



BAN SHUBBER

interviewed by lally snow, 13th february 2006.

photography : alex lloyd

'i feel so sorry for you interviewing me, i keep no records of my work, and no photos, nothing to show you,' comes the apologetic greeting. indeed there is very little public information available about ban shubber, daughter of the artist saud al attar. google her and you will draw a blank. walking through the ground floor of her house in london's w14, however, i knew instantly that there is much more to ban shubber than her famous mother.

we settle in her kitchen, a room spanning the length of the house and naturally lit from above by a two storey high sky light, and i ask her why she has avoided publicity of any kind in the past.

'i love doing what i do and have never needed the attention but it is genuinely something i have never wanted. i don't particularly want or need people to know about me. i guess i am lucky that i have never been in the position of

having to do my sort of work for money which means i can be selective about who i work for. i can pick and choose my clients without having to go through the pr machine.'

shubber disappears into the vast central atrium of the house momentarily, and returns with two books about her mother which she shows me. 'i think growing up with a famous parent alters your view of the press. she was a very beautiful woman back then', (indeed the woman on the dust jacket of the book does look like greta garbo – only better), 'and she was always in newspapers and magazines. 40 years ago a female artist in iraq was unheard of - women were cultivated to be wives and mothers not independent free thinkers. my mother broke all the rules and she was accused of using art as a tool to get what she wanted and i really didn't like the way the press manipulated the stories around her.

she has had many opportunities to enter the limelight – both because of her work and her friends but maintains, 'there was so much negativity stirred up around my mother – all for the sake of a little bit of publicity that i really don't think it would be worth it'.

shubber moved to england at the age of 16 where she finished school before embarking on a five year course at the (architectural association of architecture) (aa). 'i was 8 years old when i decided i wanted to go there, i want to raise a speculative eyebrow at this but she continues enthusiastically, 'my mothers friends were artists and architects from all over the world and i remember one of them who studied at aa. she had a mound of wild hair and used to roll her own cigarettes. she fascinated me with everything she said or did and i knew then and there that i wanted to be an architect in london. furthermore, i almost didn't believe that places she described existed. my world was baghdad and a very constrained and restricted one at that'.

'when i was 13 we came to london for a holiday and i begged my father to take me to the aa so that i could see if it was real. the classrooms were filled with students smoking and drinking while working and there were dogs walking around. it was relaxed yet exciting. when we left my father, who was horrified

at the sight of so many hippies said, 'you will never study there!' but the only thing i could think of was how much i wanted to be there. and five years later i was.

during her 5 years at the aa shubber kept good company. in fact her contemporaries and teachers included some of the most influential architects of today. 'there was such a natural energy and buzz we couldn't help but spark off each other.' it was at the aa that she also met and married her husband. 'he already had a business here and so after graduating it was natural for me to work with him. i began finding that working in architecture is very different to learning about it. i couldn't really cope with all the rules and restrictions and so turned my back on it all and started teaching at the aa and south bank university. i loved the students and the nature of the projects and for me it was great – going back to the roots and origins of architecture in its original form and playing with fantastical projects rather than the real restricted world'.

after 10 years shubber's career as a teacher began coming to a natural end. not really knowing what else to do and loath to be idle she started converting a building, owned by the family, into flats.

'while i was doing so, friends began asking me for advice on properties they



were buying. it was merely a case of right time right place, or serendipity if you like. i am lucky like that'. although she could go for months or even years without any projects, at one stage she was working on a composer's flat in bermondsey, a private apartment in chelsea, a low budget new build house for a doctor in ireland as well as her own house. 'it was a victorian shed when we bought it – just four outside walls, a wooden gate and a roof!'

an impressive feat indeed, for the shed, although still in progress, is now a family home proper. architects usually concern themselves with the exterior of a building. not shubber, who began her designs from the inside. 'i didn't much care for the outside as it backs onto a railway,' and from a woman who likes to break the rules this is hardly surprising. two central walls (made entirely of sand) were added, thus dividing the living space but also creating a perfect well for the stairs, with rooms on the upper floor bridging the outer walls. 'just give me a space and i will live in it,' she says, 'the outside doesn't always matter'.

there there is no denying either that shubber likes surprises either, for she opens and closes various hidden doors leading into hidden rooms in the walls saying, 'i don't know why people leave their clutter on show'. indeed there is no clutter at all on show in shubber's house and very little furniture either. 'i will often never see my projects again because i know that the lines, angles and light will have been utterly changed by the addition of furniture'.

the upstairs study, therefore comes as a shock to me with its cow skin sofa covered in turkish cushions and chairs hailing from iraq, sweden and even ikea. perhaps it is shubber's innate ability to throw things together but somehow it works and the eye is still entertained by the meticulous details in the actual structure of the building. the glass window panes are intentionally positioned to echo the imagined pattern of watching passing train windows and this irregular spacing is echoed in the bookshelves and sky lights.

waiting to be hung on the landing (which is reached via a staircase with a shocking pink hand rail, further testimony to shubber's love of surprise and individuality), is a soft yellow triple portrait of a young shubber by her mother.

an interlacing of irregular lines breaks up any conventional rules of composition but there is still cohesion. 'my mother liked breaking rules too,' explains shubber, with a twinkle in her eye.

i ask tentatively what her next project will be once her house is complete. i am of course, surprised.

'one thing i have yet to do is enter competitions. usually it is something you do after graduating so that you can make a name for your self but i was too busy. now i have a little more time, i would really like to apply myself. i have done the teaching, done the projects, and now it is time for the competitions. it is ironic because i am doing everything the wrong way round but always have done! i will always do the opposite of everyone else'.

but this desire to enter competitions is not for fame and glory – on the contrary shubber wants to see how far she can push herself as an architect.

'i love learning and i believe competitions will allow me to learn and grow within my field. i want to play around with ideas and to start working in a completely different way to what i am used to. to be given a plot of land and told to make an opera house or an office block would be like nothing else'.

we broach the subject of photographs again. 'i will find any excuse not to photograph my work. i have never felt it important although i know it is mad not to and a little strange given that i work in such a visual field. i guess i regret it a little bit now but i tend to think of my projects as complete when they are done. i close the door on them and move onto the next project'.

in the absence of any past work to look at, i ask shubber about her own taste and style, 'buildings do not have to be grand. as long as they are in proportion, when the materials are in harmony, when they work with the space in which they were created that is when they become heart stoppingly beautiful. in my own work, i would never want anyone to look at my work and box it into a decade. i aim for timelessness'.