



Price of Oil? Not an Issue

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Architect Lives in a Unique, Cornwall, Conn., 'Dome'

Architect Noushin Ehsan recalls the day she first saw the dome-like house on the top of a hill in the small town of Cornwall, Conn. "What is that?" she remembers asking the realtor as she glanced at



the white, foam-covered structure. She wondered why he would bring her from New York City, where she continues to maintain an apartment, for what she viewed at that moment as an utter waste of her time.

After years of running a successful architectural practice in this country and others, she was looking for a country house, a place she described as her "cabin in the woods." Something wooden. Something simple. Something hidden in the woods. She followed her realtor through what was then an unheralded entryway where grass covers a granite ledge and found herself in what she now describes as a magnificently proportioned space. "As soon as I walked in, I felt like something hugged me," she says today, 20 years after that first encounter.

"My first reaction was, 'I [feel] like I'm in the womb of my mother.' I sensed quietness. I sensed contentment," she said. Ms. Ehsan, who has a master's degree in architecture and urban design from the University of California at Los Angeles, made a trip out a side door, where she glimpsed the panoramic view from the 5.5-acre tract, and then came back inside. There, she said, the realtor was standing next to the spiral staircase that anchors the house, ready for her to walk away.

"I came in and said to him, 'I want it. If I can afford it, I want it.' He said, 'What? You haven't seen the house yet. It has an indoor swimming pool. It has sonar' I said, 'Anything else is extra. If I can afford it, I want it.' In fifteen days, I owned the house."

Anything tied to the phrase "geodesic dome" is now in vogue, with the Whitney Museum of American Art

Details Matter

2nd Opinion Design was founded by Noushin Eshan, a licensed architect with over 35 years of international experience. In 1985, she founded Accessible Architecture, PC, where she developed the concept of "The Spirit of Space," which incorporates the spiritual as well as the practical approach to architecture. In this initiative Ms. Eshan promotes designs that create a positive energy in one's space. She believes that through harmony, proportion, light, cohesiveness of thought in design and use of material one can design holistic spaces that uplift the spirit and energize the physical being. This approach to holistic design has no relevance to the size and budget of one's projects and can be adapted in any style.

From 1974 to 1985, Ms. Eshan was the managing director of B.E.B. Consultants, an architectural firm based in New York, London, Paris and Tehran. In this position, her vast number of projects included design of new towns, large residential complexes, commercial buildings, schools, hospitals, hotel facilities and private residences.

Ms. Eshan has taught at both the London North East Polytechnic Institute in England and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y. She also served as an adjunct professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Ms. Eshan studied architecture at Tehran University and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and received her master's degree in Architecture & Urban Design from UCLA.

Since 1991, Ms Eshan has made New York City her adopted home. She has been granted several honors and awards, which include the Design Merit Award from Hunter College in New York City and the Business Achievement Award from former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

having mounted the first major retrospective of work by R. Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) this year. Mr. Fuller achieved fame in the 1950s with the dome-shaped structure that gains its stability from the tetrahedrons that create its frame. He designed the dome as a type of affordable housing, although the structure Ms. Ehsan occupies, which is a variation on Mr. Fuller's design, gains its efficiency from its very un-Fullerlike foam.

"I know of only six," said Robinson Leech, a Litchfield County realtor who did not sell Ms. Ehsan her house but was acquainted with the late Albert Moore, who, as the head of Albert B. Moore Associates Inc. in Lakeville, designed a handful of the foam-covered structures in the Northwest Hills in the 1970s. "They were very difficult to sell," Mr. Leech conceded of the dome-like structures, "mostly because they were so eccentric in design. It was so out front of any kind of idea for home construction. I sold two of them in the 1980s." "They were basically so thermally efficient," he explained. "They were known to be very functionally free of fossil fuel," he said, noting that Mr. Moore had a builder construct his designs with wood-burning stoves. The houses, he said, gain their thermal efficiency from the heat from their electrical appliances and also body warmth. "You didn't want a depletion of oxygen inside.

They were basically just solid foam shells with windows cut into them and ventilation fans for bathroom vents and [also] doors."

"You would show it to an engineer-type person who was interested in advanced design, and functionally efficient design," he added of marketing such structures.

As for her interest in architecture, "No one can find out the exact source of it," said Ms. Ehsan, who was born in Tehran, Iran. She noted that everyone in her family is a teacher or a philosopher and that her father held the rank of professor at a university.

"But I remember I was walking a side of a street at a very young age in my life with my mother, and I would explain, 'Oh, if I became an architect, I would do this and that on the street differently,' and I was very much enchanted with how one has to create a space in Tehran.

"My family is from a desert country in a very ancient city," she said of Hashan, a locality just outside Tehran, "and the adobe architecture over there is so gorgeous.

"When I was grown up and already a student of architecture, I was going there and I was cherishing their old houses and their form of adobe houses," said Ms. Ehsan, who studied interior design and earned a bachelor's degree in architecture in Tehran before studying in Paris and California.

"And, in a sense, when I really look at this house ... desert cities in Iran, they all

are very much built in a way that, although they are in adobe and this is foam, ... the essence of this house reminds me of those."

For three years after buying her version of a cabin in the woods, Ms. Ehsan said, she was not willing to share it with anyone. She feared that the clients of her very large practice would say, "Oh, my God, she has really lost her mind. Number one, she divorces her husband, and now she finds this crazy house." (Ms. Ehsan with her American husband had established a practice that operated from London, New York, Paris and Tehran.)

"I could not even tell my son that I bought this house," she continued. "I was really afraid. Yet, every moment that I had time, I would drive all the way from Manhattan, come here, sit here, quietly, for a few minutes and then go back."

Finally, she slowly began to share the house with others. At the same time, she discovered what makes the essence of her country property good design and why what she sought in her cabin in the woods is embedded in the house as well.

"I wanted a cabin because of its cohesive ideal, simple design and low maintenance and something that fits with nature," she said. "On the surface, this doesn't fit with nature and yet in reality it does. Many people call it 'mushroom.' Many people call it 'rock.' Many people call it 'igloo-house.' It really is part

of nature. In the winter, you don't even notice the house because of the snow. It's just so beautiful.

"So," Ms. Ehsan continued, "the essence of what I was always preaching and doing in a modern shell or contemporary design, it is here."

She said she then began examining how space has a spirit, with some places giving a visitor of feeling of joy and others creating feelings of claustrophobia or anxiety. Regarding the latter, she cited the Lipstick Building by Philip Johnson and Paul Burgee in midtown Manhattan as an example of a building where, after straining to discover its hard-to-find entranceway and then its elevators, she has arrived at an appointment feeling tense. "It's called the rhythm of life. The rhythm of feeling. Not rigidly dictated to you. One should not think of the shape first. You should be thinking, 'What is that design for?' Then the house, it finds itself."

Ms. Ehsan thought back to one of her early professors in urban design who had said, "When you want to create a path in a garden or a road, instead of just designing it, just let people go through the mud or through the grass-find their way from one place to another-and you will find how they wind, how they go."

"They never go from point A to point B in a straight line," she said. "That is the music of design."

Since she has owned her country property, Ms. Ehsan

has continued to modify and make additions to it. These include creating a master bedroom from a fan-shaped deck.

"I think practicality is one of the issues that brings joy and more positive energy into a space," Ms. Ehsan observed as she stood in the large bedroom on the northern side of the house. "If the space is not practical, it brings negative energy. It blocks your energy."

"Every corner of this space has been used," she said of the master suite with bath. "It's an odd shape, but everything has a purpose. [Mr. Moore] had a purpose. He had a system, and he stayed on it. He didn't go for form. He went for function and ideal and principle that was carried in the system. And I carried his principle further, and I brought it to the fullest because this was a fan-shaped space. It was flexible enough that I could do what I could do here. This shape just gives you a high spirit." Ms. Ehsan's focus on the

spirit of the space, for which she credits her country house, has led her to examine the subject in a book on which she is now working.

Meanwhile, it has also served as the topic for her lectures in places as distant as China, in addition to informing her architectural work for years.

"It is something I am focusing my business, 2nd Opinion Design, on," she said of the firm she founded in 2001 to give fresh perspectives on architectural projects to clients and architects. "You really have to concentrate on [the question] 'What are the elements that will give us positive energy?'"

"Last week, I had an interview with a potential client, an architect, who is a partner with a major firm in New York," she said with reference to 2nd Opinion Design. She said the architect had done several major constructions for a client, but on one project they could not come to an agreement. "He wants me to go and meet with

them," she said. She remarked that she asked the architect whether he would consent to her hearing the client's concerns and also analyzing the project herself. She recounted that the architect replied, "Yes, because we want to move on. Right now, we are at a block," giving one example of an incident her interest in the spirit of the space has encouraged.

"On my Web site, I'm even comparing this house with the Parthenon, with Ronchamp, with the magnificent modern architecture of the hotel that S.O.M. has done in Shanghai," she said of her country home.

"It is not the look," said Ms. Ehsan, who has taught at universities all over the world, including the Harvard Graduate School of Design, of what matters to her now in design. "It is the completeness," she said.

Ms. Ehsan's Web site is *2ndopiniondesign.com*.