

PIN-UP

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GARDEN VARIETY

Featuring Bjarke Ingels,
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June 14, and M/M Paris

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much more.

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INDIA

MAHEDAVI

Interview

Andrew Ayers

Photography

Thomas Dozol

The Paris-based architect is best known for creating cheerfully elegant interiors and colorful objects for the home. Turns out this multi-cultural storyteller's roots are just as animated as her designs.

FEATURE

When PIN-UP met India Mahdavi, she was just adding the finishing touches to her newly revamped showroom on a quiet residential street in Paris's seventh arrondissement. The architect and designer's creations — all sensual curves and gorgeous colors — stand out in this chic but ever-so-slightly-stuffy neighborhood, a stone's throw from France's Assemblée Nationale. Mahdavi, whose design sense is matched by her business nous, founded her 16-strong namesake firm in 1999, and has since authored countless interiors and over 100 pieces of furniture and design accessories (many of which are available for sale at her showroom, or at her small boutique just down the street). Ranging from hotels and restaurants to stores and houses, her interiors are lush and glamorous, and include instant classics like the Hotel Condesa D.F. in Mexico City (2005), Sketch restaurant in London's Mayfair (2014), or the restaurant-bar I Love Paris at Charles de Gaulle Airport (2015), to name but three. Soft-spoken Mahdavi has referred to her work as "Pop orientalism," and it's an apt description for the fun, sophisticated, yet carefree way she puts together colors, textures, and materials. But her urbane playfulness isn't only the result of her cosmopolitan Irano-Egyptian heritage. As she revealed over the course of a leisurely yet intense conversation, it also finds its source in her childhood love of old movies and TV cartoons.

Andrew Ayers: Your father was Iranian, your mother Egyptian. What was your first language growing up?

India Mahdavi: English, because that's what my parents spoke to each other. I was born in Iran, but when I was very young we moved to the U.S., where my father did a post-grad degree at Harvard. Then, when I was about five, my parents decided to move to Paris. We were all at the airport and they told us, "No, Paris airport is closed," — this was May 68 — "You cannot go to Paris. You can try Germany. You can try London." They'd both already lived in London, so they said, "Let's try Germany." And so we moved to Heidelberg.

AA: Why Heidelberg?

IM: Because it's a university city where my father could find work. I remember not liking Germany.

AA: What didn't you like about it?

IM: You have to realize that between Europe and the U.S. in the mid-60s there was a huge culture difference. It was a very happy time in the U.S. — everything seemed Technicolor everywhere. I remember watching color TV when I woke up in the morning, and it was *Bugs Bunny*, *Peanuts*, and so on. And all



In lieu of a computer screen, Mahdavi clads the corridors of her studio with inspirational images and drawings of works in progress to prompt spontaneous discussion amongst her staff. Pictured above right is the ground-floor showroom of her Paris office, where her powder-pink chair (2014) designed for Sketch, a gallery and restaurant space in London, as well as her Alber table (2008) are on display.

the cars had different colors. My lunchbox had tons of colors. You'd go to school and you'd have chocolate milk, and strawberry milk, and peanut butter and jelly, and all these products that were happy. The States were booming.

AA: Yes, a certain consumer culture. And then Germany...

IM: Germany was dark. I can see it dark and gray.

In my memories everything goes from color to black and white. And then after about a year my father said, "I think we're going to move to the south of France."

AA: Why the south of France?

IM: I don't really know why. Because it's nice?

[Laughs.] So he buys a big Mercedes and we drive all the way down. He'd decided on Nice. I went to school there, which I absolutely hated! After a few months, my father says, "I've found a really great school for you guys, in Vence. It's called École Freinet." It was like Summerhill, this very progressive, open, free-range kind of education with no rules. You did individual work in the morning, meaning you could either do math, with no lessons, or you did poetry in the woods. So you'd go write a poem in the woods, and then you'd come back at around midday and everybody would say what they'd done. And the afternoon, in winter, was dedicated just to arts — pottery, woodwork, theater, music, dance — and in summer we'd spend the whole afternoon in the pool till four o'clock. And you would write your own school report. I found one recently that I wrote myself, it says, "I'm doing really well." [Laughs.] I was there for about three years, and after that I had to go to a normal school. It was a bit of shock, because at that time the French school system wasn't modern at all. I went from this super-modern system to this totally archaic system. And it was the same thing when we moved to Neuilly-sur-Seine [a wealthy suburb of Paris], where I did my *baccalauréat*. Afterwards I really wanted to go into movies. But the one school that existed only ran a postgraduate degree, so you had to go get your undergraduate degree somewhere else first.

AA: Tell me about your love for the movies.

IM: At the age of maybe 13 or 14 I started watching movies on TV all day long — American movies, French movies, I was drinking it all in. I was fascinated because it allowed me to dream. It was some kind of aesthetic world that I couldn't get in Neuilly-sur-Seine and that you could project your own story onto.

AA: Do you remember which films particularly marked you?

IM: At one point it was all the movies with Gary Cooper and Cary Grant. It's also maybe because that had been my childhood, and I was missing it. The École Freinet was a happy time, but there were a whole bunch of things about France that really bothered me. Some kind of aesthetic that I didn't like, that looked sad. The TV programs that were still all black and white, the sadness of the way people dressed — there was just no glamour to it. Not that I was looking for glamour, but it just didn't appeal to me. Then at 17 I started going out to the cinema about three times a day. My parents had left, I was on my own in Paris, I had my first boyfriend who had a little motorcycle, and we'd go see all these old German movies by Murnau and Fritz Lang, but also the new stuff — Stanley Kubrick, Fellini. I remember what I really liked was very strong aesthetics: *Metropolis*, *A Clockwork Orange*, all Visconti's films, all the Fellini movies. I was eating it all up, it was food, food, food. I barely attended my first year of architecture school because I was at the movies the whole time. [Laughs.]

AA: So you'd chosen a first degree before film school. Why architecture?

IM: Because someone told me Fritz Lang trained as an architect. In fact he was the son of an architect. But anyway, I said to myself, "If things don't work out, if I don't like architecture, I can go into film-set design."

AA: And how did things work out?

IM: The first two years were really great, because it was very abstract, but after that I really didn't like the way architecture was taught. You got into very specific projects, and it was this whole post-1968 vision of architecture, so we were asked to design social housing for sites in the outskirts of Paris, and if you wanted to get a good grade you had to do a slab block. I still remember going the first time as a girl to this architecture school that was 80 percent boys, and all these old guys with white beards. Women didn't count, it was very, very *machiste*. I mean just imagine me, coming from Neuilly-sur-Seine, and the school is all about doing charrettes and smoking joints. I don't like charrettes, I like to sleep in! [Laughs.] And you had to do social housing, and when it wasn't social housing the biggest project they gave you was a sailing school in Brittany. What the hell do I care about a sailing school in Brittany?!

But for my diploma project I decided to do something I liked: *architecture et les corps de cinéma*. My project was a five-minute film. I did a whole bunch of different sets that I made as scaled-down models, and I had someone compose a soundtrack. It was shot in black and white, 16 millimeter. And the professors really liked it — I

you did it. But I learned something from Christian that you don't learn in school. They teach you to go from a territorial scale down to a domestic scale. You zoom in. But what I learned working with Christian is that you can also do it the other way around. You can start with a detail and zoom out.

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got a distinction. I called it *Farewell Europa*. It was like, "Get out of here!" [Laughs.] So I got my diploma, and I was like, "Okay, how do I get into the movies?" I would really have loved to work with someone like Ken Adam, who did all the James Bond sets, that 60s glamour I adore. But I didn't have a clue about how to get in touch with him. So I decided to go to New York, where my best friend had just moved. I took short courses in graphics and design at Cooper Union, and furniture design at Parson's. It was such a breath of fresh air after France. There was a gallery that was opening up, and I did a few of my first design pieces there. But I had a problem with my papers, so after about a year I came back to Paris. Then, through a friend, I met Christian Liaigre, and went to show him my book. It was the first time I saw a studio that looked friendly — it looked like a house. And I ended up becoming his right-hand woman and staying for seven years.

AA: So you really learned on the job?

IM: I learned everything with him. I mean as much as I hated architecture school, I learned a lot there, and you realize after a while why

AA: And what made you leave after seven years?

IM: I had my son. I had a baby, and it made me start thinking about bigger questions. And ultimately I decided to set up on my own.

AA: What was your first solo project?

IM: Joseph in London. Joseph [Ettedgui, the store's namesake founder] had always been very supportive of me. He said something that really counted for me. "Never worry, because you have something you don't realize. It's a lot. You have a great personality. You're easy to work with." Then later I was lucky enough to meet [restaurateur] Jonathan Morr at a dinner in London. He called me shortly afterwards and said, "I'm doing a hotel in Miami. Come see it." It was a small budget, 60 rooms [the Townhouse Hotel, South Beach]. So I go to Miami and I say, "Wow, this place is all about sea, sex, and sun. What is sea, sex, and sun?" And I defined a color code: baby blue, sand color, and red. It wasn't an expensive hotel, but we did a few fun things. There was no room for a pool, so I said, "I want to bring the feel of the water onto the terrace." And I remembered a summer I'd spent with an American girlfriend somewhere in Maine.

She had a summer job, two hours a day, cleaning hotel rooms, and I'd go help. And that's where I discovered waterbeds! So on the terrace in Miami I put all these waterbeds together in a huge L-shape, 9 or 10 meters long. I remember going to the tackiest outlets — this was long before Design Miami — and there were all these horrible, horrible bedheads, and I just bought the queen-sized mattresses. And then I made red sunbed covers, and it looked just like a normal sunbed, but when you sat on it you got quite a surprise! [Laughs.] And I put swings on the porch. When I design, I either do it for myself — what I'd like to have if I were using the space — or I invent a character. This was me saying, "When I come back in the evening I want to sit on the porch and be able to swing. I want a glass of white wine and a cigarette. This is after a long day of sun, I'm a bit red in the cheeks." It's always that specific. And when you start telling these stories, Jonathan always says, "Yes, of course you can do it!" Then in the corridors we added these big benches, and I said, "I want cartoons."

AA: This is your childhood coming back, isn't it? The television.

IM: It is! You have to understand that if you look at everything I do — and I realized this really late — it looks like a cartoon!

AA: I have to ask you about APT, the legendary New York club you designed in 2000.

IM: I was going to tell you that story because it's really incredible. After the Townhouse, Jonathan starts really bugging me to get involved with a nightclub he wants to do in New York. And I say, "Jonathan, why are you bothering me? I have a baby, I don't go out to nightclubs." He kept insisting, so I ended up saying, "I'd like you to rent a car and we'll go round all the nightclubs in one evening." As a working mother I was a bit disconnected, I wanted to see the nightlife. I saw the Chelsea Hotel — that was really happening — I saw Milk, and a whole bunch of others. Many of them were tiny, or spatially uninteresting. So then he said, "This is the place," and showed me a building in the Meatpacking district. There was nothing down there then. I said, "Look, Jonathan," — I remember I was on my phone downstairs — "the only way I can do a nightclub today with the life I lead is to do something for me. What would I like to have? If were organizing a club night I'd like a friend of mine to say, 'I'll lend you my apartment, everything's ready, you have a

After the success of her 2013 publication *Home Chic: Decorating with Style*, Mahdavi has set to work on a second book showcasing her recent interior work for I Love Paris (2015), a restaurant opened at Charles de Gaulle Airport by celebrity chef Guy Martin, London's restaurant-cum-gallery Sketch (2014), Café Français (2013) in Paris's Marais district, and the Alpine getaway L'Apogée Courchevel (2013). Drafts of layouts for the project, in typical fashion, line the pin-up walls of her studio.



INDIA MAHDAVI



FEATURE



maid, the drinks are all there, here are the keys.' All my friends would come over but there'd still be a bed because I'm really tired in the evening and I want to be able to lie down. It's going to be like an apartment, and we'll call it APT." And I hear nobody at the other end. I go, "Hello, hello?" Then after a long pause, Jonathan says, "Let's do it!" I thought about it for a bit, and then I told Jonathan, "To make it a real apartment, I'm going to create my own client." So I invented this character called Bernard. He was French, he'd been active in May 68, he'd moved to New York, and was now teaching anthropology at Columbia University.

AA: He was living quite a long way from Columbia...

IM: Yeah, because he didn't have enough money.

He wanted to have an Upper-West-Side feel, but he didn't have the money, so he had to do it downtown. There were bourgeois leftovers, but he couldn't really afford it, poor guy. Then I said, "We're going to take all the problems of Parisian apartments and we're going to repeat them. I want a long corridor." So you entered, and there was this long corridor, with toilets on one side and a little niche with a banquette where you could wait if there was a lineup, and then you came into this huge room with wallpaper, moldings, an open kitchen, a big dining table, a bed, a double *salon*, and what I called a *pictothèque*. And in that area you saw Bernard's life. I went to the flea market to buy old photographs: his family house, his dog, his aunt... Bernard had been married for six months. Maybe he'd turned gay. He didn't have kids of course, but he had dogs, and his family had a big country house. It was his whole life story.

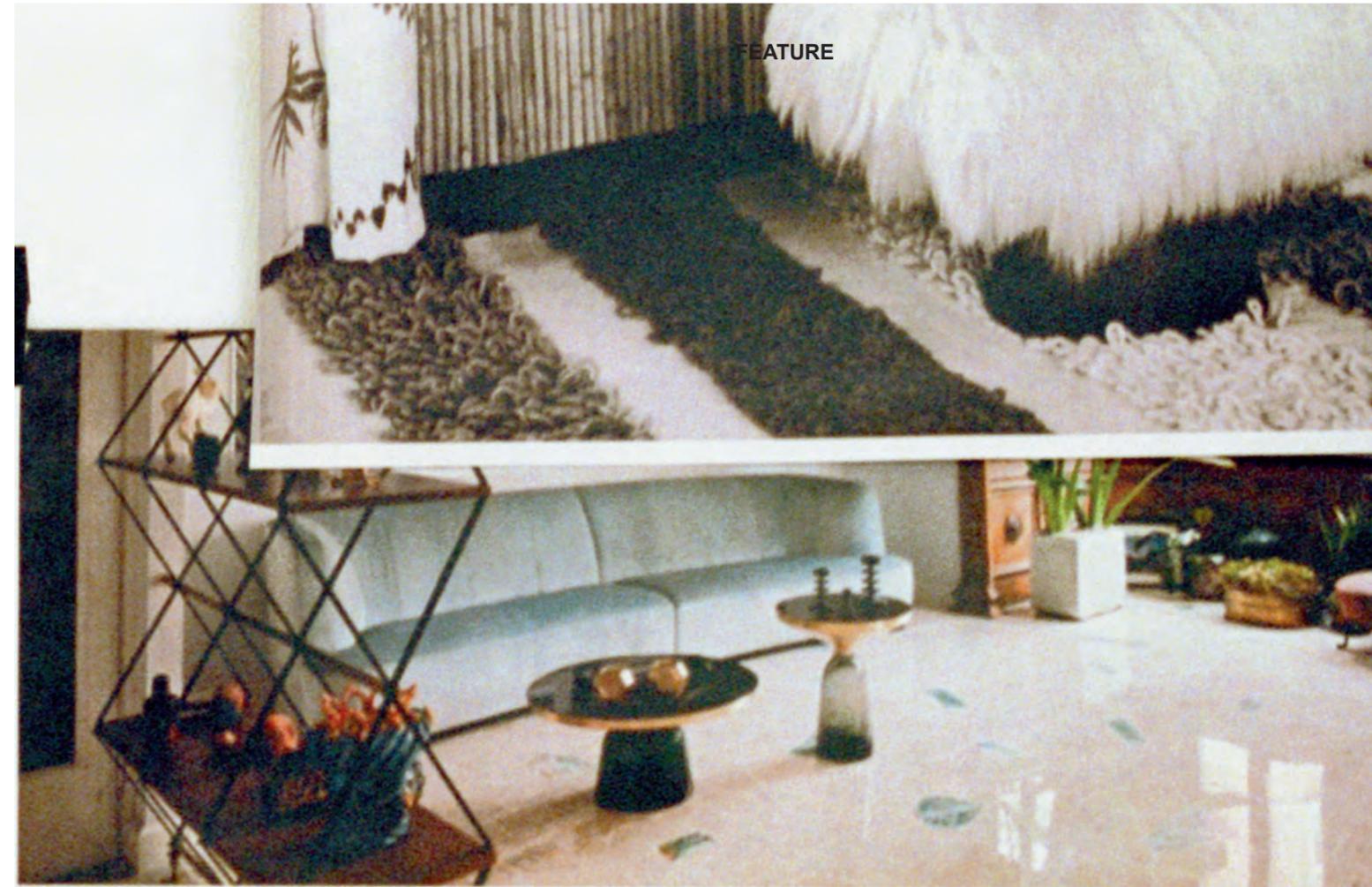
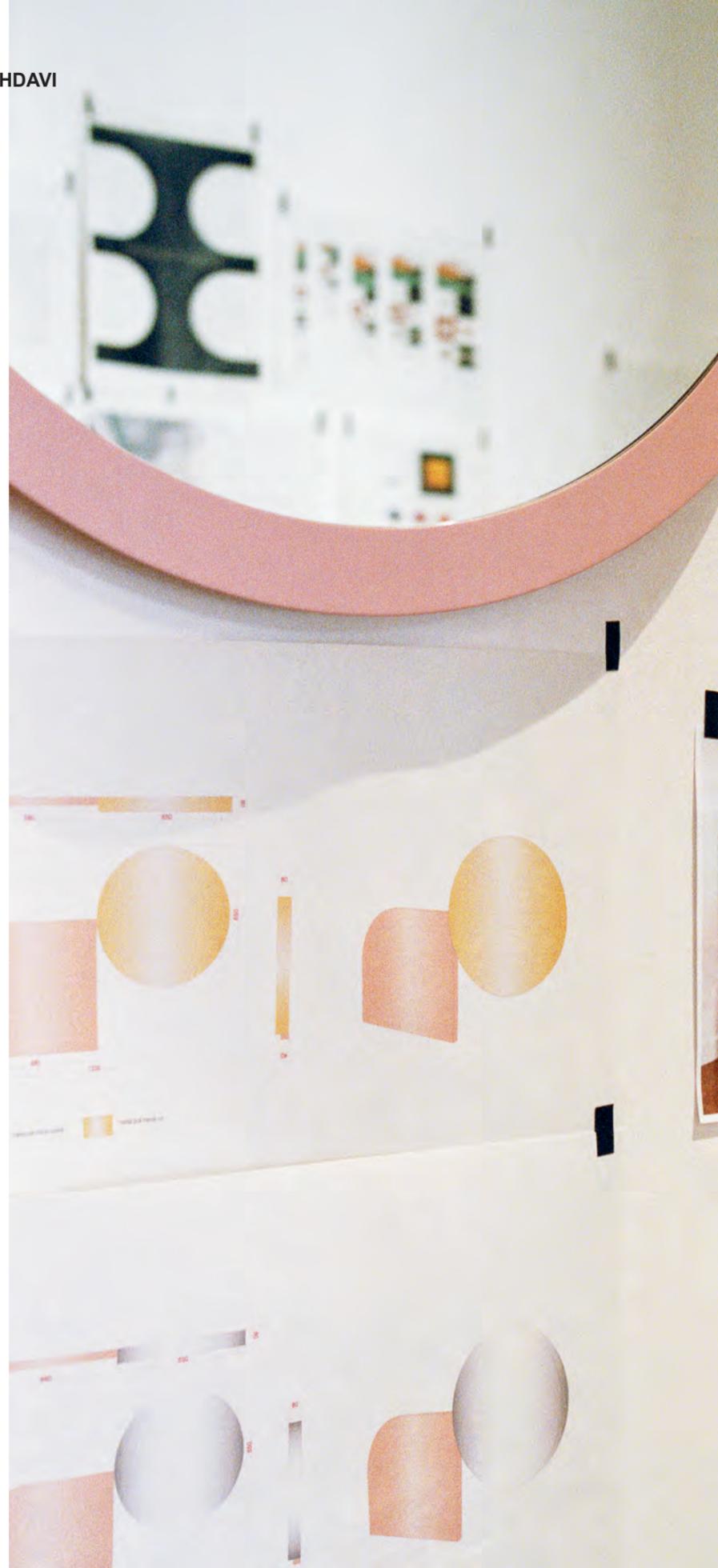
AA: Do you always have this much fun on projects?

IM: No, but when you have clients like Jonathan...

We laughed so much together at the flea market.

AA: What about your hotel projects in Arles a couple of years back?

IM: I had this long collaboration with Maja Hoffmann which was fantastic. As you know, Frank Gehry is building the LUMA Foundation for her there. And she's like, "Okay, we have to get the infrastructure right." So she's creating hotels — she has three or four now — of which I did two: the Alyscamps, which is a villa you rent, and L'Hôtel du Cloître, which is a patchwork of architecture from the 13th to the 19th centuries. The question for me was, "How do you put



Since founding her studio in 1999, Mahdavi has designed countless interiors for hospitality, retail, and residential spaces and has lent her signature to a wide range of objects, from furniture to smaller-scale vases, textiles, and bowls. Her iconic *Bishop* stool, which she custom-designed in the early 2000s for the epochal New York speakeasy APT, is seen in reflection in the circular mirror.



all that together in a way that works?" The choices we made were simple, but it's very sophisticated. Maja has all her artist friends coming to the hotel, and I've had so many positive reactions. When I went to a Lee Ufan show in Paris, he was dying to meet me. And Carsten Höller told me, "I just want you to know that I hate new boutique hotels. There's no way I can sleep in them. But I went to this room and saw your work and said, 'You know what, not only do I like this, but I think I could really live here.'"

IM: Somehow it's home. But at times Paris is just too harmonious for me. Sometimes I need something more chaotic. That's what I like about the oriental megacities, like Cairo, or Istanbul, or Tehran — Tehran is totally chaotic. When things are too harmonious, I think they risk becoming static. I see myself as a plant: I've been put in a pot all these years, and sometimes I feel the pot is getting too small. I need to go back into the ground or to a different pot. But that said, I don't think you have to pack up

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AA: Are hotels something you particularly like doing?

IM: Actually I'm not doing any hotels at the moment. I did hotels, hotels, hotels, and now suddenly there are no more commissions. Funnily enough, it happens to be when I'm a bit tired of hotels. And if I'm tired of hotels, it's because I think it's the end of hotels. I used to always stay in hotels when I went somewhere, but now I prefer staying with friends.

AA: So if not hotels, what are you doing at the moment?

IM: My office has been doing a lot of design work recently, which is exciting for me. Small things like ceramics, textiles, and carpets. We're also doing the look for the new Red Valentino concept stores, which is great because I'm hugely enjoying working with Maria Grazia [Chiuri] and Pierpaolo [Piccioli]. They're fantastic people, and I think I'm able to bring something very fresh and new... The first shop is going to be in Rome.

AA: You moved a lot in your early life, but Paris is now the city where you've been the longest. Is it home for you?

and move everything these days. Now you can have a double or a triple life. You take your computer and you have different homes, and you feel at ease with different cultures, in different cities. That's the way one should be living today. And I think the concept of property is also changing. Why do we have to have something that belongs to us? You can share. I buried my father a couple of months ago, and of course you know this in the abstract, but when you actually see it with someone you love, it really comes home to you: you leave this earth with nothing. So I really think owning is not that important. I much prefer to have the multiplicity of possibilities.

In addition to being PIN-UP's prolific Paris-based Associate Editor, the writer, journalist, and historian Andrew Ayers teaches architectural history at Columbia University Paris and is Chief Docent at Pierre Chareau's famous Maison de Verre.