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June 2011

FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP: SHASHI CAAN
COMMERCIAL MARKET REPORT 2011
INSTALLATION UPDATE



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LEADERSHIP

For Shashi Caan, design is an intellectual pursuit, not just a process of coordinating textiles and finishes. Her life and her work inform one another, starting from her earliest years when she would accompany her architect father to job sites.

Caan grew up in India and earned master's degrees in both architecture and industrial design. In 2002, after working for several years with major firms, she founded The Collective in New York and later expanded into Great Britain with The Collective U.K. She has served as the president of the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) since November 2009 and has worked extensively on IFI Design Frontiers: Interiors Entity, an effort that surveyed designers and architects from 88 countries to develop a consensus about the profession. It resulted in the IFI Interiors Declaration, unveiled last month. Caan is awaiting the release of her first book *Rethinking Design and Interiors*.

Q: How did you end up choosing interior architecture as your career passion?

A: I come from a family of architects on my father's side of the family and doctors on my mother's side. Although my father favored medicine as a profession for me, my best memories with him were viewing buildings and experiencing architecture. As a child I loved going to construction sites with my father. During these field trips, I would always imagine the lives and interactions of the occupants. I wondered what those walls had witnessed, "if only walls could talk" as the saying goes. Fascinated with people and the human capacity to dream and manifest our physical world, this naturally led me to explore my innate passion for architecture and interiors.



Shashi Caan.

Q: I see that you have quite an extensive collection of education credentials. Talk a little about how your education has helped shape your talent.

A: I love people-watching and trying to fathom the choices and decisions of individuals. It fascinates me that each of our ordinary choices helps to shape and define our time.

society and culture. I have always desired to understand this more deeply. Early on, I made the decision to go to art school in order to learn about our world through visual means. I sought to understand self through cultural differences and similarities. At a more detailed level, I became academically intrigued with the human senses, our psychology and physiology as shaped by the combination of our natural and built environment. This led me to study art, design and architecture.

My varied education was a by-product of there being no single educational path for the knowledge and understanding I sought, which was that of the comprehensive design criteria that shapes human behavior. This knowledge does not exist in any single discipline. By studying industrial design, I explored human scale. In architecture, I understood the gigantic and our responsibility for the civic—this after building a visual vocabulary of design and human perception during my fine arts training at Edinburgh College of Art. Today, I know that I have a very specific optic on design, which remains my unique contribution and offering to society.

Q: Tell me about the first jobs you had in the interiors business. Who gave you your first chance, and how did that help shape you?

A: My first project was to design a small hairdressing salon right after graduating with my BFA from the Edinburgh College of Art in Edinburgh, Scotland. While I loved that project and learned that I had a lot to learn about construction, structures and design in general, I also learned that I enjoyed shaping the environment to support commerce as well as about the complexity of factors required to shape human behavior. While the overall aesthetic considerations were an innate byproduct of the design concept, the consideration of mere decoration was superficial to me. I realized that my interest was far from shopping for ornamental objects and artifacts but in making a substantial difference to places and people through and by design.

Q: Who played a key role in making you who you are?

A: My role models from recent history are Coco Chanel and Anaïs Nin. Both women dared to be courageous and to stand up for their beliefs and their personal interest against societal constraint. Both accomplished greatness through self-interpretation and the expression of their unique talent. Both were smart, talented and intelligent, and garnered success through self-expression.

As a young designer in New York City in the early 1990s, I was inspired by Margo Grant. Today, I am inspired by a myriad of multidisciplinary talents. Contemporary architects, designers, artists, anthropologists, philosophers, theorists and firms—too many to mention—all help me shape my thinking and foster my learning and growth.

Q: Talk about the career growth that led to your current position as owner of the Shashi Caan Collective and president of The International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI).

A: After graduating with my first masters (industrial design) from Pratt, I started to teach in the graduate program there. I was working at Swanke Hayden Connell Architects on Park Avenue in Manhattan and was invited to serve on the board of the United Nations Associations. I was about 26 years old and engrossed with how each diverse activity dovetailed so magnificently into the other. These three activities—the practice of architecture and design, its education/research and professional volunteer work—have remained my cornerstones of activity throughout my life.

After SHCA, I joined Gensler Architects and then was recruited by Skidmore Owings and Merrill. Each firm contributed to my enormous growth and expansion. In each activity, I continued to gain greater experience and responsibility, culminating in my experience as chair of the interiors program at Parsons, design director at SOM and now as the president of IFI.

The Collective, my firm, was a natural next step which combines an innovative business structure (modeled after the film in-

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dustry), an academic studio (with lots of inherent research unique to each client) and the fundamental exploration of creativity and innovation required to support the unique expression of each client, their business and culture. I am thrilled to now have The Collective UK as well as our office in New York City.

Q: How do you balance your time between your volunteer work, your pursuit of continuing education and your professional endeavors?

A: This question always surprises me, since I feel perfectly balanced doing all that I love to do and with people I admire and enjoy. I think life is about learning as we grow and growing as we learn.

Q: You have just spent an enormous amount of time gathering consensus on the true role of interior design as a profession. Why do you think this needed to be clarified?

A: With 95% of life happening in some form of an inside, it stuns me that we are often superficial with our built environment. Interiors are our fundamental shelter and, as such, required to be universally and more seriously defined as an intellectual pursuit. Also, more so than any other design practice, the interior requires an understanding of the sculpting of void.

I am very proud of the IFI global community who came together (from some 88 nations) to explore and unanimously agree to a set of criteria, which is distinctive and very apt for why this design expertise exists and what its expert must know and do.

Q: How do you balance your personal life and your career?

A: For me, there is nothing more enjoyable than having a meaningful conversation with smart, creative people in any milieu. It seems that every single topic somehow weaves into

and informs my design work and thinking. As such, there is no separation for me with my personal or professional life. My personal life and my career are in balance because they are one and the same: a pursuit of making improvements to life and a search for that which allows people to live optimally in integrated and supportive communities.

Q: Do you think it's easier for a man to lead change than a woman in today's society?

A: While I think that we still live in a male dominated society, I believe this is rapidly changing. In our global village, with such overlaps of financial, environmental and cultural impacts, we are, as a species, challenged with defining and finding solutions to our topical issues that supersede the traditional and old conversations. The 21st century demands that we put our greatest thinking into action to solve some of the greatest challenges ever faced by humans. We are all in this together, and I believe that any woman can achieve societal change as readily as any contemporary man.

Q: What motivated you to write your upcoming book, *Rethinking Design and Interiors*?

A: As a matter of fact, it was the publisher who approached me to write this book. I was encouraged to express my opinions on design, education and research. Given this wonderful opportunity to contribute something of personal meaning and a shifted theoretical basis, I thought it was important to address a number of key issues pertaining to people in the built environment. The book is somewhat provocative and is also a reflection of my life's experience and work. I consider that the content poses as many questions as it answers; and I hope it will inspire younger designers to find an area within themselves and the industry that is of their individual resonance. We have much to ponder and improve. I hope the book will help to foster further questions in search of essential and important answers. ■

PACKING FOR CERSAIE



September will be here before you know it, so now is the time to start making plans to attend the world's largest ceramic tile expo in Bologna, Italy. Scheduled for September 20 to 24, Cersaie is an opportunity for designers and other flooring industry professionals to take a break from their normal routines and get a global perspective on flooring design. Bologna is a medieval city located in the heart of the Emilia Romagna region.

Staff members from Floor Focus attend Cersaie every year because

the show is much more than a product expo. In addition to thousands of design-forward, envelope-pushing products, Cersaie brings together world leaders in architecture and design to talk about hot trends and projects in the Building, Dwelling, Thinking conference. This year, with a focus on Japan's recovery and the role of architecture in emergencies, Japanese architects Kengo Kuma and Kazuyo Sejima will be speaking.

Cersaie is scheduled a week earlier in 2011, so the weather should be

even warmer and more conducive to evening strolls through the cobblestone streets, shopping the food and fashion of Italy. The region is known for its exceptional food (balsamic vinegar, tortellini, Bolognese ragu, lasagna verde) and world-class exotic rides (Ferrari, Lamborghini and Ducati), so many visit for a chance to experience the "dolce vita" firsthand.

It's time to start booking flights and finalizing plans to attend Cersaie 2011. For more information on the show, visit www.cersaie.it. ■