

She is known as the 'Queen of Colors' and some even say that she invented millennial pink in the first place. India Mahdavi has become a kind of design guru in recent years. Since founding her studio in Paris twenty years ago, the acclaimed designer has enraptured much of the design world with her buoyantly optimistic interiors. India Mahdavi's ideas and objects fill private residences and hotels all over the world with light, joy and surely lots of colors. ODDA had the chance to chat with India on her cultural background, the importance of flow and her personal meaning of home.

In conversation with **BENJAMIN
SCHIFFER**

Photographer **FRANCESCO
FINIZIO**

Fashion Editor **GEORGIA TAL**

INDIA MAHDAVI



BENJAMIN SCHIFFER. You describe yourself as polyglot and polychrome - tell us what those words mean to you.

INDIA MAHDAVI. It's a way of saying that I do not only see the world in many different colors, but also cultures. This is my way of defining that I'm multicultural. It also includes my own memories from my travels - being born in Iran, raised in the US and then living in Germany followed by the south of France and New York. All those pieces of culture are eventually part of me. I see myself as being plural.

B.S. You once stated that you actually wanted to become a filmmaker. Which qualities do you need as a filmmaker that are also crucial when wanting to become an architect?

I.M. I think there's many common points between filmmaking and doing what I do today. The way I work is that I start coming up with a story and defining a question that I would like to answer. However, filmmaking is also about teamwork, and so is my profession. It's not just you in the studio. You have to rely on the builders, the people with know-how, the eventual makers. Lastly, there's something that I have always used: the framing. Visually, I'm speaking about how you frame your own work, how you make it cinematographic. For my public spaces, I realized that when you put a certain number of people in them, they absorb a lot of the energy, you therefore have to exaggerate a bit of what you're trying to say, making it readable, like on a camera. That's what makes a space photogenic. There was a period in my life before studying architecture in which I used to go to the movies three times a day. I strongly believe that it trained my eyes, almost like watching through a lens. Now, I immediately see what will photograph well.

B.S. The way we perceive physicalities and how we contextualize them brings me to my next question. How did Instagram influence your profession?

I.M. I've always done quite photogenic work. I came to the realization that color is something that's inherently photogenic, making people recognize places. Now, regarding Instagram, when I did sketch restaurant in London, I think it was the moment where Instagram was starting. I really wasn't a user myself of Instagram at that time, and I had no clue that this room was probably going to be one of the most instagrammed restaurants in the world. Nevertheless, the danger of Instagram is that everything is diluted, and people see an image, they create images where as a living space is something that is three dimensional. So flow counts as much as what it looks like, the story behind it, what it's made for. I believe some designers are just creating images. They are more attached to an image rather than actually the well being or the story that surrounds the physicalities.

B.S. I certainly can't absolve myself from seeking out places for their Instagram ability either. In fact, my first contact with your work must have been my seventeen-year-old self sitting on one of your benches in sketch in London - to this day it is one of the most iconic works ever and exemplifies your style. Do you ever get tired of talking about the sketch project?

I.M. No, I don't, because it was a new very dramatic and radical way to use color and also it was a new life for pink.

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It might be interesting to know that it was probably one of the most time sensitive projects. It involved so many constraints considering that the room is nearly a cube. David Shrigley and his art were involved and we had to install everything within a week. Despite all the obstacles, I was quite pleased with the result. It became not only a very cinematographic room, but also an entity. What became a bit of a difficulty for me though is distancing myself from pink, because suddenly I was linked to this cute little pink. I know how to do pink, but I can do more than pink.

B.S. Your unofficial title as the 'Queen of Colour' proves that you don't only master the color pink, but you use a wide range of them in your projects. Do you ever avoid certain colors in your projects?

I.M. Usually, I have no discrimination against any color. I try to avoid certain associations. I like my associations to be very close to each other, because I'm really looking for vibration more than anything else. That vibration to me is capturing some kind of light. In terms of colors, there are some colors that I find a bit too bourgeois and that I avoid using, for instance bordeaux red or even dark blue that suddenly make a room look much older than it is. It's similar to telling a woman not to wear a fur coat because it makes her look twenty years older. Those are the things that I would avoid, apart from the fact we shouldn't wear fur at all these days.

B.S. Do you ever get overwhelmed by the work with color?

I.M. Yes, I do. Most often I'm dressed in dark blue, because I need to be neutral. I need the walls in my studio to be white.

B.S. There is the expression “to show one's (true) colors” which simply means to clearly express one's opinion. To me the expression always implies a certain kind of courage that is needed to overcome one's silence. Are we scared of colors?

I.M. Yeah, I think color is probably more risky than anything else. A lot of people are scared of colors because it's easier to make a mistake. You have to know how to put them together. I see colors like intimate friends. My way of using colors is quite instinctive. I see a room, and that room will speak to me about a color, then I will go from there. I assemble them pretty closely to each other because I like them to be able to have these conversations with one another. I like to take risks with color. Sometimes I'm walking on the edge, going a bit too far, but not too far. If not controlled well enough, the outcome can be too chatty, overwhelming or even aggressive. It's always about trying to balance, testing the limits - a joyful practice - like a ray of sunshine.

B.S. As an interior designer, you have a strong influence on the dramaturgy of all social interactions of those who spend time in your creations. A powerful position, isn't it?

I.M. It indeed is. I was recently described as 'human-centric' and it's true because I really work on three different levels of comfort. Firstly, a physical level where your body dictates certain dimensions and secondly the visual comfort, so it looks comfortable. Thirdly, there is the emotional level,



The Gallery at sketch (London, 2014-2015) © India Mahdavi
Photo by Rob Whitrow



The Gallery at sketch (London, 2022) © Edmund Dabney



Project room #2/29 rue de Bellechasse (Sept, 2020) © Simone Bossi



Achromia collection for Carwan Gallery (Spring 2022) © Giorgos Sfakianakis

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which is about feeling good, comfortable and embraced. Those are important elements to me. Flow describes how you move around a space and also the movements that a certain arrangement of space is going to induce to its users. I pay attention to all of these elements. How do you want to move from one room to another? What do you see? Why would you go here? Where would you sit? It's always all these questions that you ask yourself.

B.S. When you look at a setting, what is your approach to finding the right color for it? Tell us about your thought process!

I.M. Every project is sort of a conversation you have with a client. Whether it's public or private, it starts by listening. Many projects that I do are interior design, meaning there is an existing structure telling you something about itself, about its bones, about the light, about its location. Once you pay attention to all these elements, you're building up your own little world of constraints which help you to make the most appropriate answer to the question you've defined.

B.S. Very similar to journalism, right? It's more difficult to find the right question than finding the answer.

I.M. Exactly. It is about narrowing down a question, because the wider the question, the more difficult it is to find the answer.

B.S. Velvet - for some it's kitschy, for others royal. It is one of those textiles that have become synonymous with your work. What excites you about velvet?

I.M. My perspective on colors is through a prism of technicolor. I like using strong colors, a bit like in cartoons. Velvet allows me to do that. It's quite rare to find a fabric that offers you a very strong and diverse color palette. There's also a link to comfort, which appeals to me. I'm sure you've seen an old sofa covered in velvet that's been there for ages - they carry their life and they're super comfortable, not only emotionally, but physically. Eventually, I learned that velvet was a fabric invented in Iran. Maybe I am naturally drawn to this fabric due to its origin? Who knows!

B.S. Is there a city you would love to realize a project in which you haven't worked before?

I.M. I could tell you of many projects, but I would absolutely like to do space in Cairo or Tehran. These are two cities defining my background. Once you install a hotel for instance it's going to have an influence on who you attract. It affects the people in the area and how they relate to it. Both countries are very rich in know-how, they have incredibly skilled talents. I would like to incorporate a new interpretation of something, recontextualising some practices.

B.S. I guess that's also a very beautiful facet of your work - to recontextualise. Particularly, in the big metropolises of this

world you are facing existing constructs. There rarely is the chance to build something from scratch. The media mainly praises you for your interior design work, but people seem to forget that you are a studied architect. Do you think that's due to the fact that architecture is a quite male-dominated field?

I.M. Well, I think that people mostly relate to my work due to my strong use of color. That is mostly being associated with the work of an interior designer. However, they often forget all the work that's behind it. I can surely say that most of the things used in my interior designs are linked to my work in architecture - the meaning of flow, the meaning of light, the meaning of space. I have worked as an architect, but it's always linked to an existing building somehow. But it is true that it's a male-dominated industry. Personally, I'm able to express myself much more easily today within the sphere of interior design. I strongly believe that interior design is going to become more important as we will have to work with existing structures. Maybe one day I will build something from scratch!

B.S. I would love to see that! Though in regards to sustainability, it is more than fair to work with what we have.

I.M. No, exactly. I think this is where we're going. Sustainability - you don't just erase something. It's absolutely possible to turn something uninteresting into something interesting, if you give it the right perspective.

B.S. In addition to public spaces, you also design and create homes for private people. But what does the word 'home' personally mean to you?

I.M. Home is probably the reason why I'm doing this profession. I changed so many homes growing up and never experienced having a fixed family home. Home was my family. Every time we moved we gave up personal belongings. It was a lack of home that triggered this need in me to project myself in spaces and being very sensitive to spaces. Now, when I do homes for private people, I of course listen to the client, I listen to the locality, I listen to the space. At the same time, I really feel as if I was a photographer, I feel that I'm doing portraiture in a way. A home should look like their owner. They are portraits.

B.S. That's beautiful and deep down personal. Could you give us a little hint on what your next project is going to look like.

I.M. My next project will look like nothing else I've done before. I cannot tell you too much as it has not officially been announced, but it's in a very historical building in Italy and I was given some spaces to work with. It will probably be one of the most challenging and difficult projects. I really had to ask myself what I was doing because it's an institution, and then you have to place yourself in some kind of historical continuation. It is a great responsibility. I had to create something very different and very special. You'll know more by April this year! ●

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