



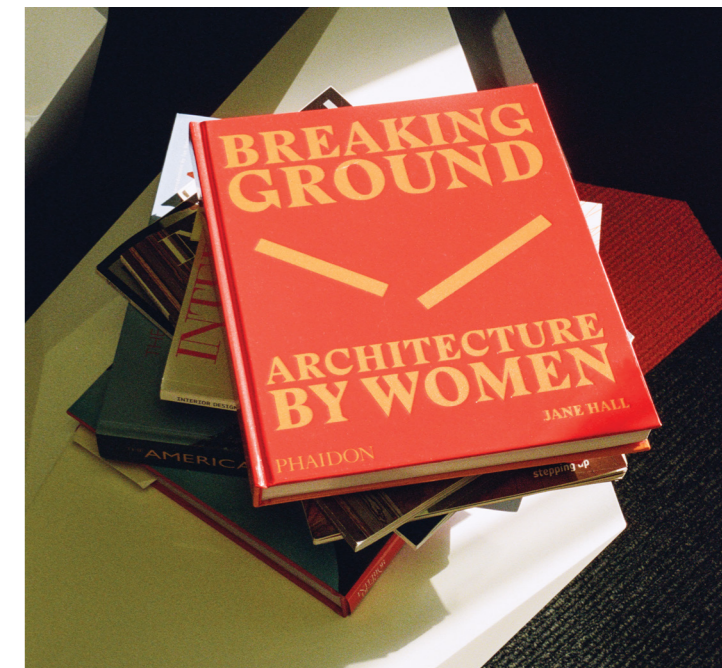
At Work With: Hariri & Hariri

From the Iranian desert to the New York architecture studio they co-founded, sisters *Gisue Hariri* and *Mojgan Hariri* have always been “partners in crime.” *Charles Shafaieh* meets them in Manhattan. Photography by *Claire Cottrell*





Gise Hariri (pictured left) has spoken about the need for an architect's fashion sense to reflect their design style—in her case that means clothes that are "sculptural, dynamic, and structured."



When sisters Gise Hariri and Mojgan Hariri began studying architecture at Cornell University in the 1970s, they were unaware of the opposition they would encounter as women in the field. Born in Iran in 1956 and 1958 respectively, they grew up in the desert—where their father worked as an engineer on the oil fields—and had no preconceptions of who architects could be or what the work entailed. Still, the unknown did not deter them. For over three decades now, the Hariris have run an internationally renowned studio in New York City, where they are celebrated for a holistic approach that puts as much emphasis on the furniture and smallest accessories as on a design's grand structure. Whether in Salzburg or Tehran, they are inspired by Iranian culture's reverence for nature as well as by its poetry.

The Hariris continue to challenge dominant ideologies in architecture. Rather than focus on high-profile commissions or even paychecks, they are working independently on an alternative solution to refugee housing: and emerging transient communities. Scheduled to exhibit at the Venice Architecture Biennale, their innovative prototype—"a foldable pod for disaster relief"—asks whether it's possible to design a generic shelter that would be practical and affordable for the homeless worldwide.

CS: What stands out from your experience as women entering the male-dominated School of Architecture at Cornell in the 1970s? **MH:** It wasn't a case of a male versus female view. There was only one way to see the world: the man's way. **GH:** Iran is a very segregated universe, and the struggle was always between men and women. We went to segregated schools; everywhere you felt you had to protect yourself because the men were freer. Even in the physicality of residential neighborhoods where homes had tall walls around them, you saw, from an early age, women as more in the interior and that public [space] was for men. Coming to America, my expectations were from Hollywood movies: big universities, freedom, equality. Entering a very small college that was unaccepting of women and having to be on your own was difficult and eye-opening. We were very secluded and had to protect each other. **MH:** The difference between the genders was shocking, too. We thought American women would be strong and liberated but found it completely otherwise. **GH:** In a way, we had to become their nurturers and protectors! In Iran, there was backstabbing and competition amongst the women, of course, but it was like sibling rivalry. We looked after each other to create a group so no one could push us around.

CS: Why did you decide to set up your studio together? **MH:** Architecture is a creative and competitive process with lots of emotion. I trusted Gise and knew if she opposed something I was drawing, it wasn't egotistical. If we criticized one another, it was to push the project further, not stop the other. Being sisters, we knew that wouldn't happen. **GH:** When you enter the profession, you realize that, unlike at school where one architect does their own project and hides everything, in offices a group



works together; everyone pulls, pushes, erases and complements to make a project become concrete. Yes, the designer is kind of the creative link, but design is only a small part of it. The School of Architecture didn't teach us this! When the awakening came, it was obvious to me that Mojgan and I could make a team. We grew up together and learned we could look at something and communicate in a kind of language, if you will, that didn't require talking. We were not afraid; there were two of us—we could stay up longer together. It's a tight-knit collaboration that makes our projects not twice as good but 10 times better.

CS: You literally dug through the earth together growing up in the desert. How did that landscape influence you? **MH:** [How] your environment changes your outlook will always be with you. For example, I get claustrophobic in woody areas. I want to see the horizon wherever I go! The desert is boundless. There is so much contrast—just blue and the color of earth, coming together in one line. It's so abstract and beautiful, like a blank canvas on which you can do whatever you want. **GH:** What was fascinating was there was nothing besides the desert. No green parks, public spaces, museums, toys. **MH:** It had snakes and lizards. **GH:** And we played with them! All that was given to you was this vastness. And you need to have a comrade. **MH:** A comrade in crime. **GH:** To discover. It was about going out and entertaining ourselves. In that sense, it was very nurturing and important because today we're bombarded by so much information that there isn't time to think. I want to take students someplace with no people or internet so they can go inside themselves and just think for a bit. We were lucky we had that time, and one another, to talk, ask questions and discover things. Now we have a love for rocks and their shapes, and a passion for space, blankness and vastness.

CS: Mojgan has used the metaphor of architecture being a "long-distance marathon." Do you see time as essential to understanding a work? **GH:** For me, architecture is always about experience; it's about space and light, and their articulation. That they are intangible brings in metaphysics, philosophy... quantum mechanics! We've considered whether [we think about this] because we're Persian: Sufi poets talk about "everything and nothing." All these philosophical quests relate to architecture, but no one tells you how to articulate experience. It's something internal. You have to know who human beings are and what "nothing and everything" means. It doesn't have a formula. **MH:** We know we've done something good when our clients' habits and behavior change after a project finishes. That experience allows them to make themselves better.

CS: Your emphasis on socially responsible architecture, such as your refugee pod, signals that architecture's capacity to improve lives should not be restricted to the 1% and their luxury apartments. **MH:** The word luxury has become meaningless. **GH:** One has to redefine it—perhaps as affordable or in good taste, locally made, sustainable. **MH:** In New York, a housing project and a luxury building have the exact same structure. So why should we even have luxury buildings? You can make things out of gold that nobody needs or wants, but essentially, it's the same materials. There's no reason why good materials and standards of living shouldn't be applied to affordable housing.

CS: What is the path forward? **GH:** Private developers and governments need to come together. Companies like Amazon and Google that go where they think space and housing are available need to work with great architects to create innovative, affordable ideas. **MH:** Unfortunately, with our environmental situation, until everybody comes together there will be no solutions. We are just destroying the earth.

CS: Will architecture in the future be identical to today's, or is architecture undefinable because it is always evolving? **MH:** If architecture doesn't evolve with technology, people's mindsets and available materials, it dies. **GH:** Architecture, like life, is paradoxical in the sense that matter and energy are never created or destroyed; they constantly transform into one thing or another. It's not about style—it's about vision.

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