

SHAHRIAR NASSER
Architect



Shahriar Nasser founded Belsize Architects – an award-winning practice specialising in imaginative, contemporary designs with a particular interest in light and space in 1995. Shahriar graduated from the Architectural Association School of Architecture in 1981 and prior to that gained his MSc from Tehran University. He worked for a number of architectural practices on residential, leisure and educational buildings before setting up his own practice, and his work is widely published. Shahriar has been a member of the Southwark Planning Design Panel and chair of an RIBA Awards regional jury.

Amazing GLAZING

WHAT MEMORIES DO YOU HAVE OF YOUR CHILDHOOD HOMES?

The first home I remember was a house in the old quarter of Tehran, which has been demolished now. Houses in Tehran are designed to combat the intense heat from the sun, with ponds and fountains to create a bit of humidity in the garden, and we had a pond and a lovely garden with a cherry tree I would climb. My memories are more of the garden than the house, although I vaguely remember the dining table, which was also an important part of my life!

I'm the youngest in the family, with a brother and two sisters. Our father worked for the Ministry of Finance, looking after various regions, and our mother was a housewife. Later we moved to a very old house in a different region, because of my father's job, which I remember reasonably well. It was built with the garden and a pond in the middle, almost like a courtyard house. The rooms were large with high ceilings, but old fashioned and low tech. There was a little stream outside the house which was exciting, and I would do a lot of fishing and then put the fish I caught into our pond.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BECOME AN ARCHITECT?

As a child I was quite interested in painting, and I would go every Thursday evening to an art class, which became the most exciting part of my childhood for about eight years. We went to school on Saturday

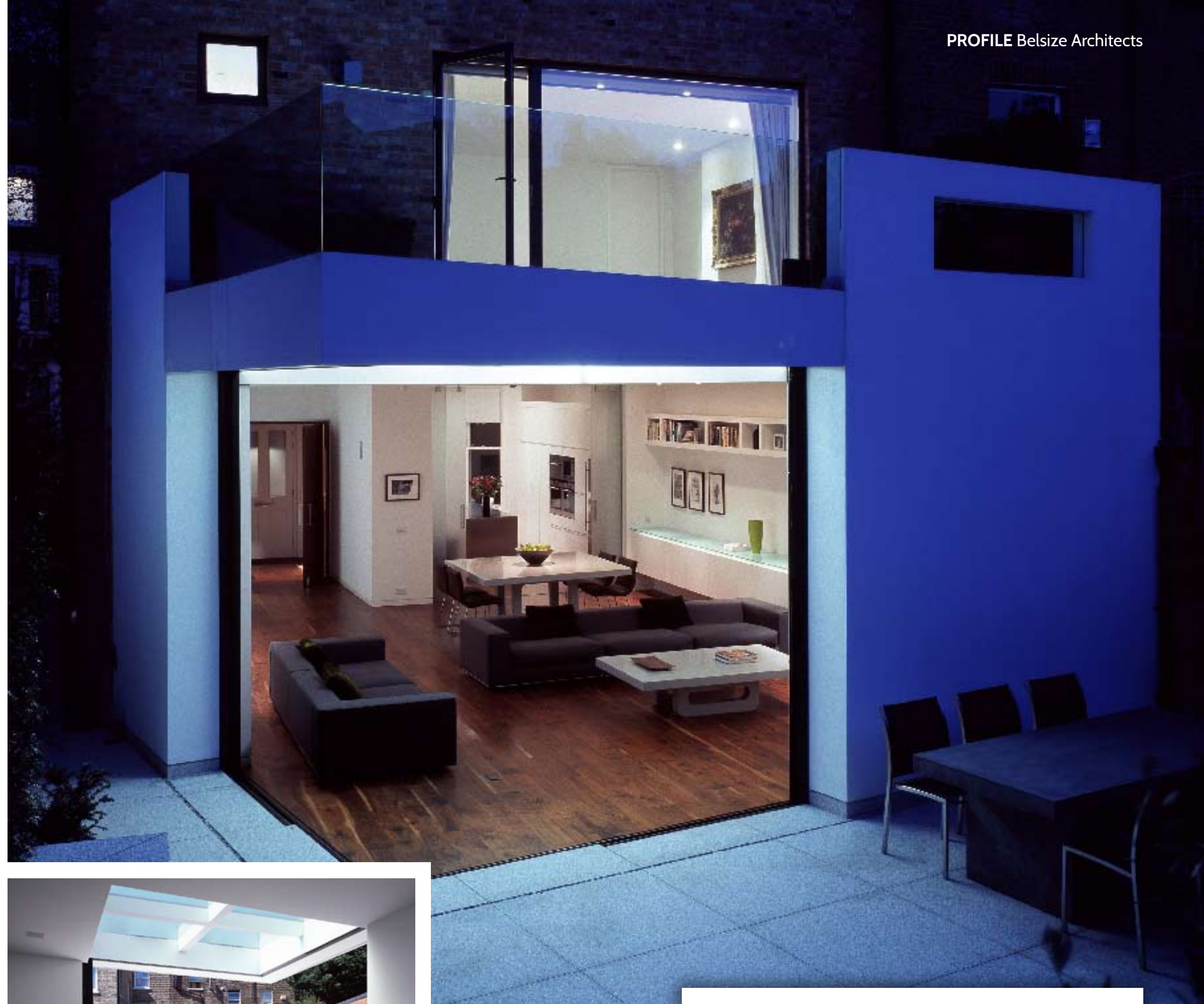
until Thursday lunchtime, and then we would have Thursday afternoons and Fridays off. We were taught quite old fashioned, classical painting, but it was a different world and much more exciting than any of the studies at school.

My father was very much against me becoming a painter because he was worried that I wouldn't make enough money to survive. In the Middle East if your family pushes you hard to study then you're expected to become something reputable like a lawyer or a doctor, which didn't inspire me. The closest thing to art I could think of was architecture. I was interested in two-dimensional art, but with architecture you have to create a third dimension.

At the time there were very few universities to choose from and it was quite tough to get in. I took a national entrance examination and an additional drawing-based exam, which gave me an advantage and meant that I was offered a place in Tehran University to study for five years, with an additional year for my final thesis. There were many interesting people and it was an exciting time, with lots of travelling. I came to Europe, which was fantastic, and my first time outside Iran.

WHEN DID YOU MOVE TO LONDON?

I started my thesis, An Analytical Survey of Old Persian Houses, in 1979 when the Iranian revolution began, and was studying incredible old Persian houses on the border of the desert. Some of them were 500



PARLIAMENT HILL

This semi-detached house, located on a quiet road leading to Hampstead Heath, has been transformed into a modern family home by extending the ground floor and excavating the rear garden to the same level.

THE BRASSWORKS

Located in a quiet mews close to Marble Arch, The Brassworks is a remodelling of a former Victorian factory into loft-style apartments. The focal point is an internal courtyard with a bronze water sculpture at first floor level.





SHELDON AVENUE

This new house is situated on a long, rather narrow plot in a Highgate Conservation Area. The design is reminiscent of a series of monastic cells arranged around a cloister: the layout is U-shaped, set round a glazed, triple-height atrium which allows ample daylight into the heart of the house.

or 600 years old and had somehow survived the harsh climate. They were low tech but ingeniously designed.

At the time there was very little information on these buildings and it was an interesting but difficult year, because there were curfews and people were very suspicious of one another during the revolution. The local police were called sometimes when we were measuring empty houses, and we had doors shut in our faces, so we started being a lot more careful. If a woman opened a door you couldn't look at her face straight away – it was all very formal.

By the time I had finished my thesis it was six months into the new regime. Ayatollah Khomeini had returned and the Islamic Republic had started. Our faculty had been closed but we managed to get a number of the teachers to mark our thesis, and I finally got my degree and left Iran a few days later.

I came to London and studied at the Architectural Association for two years, which I enjoyed as there was far more freedom. I was incredibly excited to be out of Iran because it had become increasingly difficult to live there.

HOW DID YOU SET UP BELSIZE ARCHITECTS?

Finding work was really tough after university, and my portfolio didn't impress many people because it wasn't particularly technical – more fantasy designs. But gradually I started working in different places and gained confidence for about 10 years, before I decided that I wasn't very good at working for other people!

I was working for an architectural practice in Belsize Park, close to where I lived, but they didn't have much work. I used the opportunity to take on some private jobs, and a Chinese client was introduced to me and went on to give me several jobs, including a restaurant, house and office. He put his trust in me and allowed me to do virtually what I wanted. The very first job I did for him was published in a huge number of architectural magazines and papers, including an article in Elle Decoration. It gave me the confidence to set up on my own, and I've now been working for myself for 17 years.

WHO/WHAT IS YOUR SOURCE OF INSPIRATION?

Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe are the classic architects we learnt about at school, and I love some of their work – especially Le Corbusier. I don't look at one particular architect for inspiration because there are so many people doing amazing work all around the world, particularly in Germany, Switzerland and

Austria, where the workmanship is incredible. Peter Zumthor is the renowned Swiss architect who was awarded this year's RIBA Royal Gold Medal, and is definitely an inspiration. I like buildings which play with light and where there is a little more poetic space.

SUM UP YOUR ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

I would hope that I don't have a style – I like to solve the problems that come with each specific location – although I'm known for using a lot of glass. I was used to a lot of very strong light in Iran, and when I moved to London I suffered from a lack of sunlight. The light is not always strong in this country and technology is moving so fast that glazing offers all kinds of possibilities.

DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT HOME

I have a semi-detached Victorian house in Belsize Park, and I've completely rearranged the layout – moving the living area up to the ground floor and the bedrooms down to the lower ground floor. The ground floor is virtually open plan, from front to back, which allows more light to enter.

I've been thinking about building my own house for about a year or so, but I never have the time to look for a plot of land. I would love to design a courtyard house, which I think would work well over here as it gives you better control over the micro-climate which is created by an enclosed courtyard. It's not about the latest fashion in architecture – it's about getting a good feeling from being in a space. Sometimes it's good to rediscover simplicity and not make things too difficult.

DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS FOR SELFBUILDERS?

If you're going to employ a designer then work on the brief as much as you can, but don't design it for them! That's where the difficulties start. Clients cut out pictures from different magazines and throw them at the architect, which can be overwhelming and kills creativity. Let the architect digest your interests but come up with their own ideas.

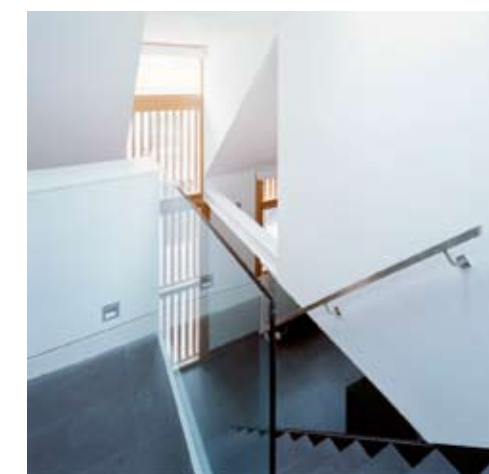
It's important to like their previous work, which will give some idea of the type of designer they are. I try to show people some of my work in person, because pictures don't always convey everything about a building. Whatever happens in the future I will never stop designing family houses because it's what I really enjoy.

BELSIZE ARCHITECTS
(www.belsizearchitects.com)



PARK SQUARE MEWS

This small, contemporary mews house in Regent's Park nestles among listed buildings on a very confined site. Large windows were formed in the brick walls, with privacy shutters made of vertical slats, and rooflights were added everywhere to bring in as much light as possible.



FROGNAL

This property, located on a leafy uphill road next to Hampstead village, has been remodelled and extended. The ground floor was lowered to gain adequate head-room and a large addition to the living space was built in structural glass to allow the garden to become an integral part of the interior.