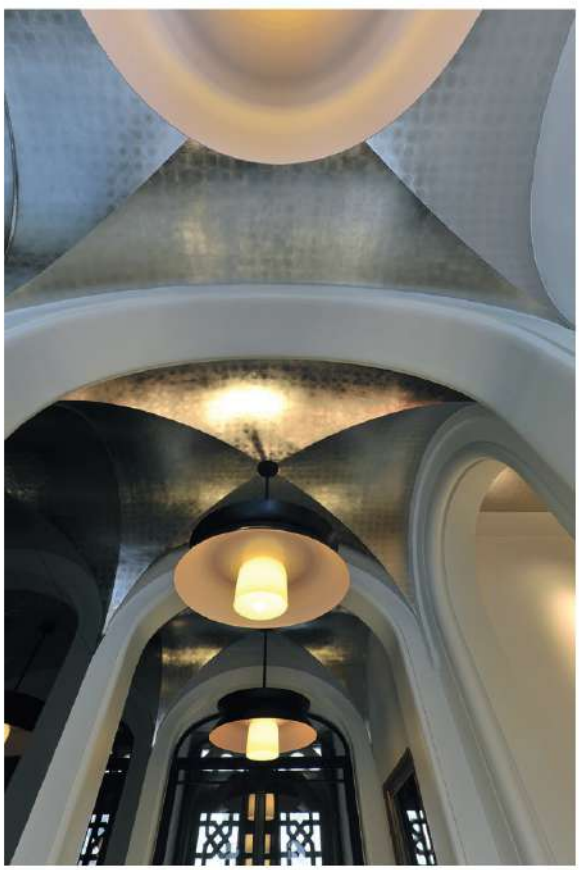
to architecture and construction, where men tend to feel intuitively more at ease. It is also true that in Iran some women with good taste self-proclaim themselves as interior architects without any former training. That surprises me, because interior design is not only about choosing furniture and light! When you go to Iran, you notice an obvious cult of beauty. From the most ancient architectural monuments of Persia to the most recent aesthetics in trends carried by women in our modern times, we live in a culture where we like to "welcome others with beauty" when we have guests at home. And this is apparent in the way we present ourselves: our clothing, as in our carpets, food, and interior design.

Different aesthetics apply in different places. What can you tell us about modern architecture and building in Iran? What are the influences today and how is it different from the West?

The strength and beauty of architecture has been part of our history for more than 3000 years. We have always had excellent architects in Iran, but the landscape of the city changed due to savage urbanism that took place after the revolution, one with no respect to any rules of aesthetics. In the past ten years, Iranian architects have been paying further attention to the concept of the buildings and they are more aware and attentive towards the different ways to build. Today, with modernization and with Iran once again opening up to the world, you can see many places with architecture that looks a lot like what we used to have before the revolution. I appreciate the work of architects that are able to use the language of Iranian traditional architecture and modernize it. This is actually what I like to do, to transform traditional language and work with it, in a modern way, with new technology.

You are Mr. Lagerfeld's architect and interior designer ;How do you experience working with Mr. Lagerfeld?

Mr. Lagerfeld contacts me to work with him on the development of his projects. This is how we've worked on a few



prestigious projects together (restaurants, offices, luxury residences). We are currently working on two towers of 40 floors in Taiwan together. In fact I've also worked on the interior design of the Chanel studios and Mr. Lagerfeld's office. He trusts my taste and contributions in each of our projects. I am very honored that I have been chosen as his architect, knowing that he knows a lot of architects and interior designers.

What is your fondest memory of working with Mr. Lagerfeld, if I may ask?

What is precious to me is that he has really trusted me with everything throughout the years and that we have always been on the same wavelength. I remember one time at a presentation of materials for a big project, where he pointed out that he didn't like the choice of a material I had made for a particular place and then the same afternoon he called me and said "I trust you, let's do what you showed me today" and he let me continue with my initial idea- and this was really a very important moment of trust and recognition for me.

Are there any architects or young talent (Iranian) you are currently following and would recommend us to get to know?

I had an opportunity to work with Mr. Mozafari Vala, a young Iranian architect with a very modern style. He is now one of the most popular architects in Iran.

You have worked with some of the greatest in the field of architecture, among them Christian de Portzamparc and Jacques Garcia (for 11 years!), what advice would you like to pass on to young women and aspiring architects?

Architecture and interior design are artistic jobs that you must love from the bottom of your heart. It's the kind of jobs you need to love because it demands a lot of investment from you and means a lot of sleepless nights. Don't be afraid to express your creativity and use your imagination. Very often, even the craziest ideas are possible to make.

I am interviewing you for our Contemporary Woman section, so naturally I am curious to know how you would define the contemporary woman and what it means to be one in current terms.