

# Brilliance of Silence

By

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## **Abstract**

Brilliance of Silence is an installation made of fabric and paper which provides a contemplative environment within public space of a gallery. Brilliance of Silence advocates quietude and privacy as two essential missing elements of today's hectic life. The installation is a reminder of what we are missing in the public environments and how vital it is to bring back alluring spaces to our lives.

Brilliance of Silence explores the impact of cultural norms, religion, and gender in forming private and public spaces in various cultures. Originally from Iran, I am comparing residential spaces such as traditional courtyard houses and public architecture like mosques and bazaars (public markets) with my current living environment in the United States. As a female artist, I challenge the gendered and masculine spaces in traditional Iranian architecture. I reclaim the hard and masculine exterior spaces with the soft and feminine fabric and bring what is conventionally kept and covered inside to the public's eye.

Brilliance of Silence explores and examines various components of a space such as scale, material, pattern, light, color, and configuration to create an alluring environment. By providing a calming and quiet space, I hope to make my audience realize the necessity and vitality of silence and privacy which are gradually disappearing from our lives.

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<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>III</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>IV</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>INSTALLATION</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>17</b>

## Introduction

“Do you understand, sir, do you understand what it means when you have absolutely nowhere to turn?” Marmeladov’s question came suddenly into his mind "for every man must have somewhere to turn..."

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

Growing up I always found myself drawn to reading books, thinking, reading poems for my very few and longtime friends, and having a cozy chat with them. My favorite spot of our childhood apartment was a tent that my father used to set up for me in summers so I could take my parents’ cassette player and listen to my favorite audiobooks and get lost in thoughts for hours without someone distracting me. But, as I was growing older, it was becoming more and more unacceptable and less possible for me to find a hideaway to refuge and have some quiet time to contemplate. Wanting to have a break from social life was always interpreted as a sign of depression especially for a teenager when I was growing up. I was labeled as “cold” and “indifferent” because I needed to be in my room for few hours with a closed door instead of interacting with my parents. I finally started to wonder what if something was wrong with me? I began to question myself more and more. Why did I feel the urge to be alone, in the dark after socializing with my friends and family? Why did people speaking loudly in public areas annoy me so much? Why was it that the best gift I ever received was a headphone that could block the outside voices so I could daydream? Was I depressed? What if I was a misanthrope and I didn’t want to admit it? I loved the vibrant inner world that I had, but I was concerned about my shrinking social life. I suffered from anxiety and depression, from being unable to figure myself out, and continually failing to live up the extrovert life.

Entering into the third decade of my life, and educational opportunities that came across for me after I moved to the United States to pursue my second masters helped me to better understand my quiet nature. I finally concluded that thriving in solitude is not a depression sign and asking for an environment with minimal stimulation does not show that I am a socially awkward person. Instead, I am an introverted person, and I need alone time to be recharged and ready to face social life. I also found out that privacy is an essential and critical component of a healthy society and many people thrive in solitude and silence.

There are many philosophical and scholarly articles on the benefits of silence and solitude for humanity. Aristotle, for instance, believed that each person needs contemplative activities to flourish and, one needs “distance, space, and solitude from the public” (Kemp and Moore, 2006). In other words, a human should have a right to control the degree of association with their fellows.



After living in the United States for a while, I started to compare my new environments to the spaces where I grew up in Iran, and that was a big revelation to me. My own introverted qualities are not only personal preferences, but are rooted in my culture as well. According to Ramezani and Hamidi(2016), the practices and ethical norms existing in the urban spaces of Iran have a high level of privacy compared to many European countries.

Religion, climate and the culture of Iranians intertwined to require the high degree of privacy in domestic spaces. It's hard to distinguish the Persian values from Islamic influences since the majority of Iranians are practicing Islam for hundreds of years and adopted the Islamic values into their culture. Iranian culture upholds a high degree of privacy with regards to strangers. Homes are built in such a way as to not allow observation by passersby. Everything is deliberately covered. In Islamic law related and unrelated men and women are separated, and they do not live or interact in one space unless under special rules. As a result, the walls of a residential house were built high enough to avoid the unwanted exposure of the women of the house to an outsider's view so they could feel "comfortable" and "protected" in their home. I reject the gendered segmentation of space, and I mean to translate male-dominated architecture into a feminine environment that can hold everyone regardless of their race, sex, or cultural background

The outside and inside of a structure historically hold a very symbolic and essential place to the Iranian architect. Outer surfaces of a home are not necessarily conspicuous or pretentious, but there is a rich and beautiful world inside. These reserved structures and degree of privacy especially in domestic spaces in Eastern culture distinct them with Euro-centric Western cultures. The degree of privacy is different in other structures such as mosques or bazaars, but houses are considered the most private architectonic sites.



## Installation

My thesis exhibition is an installation of patterned, vertical, fabric and paper planes hanging from ceiling to floor. The gallery is divided into room-like sections with fabric walls, windows, and doors, that refer to a private, traditional, Iranian home. The length of the Installation was roughly 20 feet from the entry “gate” to the private “living room” at the back wall. The installation as a whole is a united space that consists of a few semi-private and semi-open sections. A conventional house in Iran is comprised of various compartments which are formed based on a hierarchical structure. Homes typically have narrow gates and a long pathway for a guest to walk through and reach the courtyard area which has a lower degree of privacy and therefore is less covered. Courtyard designed to welcome the people that are close enough to the



owners of the house to gain the passage and come in but not so close that they can step into the owner’s rooms.

The room-like spaces I created in the gallery with my fabric and paper panels, attempts to provide the viewers with the choice to be left alone at will, and the freedom to return to socializing when ready. To observe my level of success with this notion, I stayed in the gallery during the installation to study the viewer's movement around and inside the work. One day, I left the camera running to capture people's interaction with the work so I was able to analyze it afterward.

After observing, I realized that once the viewer passes the main gate, she is not visible anymore from the front view. I noticed that not everyone chooses to step into the installation from the main entrance. Some people entered from the sides and roamed around, and some started to wander from the end point which was one single plane and a shadow “panel” cast on the wall.

I enjoyed how occupants were able to hide inside the work You have to be known, and you have to be fully trusted to be able to reach the most beautiful internal part of an Iranian courtyard



house.

This installation provides an opportunity for occupants to walk through it and enter and exit different areas with varying degrees of privacy. I hung my pieces vertically from ceiling to the ground because "vertical has always been contemplated as the most sacred dimension of space, representing a path leading from one cosmic realm to another, and an axis mundus." Labelle Prussin (1986).

I started my research by examining the impact that culture and religion have on my notion of privacy, besides my character traits. Besides, I question how other cultures make their living or public environments private. Privacy is a hard notion to explain because it has various definitions among different civilizations and individuals. Although privacy norms differ in multiple cultures, there are some aspects of privacy that are "culturally universal" according to Allen Westin (1968). Also struck me that privacy has always been based on "wealth, power, and privilege." Randy Kemp and Adam D. Moore, (2007). Seclusion, which seems to me the most natural and essential right of a human, is not accessible to all people from different social classes. I believe that the most important type of privacy is the right to have privacy in public spaces. The urban public spaces such as offices and schools gather people from various social classes, age, sex, and cultural backgrounds and have to provide fair opportunities to meet everyone's needs. We are so used to the idea of dedicating an "office room" inside our houses, but we do not have space within our public areas to be able to have the comfort of our private home. and find some privacy there.

Based on my observation after four years of living in the United States, and talking to various friends, I believe the public spaces such as offices and schools in the United States are overly exposed and there is little chance of finding a private area to be on your own. Most schools and

workplaces force students and employees to work in groups because of the common belief that this form of group work is more productive. Some think that brainstorming in larger groups lets the creativity flow. However, my personal experience has been quite different.



As a graduate student, I had access to a significant studio space which was part of a shared space with other graduate students. After a while, I realized I needed a more secluded section that gives me a chance to be on my own, think, and do work and have the freedom to come out of that private area and communicate with my classmates only when I chose to. So, I started to build a frame and cover it with some fabrics and place it on my desk to define a space that could meet my needs.

Seclusion and quietude are two critical components of a space which are missing in today's public areas. I believe we should start to either re-consider the notion of privacy before building

these spaces or dedicate a special section in each building for people to contemplate or At least if we can give the freedom to each person to change the structure of his/her working/studying space when it's possible. My installation, Brilliance of Silence, attempted to provide a unique and stimulating environment that reinforces the sense of serenity and peace of mind for the viewer.

As my inspiration, I refer to Persian courtyard houses as a source because of the way the boundaries are established in these unique architectural spaces. Plain and weightless walls within the enclosed courtyard houses are perforated and pierced with regular geometric patterns. By creating apertures on the walls, Persian architects made functioning barriers that can pass the air and make the beauty of the area more inaccessible to outsiders. Making weightless and visually



enticing barriers were two significant pillars in creating my work.

I wanted to create an environment that was inviting people to go inside and protect them from being observed and disturbed. Therefore, I picked soft and light materials such as cotton and sheer fabric like silk to obtain a subtle or elegant drape and flow in each component. I wanted my soft and translucent fiber planes to drape organically from the ceiling, pass light and air, and cast shadows, to evoke a memory or indicate the impression of a wall that provides a

private space. Translucent and ephemeral materials are chosen to communicate impermanency as well as weightlessness. Monumental screens hung high with perforated surfaces or translucent materials are meant to convey an elusive image of the barrier which initially intends to protect space and make privacy, but it is nothing more than a fragile and barely visible plane.

To construct the front gate of my installation, I used cotton Cotton and silk, to translate the hard architecture into the soft fabric. Historically, men have built houses and administered it as a “safe and comfortable” place for women and children to live, and women had fewer roles in the process of planning. Women, for a long time, belonged to the residential spaces and were kept “inside” and Embroidered table clothes, curtains, and many other finely made pieces were the only things that they could use to render their living space. I chose to cover the entry gate with hand and machine embroidery and display them in the most public part of the exhibition to claim



my womanhood by transforming the male-dominant hard and external architecture into big and bold, fully embroidered fabric planes that stand proud and loud after centuries of being inside the houses and undermined. I, indeed, aim to appropriate a traditionally male role to make it mine in my way.

After I selected the material and cut it to lengths, I had to decide how to add patterns and decorations to make each piece visually pleasing. I cut the shapes out of the screen's surface by hand and also sometimes with a laser cutter. For patterns that I cut out of the cotton fabric, I hand-drew or projected my motifs on the textile to trace and cut with scissors or exacto-knife. For the translucent material, I used sheer polyester, so I was able to “melt” the pattern out with a burning tool.



I used laser cutter only when I wanted to incorporate detailed and meticulous Islamic motifs on outer parts of the work. I chose my patterns after I studied hundreds of examples of tile work,

glass work, brickwork, and wood decorations used in houses, mosques, and bazaars in Iran. One thing that comes to mind after studying the beautiful range of Islamic architecture is the ubiquity of pattern in time and space. The designs are interchangeable in different mediums, and the same pattern can be repeated in different scales within the same building which I tried to emulate in my work. I used bold and geometrical patterns to decorate exterior surfaces and applied the same motif on other parts with a different scale to also preserve the cohesion of the work.



Other than traditional courtyard houses in Iran, I studied bazaars as a public architectural structure. The spatial arrangement of bazaars is formed based on a religious, functional, and visual hierarchy. Overall, an Iranian bazaar extended linearly on one wide strip over 10 Kilometers in length and it's divided into several corridors each specializing in different types of goods. In addition to the shops, the grand bazaar in an Iranian city contains mosques, guest



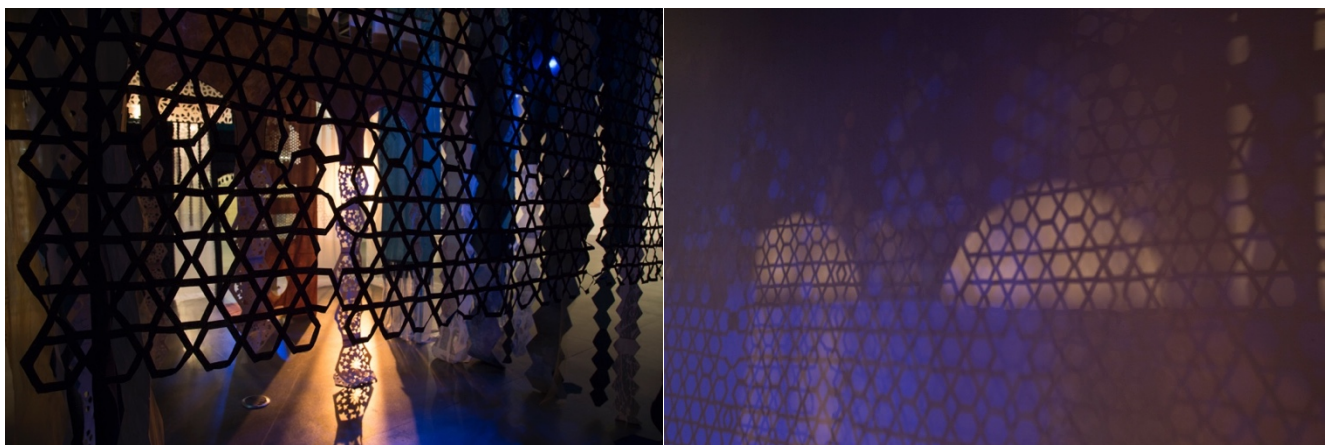
houses, and banks which are formed through the linear main plan of a bazaar. Bazaar is not usually only the commercial center of cities but also the center of social, cultural, political and religious activities. Therefore, aesthetically it's a complex of semi-closed and semi-open public and socio-cultural components that are integrated and inter-related and read as a united whole. In fact, it is not only a chaotic mess, but also, shops, passageways, and guesthouses are all in a smooth and fluid harmony. The relationship between people and spaces in the bazaar, along with the design of the overall complex invites individuals to come in, engage and interact. Creating an inviting space which holds various private and semi-private areas, yet reads as a united whole is one of the most significant challenges I strive to accomplish with my work.

I planned the general configuration of my work based on the hierarchy in Iranian courtyard houses. Same as courtyard houses, I wanted my structure to have a narrow entrance, a wider yard which leads to a tight and enclosed section.



My Installation had one main entry point. Traditional homes in Iran usually have thin and short entrance doors which guard the whole space of the house. My entrance gate was designed narrow, to control the movement of the occupants and heighten their sensory experience by the gate's proximity to them while passing. I developed the entry piece as big quilted planes which were hung low from the ceiling. One side of the gate was covered and applied with fabric and had no entry point. The other side had a short and narrow opening with tassels hanging on the edge. The viewer had to bend slightly to pass through the gate, causing them to recognize the boundary and become humbler entering the private space.

Furthermore, I wanted the entry hallway to be narrow and more densely covered in comparison to the middle part of the installation which I intended to be a courtyard. Thus, I designed few pieces for the gateways, and I hung them tightly to limit the mobility of the viewer and control their movement. Then, I developed courtyard to have an open area so the viewer could move freely and feel comfortable and notice the transition of moving from the gateway and stepping into a different part. After the courtyard space, the rooms were planned. I meant this part to have the most coverage so people from outside could not peak through and function as the most private and contemplative part of the exhibition.



This part, in fact, was supposed to refuge the viewer as interior rooms may have served in a traditional Persian house. Traditional Iranian architecture, which has fascinated me for many years, is perceived as an introverted architectural space because the abundance of decoration inside contrasts with the plain and humble exterior surfaces. Introversion in Persian domestic spaces, indeed, tries to protect the privacy of the inner area, which is the most elegant and outstanding part of the house and is consciously planned to provide peace of mind and great calm (Peyvastegar, Heidari and Parvizian, 2015). One of the viewers mentioned that she would have stayed there for a long while if I 'd put some floor cushions there for resting and contemplation.

In the future, I hope to expand this work in another prominent space. In my next work, I will dedicate a larger area to rooms and encourage participants to enter, to ponder, reflect and relax.

I discovered that by obscuring the ceiling, I could evoke the sense of safety because it makes one feel secure and covered. I designed a mass of tassels to hang above head height to add a



sense of a gentle/soft area above. I made the tassels with bulky cotton yarn and painted the ends brown, so they look massive. In the future, I will explore other materials for creating the tassels. I want to make them in a larger size and make more of them so I can have rows of thick and heavy tassels that can hang low and feel like an actual ceiling.

In all the architectural sites that I studied, rows of colorful tiles were covering the indoor and outdoor walls. Tiles, indeed, form walls and decorate them. In Islamic patterns, the hexagon and polygon tend to be the most repeated shapes. Accordingly, I picked the hexagon as a recurring element in my work and designed long fabric strips made of hexagonal units to serve as portable, playable columns. I used the laser cutter to cut patterns in canvas to make hundreds of hexagonal units with variously sized perforations. I mono-printed and stamped textures on the canvas material and sewed all the units together to make a long chain of hexagons that started



from the floor, went up to the ceiling, and over the ceiling's rafters and came down again as one long chain or column. These perforated chains cast full shadows on the walls which filled the space and added visual attraction and depth to work. I varied the size of the cells from approximately 3 inches to 12 inches.

The scale of each element in my work was one of the most challenging aspects that required continual experimenting and testing. Architects understand that the starting point for our perception of something is the size of our bodies. Whether a room is large, small, or somewhere in between, It has a direct correlation to how we understand that room in relation to our bodies. A room that's overly large or overly small can make us uncomfortable. A very tall, high ceilinged place that's small in an area can make us feel as if we're in a pit. So giving space "human proportions" increases the likelihood that we'll find the space comfortable.

The dramatic lighting was one of the most successful aspects of my installation. Incorporating fabric gave the work a tactile element, and the subtly colored lights created shadows that intertwined with the textile and added to the dimension and depth of the work. I collaborated with a lighting technician from the theatre department, and I learned the importance of lighting in defining a space. Light is an essential part of my work because it helps delineate a sacred area and convey ambiguity and nostalgia. By varying and controlling the amount of light, I mimic the Iranian courtyard house's atmosphere, of moving from a dark space to a brightly lit one. The specific Lighting aimed to unveil particular details and keep other elements in the dark. I used colored gels to set the mood: Warm orange, gold and brown to light the front to middle planes and convey daylight, and ultramarine blues light reflected on the backplanes and cast soft-edged shadows on the walls. The shadows in my work stimulated the viewer's sensory experience and created a psychological boundary. The boundary doesn't have to be rigid or

completely visible to be perceived and identified. I am drawn to the invisible barriers or soft-edged fences because I believe the existence of the wall is not reliant on its complete visibility. I aimed to divide my space into visible and invisible boundaries that overlap each other and flow from one form to another, making the whole installation space active.

The end goal was to make an alluring and introspective space that can promote and inspire quiet reflection and refuge for viewers from the intensity of everyday life.



## **Conclusion**

Multiple studies have shown the critical impact of spaces we inhabit on our mood. Complex, engaging, and layered areas within a public space provides a better degree of privacy and simulating environment for inhabitants to contemplate, think, and feel better. Quietude, distance

and time to be alone is not only beneficial for people with introverted qualities but everyone in today's busy life. Scale, material, direction, dimension, light, color, and configuration play an essential role to make an alluring realm. I hope my work can provide a contemplative environment for the occupants that silence the noises and distractions of the outside world, offers peace of mind and allows the people to heighten the connection with one's self, gain perspective, and achieve a tranquil state.

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