

# MAKING LEGEND OF A D

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## EARLY YEARS

It was almost the end of December 1963 when my husband Suhail Lari and I with our infant daughter returned to Pakistan - Suhail as a graduate of Modern Greats or PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics) from St. Catherine's College, Oxford, and myself having completed 5 years of intense architectural studies from Oxford School of Architecture (now Oxford Brookes University). A minimum of two years experience was required before I could apply for the coveted membership of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), which I would get in 1968 after clearing the professional practice test in Karachi.

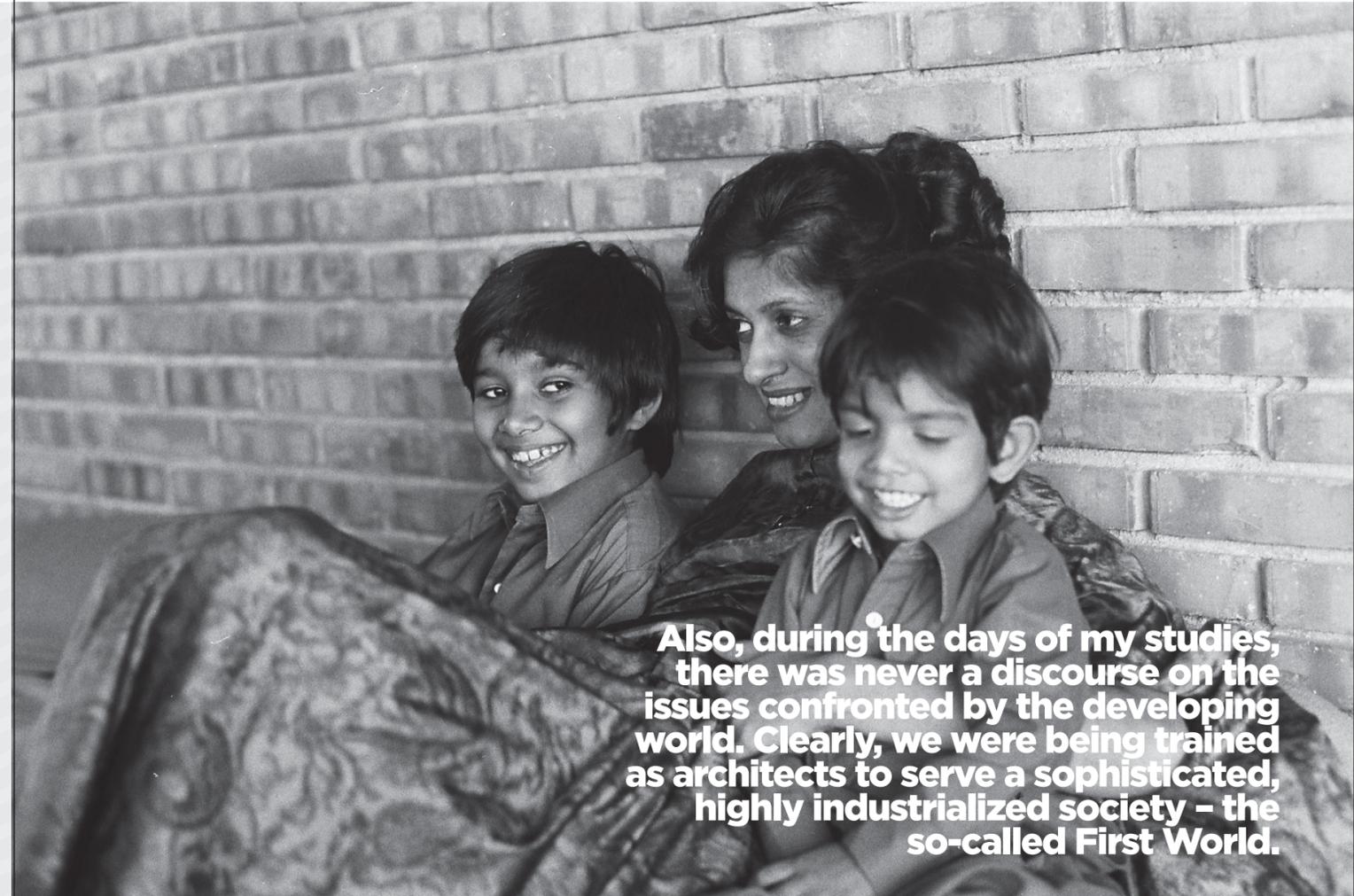




That we returned to Pakistan almost as soon as we finished our studies reflects the spirit of the times. When I went to England to take up first fine arts and then architectural studies way back in the summer of 1956, the excitement of being part of a new nation was profound. It was clear that whatever one did was for the glory of the country, and one wore the pride of being a Pakistani on one's sleeve. So, after graduation, there was never a thought of settling elsewhere, or acquiring another passport, it was to our country that we had to return to and it was Pakistan that one was devoted to serving.

Having been taught the ethics of being an architect as an upright and a highly valued professional, you believed that you were a precious 'gift' to society. And, as an originator of unique forms of matchless beauty you considered yourself justified in claiming to be next to the Creator. Our sensibilities had been refined in the tradition of Vitruvius and Michelangelo, impelled by the philosophy of William Morris and John Ruskin, and were almost wholly inspired by the quintessential illustrations of the flamboyant 'Modern Master' Le Corbusier or the 'Master of Detail' Mies Van der Rohe.

Interestingly, and perhaps predictably, in all the years of my stay in England, there was never a hint of reference to Hasan Fathy, the Egyptian architect striving to popularize the vernacular traditions of building – after we met at the first Aga Khan Award for Architecture seminar (consisting of, it seemed, a chosen few) held in 1978 at Aiglemont, it was moving when Hasan Bey, the luminary, spoke of me as his daughter.



**Also, during the days of my studies, there was never a discourse on the issues confronted by the developing world. Clearly, we were being trained as architects to serve a sophisticated, highly industrialized society – the so-called First World.**

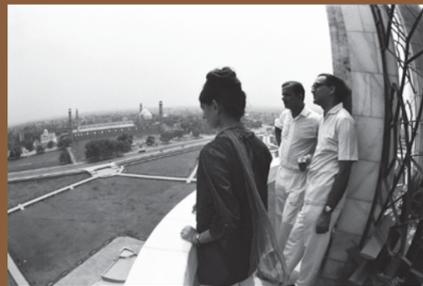
Returning to Pakistan was a shock to say the least. With hardly a dozen qualified architects in the field, the profession and its aims were largely unknown. Most people appeared unaware of what an architect did – “probably prettifies the facades,” they thought. As a young architect, I remember, it burnt me up to be relegated to the position of a technician designing fasciae!

To me the downgraded status of the profession was entirely unacceptable. Perhaps it was due to the unfortunate position relegated to the profession, that I would become active in attaining a deserving position for architects. Beginning my forays into establishing architects’ status was by being elected as President of the Institute of Architects, Pakistan and Deputy Chairman of ARCASIA (Architects Regional Council of Asia). Later, I mounted a struggle for the creation of the Pakistan Council of Architects and Town Planners (PCATP), which earned me abiding foes among engineer-architects, non-architects and even architects. It was probably the worst period where pitched battles were being fought with myself as the target! It was during this time that I accepted the offer from the government of membership of the Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament of the Chosen), as there was no other way to get the recognition that the profession needed. This was against the wish of my family, where my father-in-law Justice (retd.) Zaheerul Hasnain Lari, as a close confidante of Miss Fatima Jinnah, had been in opposition to the first Martial Law regime of General Ayub Khan, and had been incarcerated because of his beliefs.

In spite of strong opposition, the ordinance for the establishment of PCATP was approved. General Zia ul Haq informed me at the time that the three engineers in the cabinet were wholly opposed to it, but he kept his promise to me and got the approval for the ordinance that would give recognition to the titles ‘Architect’ and ‘Town Planner.’

As a young, fresh, out-of-school, brash architect, having been taught to value and cherish an inflated ego, in my inspired wisdom I presumed that only I had the creativity and the design solutions - only I knew how to create what the clients needed. And, God help those who dared to ask for any changes!

In hindsight this cockiness seems even to me somewhat excessive, considering I knew so little about my own country and practical life at the time. That I got away with it at such an early stage of my career underscores the worth of relentlessly pursuing what you believe in - an invaluable realization that would provide strength all through my professional life.



Having had a secluded and privileged existence throughout my childhood, I was almost completely unaware of the prevalent living conditions of the general public. As a child, my siblings and I roamed the extensive grounds of residences in the Civil Lines, due to being part of a special class of ‘black sahibs’ created by the British. My father, Zafarul Ahsan Lari, had won the much sought after position and joined as an officer of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in 1936. The ICS rank had earlier been reserved for white Englishmen, a handful of whom governed the entire subcontinent. As is well known, as a result of the famous “Minutes of Education” by Lord Macaulay (1835), English education was initially imparted to natives for subservient clerical positions, when Macaulay had declared: “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”

During the late 19th century the Nationalist Movement became strong, and as it vociferously

demanded emancipation and self-rule, the British Government was forced to induct university-educated natives into superior administration. Thus, my father, and many other ‘natives’ became beneficiaries of this movement.

Having studied at Aligarh and Allahabad Universities, my father was among a handful of Muslims who won a position of merit in the competitive examination held for this purpose. This was a rare achievement in the Indian Civil Service (ICS) exams where most Muslims were inducted on ‘reserve’ seats.

Once admitted to the hallowed circle as an ICS officer and having been sent to St. John’s College, Oxford, he was groomed in the ways of the rulers, which included keeping a considerable distance from the subjects. It was but a corollary of the prevailing mindset that ICS families lived in splendid isolation in rambling estates where even the most junior of the officers lived the life of British country squires, served by trains of attendants.

Under the circumstances, it would not be surprising, that my brother, all of 8 years old, would grumble at the congregation of monkeys on the Assistant Commissioner’s lawn in Dharamsala (Indian Punjab): “Are they [the monkeys] not afraid of Abba, when everybody else is? How can they dare to gather in OUR lawn?” he would retort. If there was any sobering factor in this folly, it was our highly religious and compassionate mother, Nabiunnisa Begum, who successfully created a balance at home between anglicized and traditional living. Thus, studying in England was entirely sobering for a spoiled brat such as myself – I was forced to relinquish the snobbery I had acquired growing up in Pakistan. But studying architecture in England wrought another kind of pretentiousness – a heightened sense of ego, as if one was specially ordained, and as a gifted designer presenting a role model of distinction to society, one could never take a misstep!

**Interestingly, I would not be rid of my ego until four decades later. After retiring from architectural practice in 2000, the spontaneous voluntary movement of KaravanKarachi HeritageFests provided me the opportunity to sit with the plebeians on the pavements of Karachi. Even though I had been the first architect to work in the Katchi Abadi of Essa Nagri as Slum Advisor to Karachi Development Authority in 1967, the mingling with thousands of ‘commoners’ who congregated every Sunday to celebrate Karachi’s heritage, entirely humbled me. I realized then that you do not have to attain high levels of education to be heritage savvy. Even the non-literate, the young and the old belonging to the downtrodden classes, could equally relate to heritage treasures of the city. Further ego loss would occur when, after the Great Earthquake 2005, I began working with disaster-affected communities, especially women whose creativity and wisdom, I began to learn, was awe-inspiring and boundless.**



As I set up my own consultancy, within a couple of years of working I knew that I needed to go through a process of 'unlearning'. But first it was via the route that almost all young architects were forced to take - begin by designing houses of those you knew. Not unexpectedly, the family was the first client. I was asked to build a house for my soon-to-be-married brother. I took advantage of the opportunity to say the least. Rather than a conventional layout, it was a simple cubic volume that I designed. The first floor bedrooms on three sides overlooked the double height living space, accessible by sheesham wood steps that were suspended with steel rods from exposed concrete roof soffit. A deep verandah on the southwest provided an extended living space. I was privileged when our dear friend, the famous painter and Father of Modern Painting in Pakistan, Professor Shakir Ali, visited the under construction house, and applauded the concept.

Being the first house that I ever designed that was also built; I experienced the trials that I would face many a time in my career. The most poorly made and rickety wooden steps that could be made would be used to test whether, as a young woman, I would dare to climb them. I was judged thus many a time in my career, even when the multistory Finance and Trade Centre (FTC) or Pakistan State Oil (PSO) head office would be built. The contractors made sure that they would pose a challenge - whether I would have the courage to climb the near-collapsing ladders even at great heights in order to check the work. It was an important test, for once I passed it, and it established my authority over the site. Without any hesitation I could reject all work that did not conform to the specified design and specifications.



As early as 1965, Suhail had decided to befriend artists. Our house soon became an open house where friends could drop in freely and artists could set up their easels, or practice mural painting on the apartment walls. Soon our living room became an atelier and a discussion salon - in the tradition that Suhail had established in our attic apartment in Oxford when we were still studying. We had removed all our furniture, with only books lining the sides of the walls, to accommodate as many people as possible for open-house lunch on Sundays, with many continuing intense discussions through a dinner of leftovers. We continued floor living in Karachi, which provided the setting for writers, journalists and artists to get together. Many well-known giant figures such as Shakir Ali, Sadequain, Sibte Hasan, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Begum Alys Faiz and Begum Majid Maklik were among those whom we saw often. Many budding artists who frequented our living room salon would become celebrated figures, since the atelier soon led to the establishment of the first art gallery in Karachi - Karachi Art Gallery - where Suhail arranged art exhibitions. The manifestoes developed at the time included one that would aim to provide 10% of the cost of a building for artwork. The only time that I was successful was when I designed the Armoured Corps Mess in Nowshera and General Saeed Qadir, Quarter Master General at the time, agreed to commission the

highly gifted sculptor and friend Shahid Sajjad for a bronze mural, the first one of its kind and scale that Shahid had ever done.

It was Shakir Ali, who in mid-1960s slept many nights on the tatami-like square straw matting (from Chittagong) in our living room, until he finished the remarkable 96 sq ft calligraphic mural, which is a stanza from a poem of the famous Urdu and Persian poet Ghalib. With his endearing demeanor, he remarked it was something he wanted to do for us!

Shakir sahib's 24' long mural became the module around which I designed our house in 1982. Two 24' square double height cubes intersecting at the corner became the starting point for the design. The overpowering mural has been placed above Suhail's extensive book collection. It is the same house where our three children, Raaena, Mihail and Humayun grew up, and where Suhail and I continue to live to this day. It is one of four projects from Pakistan that have been featured in The 20th Century World Architecture, that according to the Phaidon Press 2012, are among "Over 750 of the most outstanding works of architecture built between 1900 and 1999." To be continued.....

