

H O U S A T O N I C

0 0 / A P R I L

# HOME

## FOAM HOME

IN CORNWALL,  
INTERNATIONAL  
ARCHITECT  
NOUSHIN EHSAN  
FINDS SOLACE  
IN AN IGLOO

## BUDDING BEAUTIES

THOSE PERENNIAL FAVORITES—  
RHODODENDRON AND AZALEAS





# A *Dome*

INTERNATIONAL  
ARCHITECT  
FINDS SOLACE  
INSIDE AN  
IGLOO-LIKE  
CORNWALL HOME,  
WHICH INSIDE  
IS ANYTHING  
BUT COLD.



# IS WHERE THE

# HEART IS



INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN ARCHITECT NOUSHIN EHSAN OF CORNWALL HAS HERSELF A UNIQUE FOAM HOUSE THAT "TRANSFORMED" HER THE FIRST TIME SHE ENTERED IT.

**W**e recently caught up with Noushin Ehsan, a chic, cosmopolitan, sophisticated woman who happens to be an internationally known architect and award-winning designer of public buildings and luxurious private residences in Europe, Asia and the United States. Throughout the years, her residences have been in a variety of countries. So where is she living now? "In a lumpy foam house in the country, a stuck-together bunch of ugly white domes, an animal-shaped thing," the architect admits.

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WRITTEN BY REA LUBAR DUNCAN PHOTOGRAPHED BY NICK JACOBS



MS. EHSAN SHOWN HERE IN HER KITCHEN LOOKING OUT TO A WROUGHT IRON SPIRAL STAIRCASE WHICH WINDS TO THE BALCONIED UPPER LEVEL, ITS BANISTER A RIBBON OF BLAZING RED.

## NOUSHIN EHSAN

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Those were the words she used to describe her first impression of the foam dome that is her country home in Cornwall. "But that was from the outside," she hurriedly makes clear. "Then I went inside and I was transformed."

I suddenly became calm and peaceful. Safe and serene," Ms. Ehsan explained, marveling still. "I had not felt such utter peace for a long, long time."

She then told the astonished broker, "I'll take it."

"But you haven't seen it. There's a swimming pool and a sauna and bedrooms and..." was the Realtor's response.

"Whatever else the house has is icing on the cake," she replied.

And within a month, the lumpy foam dome was hers.

"But it took time till I got up the courage to invite guests, especially my clients," she confesses, "Why run the risk of having them think me a 'free spirit'? And, with my architect colleagues, I simply was not prepared to hear their snide remarks."

"Finally, the comfort, love and sense of security I received from the house gave me

enough courage to invite guests. Most of my architect friends, particularly the so-called good designers, refused to comment. But everyone else—especially children—loved the house at first sight and gave it many names—"Smurf House," "The Rock House," "Mushroom Manor," "The Caterpillar Estate." But most people called it "The Igloo."

It was 12 years ago that she bought the house and the outside is still a lumpy igloo, actually four igloos, a big one with three smaller ones stuck on.

But inside—inside!—it is stunning. As I enter the big dome—the living-dining area, which is 18 feet tall at its peak—my first impression is of high drama.

Yet, simultaneously, I feel the sense of peace that initially enveloped Ms. Ehsan—and still does. For this is, first and foremost, a "people" room, the ambience warmly welcoming, with simple furnishings arranged for intimate groupings.

"Yes, I made some changes," the architect explains, "but the basic geodesic dome form remains undisturbed. I later learned that the designer, the late Albert B. Moore, has not received formal architectural education. Yet he created, and patented, a geodesic system that was successfully used for building a series of low-cost houses, several at Music Mountain and one just nearby in Cornwall.

Unprecedented in its use for construction, the foam covers the various domes, each housing different functions. Covering the foam is a polyethylene material for waterproofing on the outside and a special cementation material for fire protection on the inside.

"The responsiveness of the form to the natural beauty of the New England terrain made me want to bring the outside in and the inside out," she goes on. "So I replaced walls with windows and extended the sliding glass doors."

The result? A flood of light and a glorious view of the surrounding woods and fields.

Throughout the house, walls and ceilings are white ("They were originally dull gray"); the floor, black slate. But with an artist's touch, she has added galvanizing red accents.

Riveting the eye as one enters, a wrought iron spiral staircase winds to the balconied upper level, its banister a ribbon of blazing red. Bright red, too, is the soaring flue of the free-standing California fireplace which serves both for warmth and as a piece of sculpture. Simple black-upholstered banquettes line the walls; the dining table is a functional rectangle of black wood.

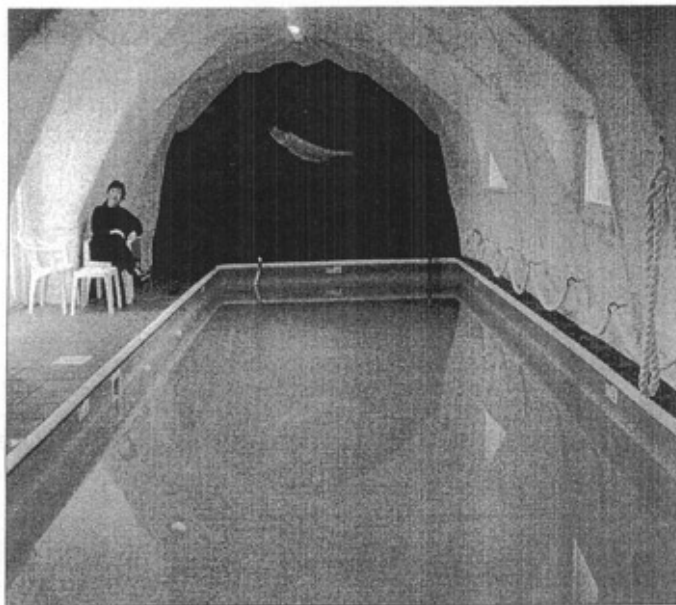
An eclectic collection of paintings and objets d'art, collected from around the world, some ancient, others contemporary, soften and personalize the room. Unexpectedly glitzy, a gilded wood mirror from Thailand is elaborately studded with blue and yellow fake gemstones. "My son, Babak (an aeronautical engineer with Lockheed Martin in Orlando, Fla.) couldn't believe I'd allow such a jazzy piece in the house," Ms. Ehsan tells laughing. "But I carried it home myself. I knew it would work here."

"And who would have thought a Victorian painting would fit this contemporary setting?" she asks. "But see how that still life of fruits and vegetables fits right in. It's at home here."

In contrast, contemporary paintings and black-and-white sketches by Ardeshtier Mohasses, internationally known Iranian artist, occupy one wall, and an unusual handcrafted silk and wool rug from China warms the floor.

The fourth "igloo," which Ms. Ehsan added to the original three, houses her spacious bedroom and sumptuous bath on the ground level. A gourmet cook, she has also enlarged and re-shaped the kitchen that is adjacent to the living room. And she has re-designed the second floor to accommodate two bedrooms and a balcony loft.

Surprises keep coming. In separate connecting igloos are a large, cedar-walled sauna and a 5-foot-deep "cold" pool with socko brilliant blue sides. ("I'm a sauna addict," she admits.) And, in another igloo, directly off the bedroom, is a 40-foot-



INSIDE ONE OF THE SIDE IGLOOS IS A 40-FOOT-LONG POOL IN WHICH MS. EHSAN SWIMS EVERY DAY.

long swimming pool (she swims every day).

Ms. Ehsan has also curved large stone terraces outside that blend into the countryside she so loves. In summer these are favorite gathering places for the many guests she now entertains. In winter, the outside hot tub is the place to be. "It's so hot that people can roll in the snow afterward and not get cold," she tells.

In her early 50s, a striking brunette, Noushin Ehsan was born in Tehran, Iran, and is an extraordinary combination of worldliness and deep-rooted spirituality. Indeed, her spirituality has shaped her life, and changed the course of her career.

Her education is indicative of an insatiable drive "to learn from the best" even when it meant uprooting herself and her home to seek it out. She received degrees—a bachelor of interior design and bachelor of architecture—from Tehran University, then left her homeland to study in Paris at Ecole des Beaux Arts on a scholarship award from the Shah. Then, another leap, to the U.S. for a master's degree in architecture and urban design from the University of California at Los Angeles.

Her career is extraordinary in a field where women rarely occupy top positions, indeed, where there are few women at any level. She has taught at the Harvard School of Design and at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute—both times the only woman on the faculty—and is sought out internationally as a lecturer, conducting workshops in architecture in China, Russia, Malaysia, Turkey, Kenya, South Africa, London, Ireland and New York.

For the first half of her professional career—till 1985—she was a partner and managing director of B.E.B. Consultants, a 60-person international architectural design firm with offices in Tehran, London, Paris and New York.

Here she directed huge projects: creating four new towns—from scratch—in different parts of Iran, a 3,000-unit housing complex in Tehran, re-designing the Hunter Elementary School in New York, the Communications Center at La Guardia Airport and major hotels, condominiums and office buildings, plus famed private residences around the globe.



MS. EHSAN WANTED TO "BRING THE OUTSIDE IN AND THE INSIDE OUT" SO SHE REPLACED THE WALLS WITH WINDOWS AND EXTENDED THE SLIDING GLASS DOORS.

## NOUSHIN EHSAN

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And then, suddenly, a spiritual change of direction. As a devout follower of the Baha'I faith which originated in Iran in 1863, Ms. Ehsan lives by its basic tenets: the one-ness of God and the unity of mankind.

Welling from a deep need to express these principles in her work, she shifted from serving large corporations to serving people, "people who thought they could not utilize the services of an architect," she explains.

"My quest was to advance public knowledge of the role of the architect in enhancing constructed environments. To help people improve their living and working surroundings and, importantly—to build the growth of their business."

And so she founded Accessible Architecture, PC, headquartered in New York City, a trail-blazing venture in which she had to reach out to the public with her message. "We had to use newspapers, magazines, radio and TV to let people know we were on hand. 'What can an architect do for you?' we asked. And, 'How do you get the job built right?'"

"Plainly we filled a need," she states. "We completed more than 400 projects. Store fronts, offices, all kinds of small commercial buildings, extensions and renovations of homes."

"The work brought me a degree of fulfillment I had longed for, and, gratifyingly, honors from the community," she reveals. She won an Entrepreneurial Business Award from Mayor Ed Koch with a grant of \$10,000 and a Business Achievement Award from Mayor Giuliani.

"Unexpectedly, our work also drew interest from the government," she says, "which came to us seeking our help with renovation of public buildings so that they would better serve the needs of the people and the environment."

Yet despite the honors heaped on her, despite her professionalism and her formal knowledge, Noushin Ehsan is a maverick—"a free spirit." Her approach to architecture is unorthodox, stemming again from her pervasive spirituality.

Although highly educated herself, she takes a controversial stand and sees education as a barrier to true creative expression, prohibiting the reception of spiritual inspiration, of new thoughts, of intuition.





YEARS BEFORE BUYING HER IGLOO HOUSE MS. EHSAN DREW A STRIKINGLY SIMILAR SKETCH OF HER "DREAM HOUSE."



DRAWING 1

DRAWING 2

"Contrary to the essence of knowledge which leads to an expansion of vision," she writes in an article titled "Education as a Barrier," "academic education prevents one from seeing freely."

Strong words. They get stronger. "Architectural education, by which I was trained, is a barrier to the feeling that a space can provoke. Yet the essence of design—which I call the spirit of space—can only be perceived by feeling and emotional response."

She tells a spooky story to illustrate. "Some years ago, I went through a difficult period in my life and sought counseling in group therapy. One day the therapist asked us to draw our dream house and gave us two weeks to complete the assignment.

"I couldn't do it. What's the matter with me, I asked myself. I've designed lots of houses. Finally, I scrawled a small dome-shaped form with a rectangular entrance and two square windows on either side. That was it." (see drawing 1)

"It was a year later that I first saw my foam dome and hated it. The strangeness of the form undermined my basic foundations of architecture. Yet the feelings it elicited captured for me, the true spirit of space. It was my dream house. (see drawing 2)

One evening, shortly after visiting the igloo, I was invited to Ms. Ehsan's apartment in New York. The contrast staggered me...

Sumptuous, luxurious, it's situated high above the city looking out on the East River and the New York landscape of glittering lights. Furniture is by Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. Rare, ancient rugs from Iran and Tibet cover the parquet floors. Paintings and sculptures from ancient India and Indonesia adorn the walls. Every detail is exquisite.

"Are you right handed or left handed?" she asks.

"Right handed."

"Then use this fork," she suggests, handing me a burnished stainless steel fork for "righties" sculpted by Arne Jacobsen.

"It's a different life-style in New York," she says, responding to my wonder. "I've lived here happily for 18 years. But for total peace, for spiritual nourishment, for serenity of soul, I go to my igloo as often as I possibly can, winter and summer."

Pliny said it first. "Home is where the heart is."