"Competition fuels him but he is not eaten up by it. He is the least envious person I have ever known.")

His father worked as an accountant for a transport company — "He made the money" — but his mother was the dominant influence. "That's how it is a lot in Italy. The father behind the mother." And, though he stresses that she was not unkind, he says, "She was very hard, very exigent. I don't remember her cuddling me except once: I was three, she took me in her arms and sang me a song." He is not being mawkish. The war imposed all sorts of constraints, he says. "We were hungry often. We had nothing…" Truly, there was barely time for emotion. But it is to this lack that he attributes his first professional instinct, which was to be a doctor. "I was fascinated by anatomy, by proximity to the human body, even when I was very small. I lived by my hands. I would make dolls out of mud with a coffee bean hidden inside." Which he would then excise with a kitchen knife, giving himself marks out of 10 for surgical precision.

Following school, he spent three years studying medicine at the university of Piacenza, interrupted by two years' compulsory military training, after which he did not return to medicine. He says the reason was that he was no good at studying. "I had trouble at that time synthesising ideas." But he also felt a need to earn his own money, not to be a burden on his parents — he lived at home until the age of 25. And his family's never very propitious circumstances received a blow when, after the war, his father was imprisoned for his fascist sympathies. "He was implicated in fascism…like almost everyone at that time." He spent nine months in prison — Armani remembers visiting him there. "I remember his distress and that he cried, I remember that… I can't remember all of it…but the feeling of it, certainly." At the same time his brother Sergio had to go into hiding, also "for some months". "He was in uniform but then everyone was in uniform…" Soon after this, the family left Piacenza for Milan.

So, to answer the question, 'Where did the Armani revolution originate?', it came of course from his aesthetic — his desire to break open structures, to make everything fluid. But it must also have come from his ethics. A reaction against hierarchy, a distrust of conformity and rigidity in all its incarnations. As a child he had seen first-hand the perils of a uniform — he must have understood the psychological comfort and equally the danger in such conformity. I asked him if he could sum up the essence of his style. "To give confidence but not to define the personality," he said.

Armani's rise to become the most commercially successful designer in postwar European history began in the late 1950s when he was employed at the department store La Rinascente, first as a window-dresser and later as the buyer's assistant. In 1961 he was spotted by Nino Cerruti and hired as the designer for his new menswear line, Hitman. He went freelance in 1970, starting his own label in 1974.

He met Sergio Galeotti, the man who was to become the biggest influence in his life and in his work, when he was in his 30s and, he says, still unsure of himself. He found in Galeotti the reassurance, the love even, that was so absent in his childhood home. "It was Serge Galeotti who gave me strength, huge strength." They met in Milan — Galeotti was also a provincial boy — excited by the opportunities of the city. It was at Galeotti's insistence that he established his own label, though typically Armani's lack of self-assurance made him occasionally doubt even Galeotti's faith in him. "Sometimes I felt that he was too easily pleased." The business expanded — in 1983 Armani became the first designer to establish an office in Hollywood dedicated to attracting celebrities. It was in a sense an actor, Richard Gere, who had made him an international name and Armani was quick to realise not only the promotional value of celebrity to his label but, more to the point, the value that he could be to the stars. Actors are used to being dressed for a part; they are unaccustomed — as insecure as the rest of us, perhaps even more so — to appearing in public as themselves. In 1985 his mid-range brand Emporio Armani was established. But by this time Galeotti was terminally ill.

Consistency is one word regularly applied to Armani — another would be fidelity. When he talks about his friend and partner, he lingers as though he would like to say more but cannot bring himself to. Galeotti, he explains, was the businessman, the brains. With his death everyone assumed Armani would not have the financial expertise to continue. For himself, he didn't know if he had the will. "I could have given up easily. I had enough money, enough for myself anyway. But I always gave Serge the impression that I would continue. I'd say, 'We'll do this, we'll do that,' and he'd say, 'Yes, yes.' " This is what Galeotti needed to hear from him, he says. And later, after he died, there was no reason to renounce his word. He had nothing else. He considers the business, Giorgio Armani, a testament to himself and Serge. "He saw too little. He died too soon."

What is certain is that were Galeotti alive today, he would scarcely recognise the fashion house he helped to create. From initial sales of $14,000 in its first year, 1975, the company grew to sales of $100m only a decade later. Today it has an annual turnover of close to $2bn. There are 305 shops in 35 countries, and five brands that straddle age groups from 18 to 55. He is now diversifying into household goods, with his Armani Casa line. Earlier this year he signed a contract with a Dubai company to create 14 branded Armani hotels. Soon we will be able to wake up, eat breakfast off Armani china, dress, go to work wearing Armani sunglasses and watch, ➔



CHRIS MOORE (1); AP

His detractors say you cannot tell a vintage Armani from an Armani of today — but that is missing the point. What's important to the designer is consistency. Right: Armani on the catwalk, in shows from the past five years



TOM DYCKHOFF LET'S MOVE TO...

Wimborne Minster, Dorset

'Ooh, heaven is a place on earth,' tooted Belinda Carlisle in her chart-topper of 1987. And right she was. On earth, just off the A31. Wimborne's won that many polls and surveys for general loveliness, it ought to have a halo. It regularly pops up in Country Life's spiffingest towns, and is both where couples stay married longest and where men live to the ripest of ages. Though male deafness rates are reported to be chronically high.
Ups Pleasant. Lovely minster, cheese shops, warm beer, cycling nuns. Minutes from Poole Harbour for sailing, the New Forest for riding, the Isle of Purbeck for sturdy rambling.
Downs Too many smug rich folk and dull as ditchwater. Escape to Sodom (aka Bournemouth, aka Bo-Mo).
Getting around Poole's mainline station to London is six miles away. The A31 to M3 is devilish in summer.
Schools Angelic. Wimborne First 'very good', says Ofsted. Queen Elizabeth's secondary 'effective'.
Property Outstripping national price rises. Three-bed townhouse or four-bed suburban detached, £300,000-£400,000. Modern detacheds, £270,000-£320,000. Semis and large period terraces, £150,000-£250,000. Few one- or two-bed flats, £125,000-£175,000. Agents, such as Palmer Snell (01202 885151), on East Street.



DORSET COUNTY COUNCIL

propertyspace



Cockhaven Road
Bishopsteignton, Devon

△ A chance to sample pastoral seclusion without adding yourself to the morning rush hour.
Pros You would set up camp in a studio at the back, currently used by an artist. The journey home is across the terrace into this three-bedroom house with views to the Teign estuary. You won't need the car for basic shopping, either, since the village has a post office and store, and Newton Abbot is a bike ride away. The house has been smartly done up and stands on a goodly chunk of garden.
Cons Two of the bedrooms are very narrow. No off-street parking.
Price £325,000. Knight Frank, 01392 423111.

Havelock Walk
Forest Hill, London SE23

▽ The architect and film director Paul Joyce transformed this former industrial building into a home-cum-office seven years ago.
Pros It's large and it's wacky. Up to eight people can earn their living on the ground floor, where there are two studios, and kitchen and bathroom facilities. Then, at the end of the day, your commute home is a stair climb to the two storeys above.





Agoraphobics may feel uncomfortable at this point, since the living area is 41ft by 31ft, with a roof terrace opening off it. There's another terrace off the second floor and potential to create a third. Another open-plan living area could be harnessed as a bedroom, to supplement the two fitted gallery rooms. Havelock Walk is a funky address, full of designers and dance studios.
Cons Check your underwear: a daring detail involves two glass panels in the living space floor, through which your staff can gaze up into your private quarters while you can spy on them below.
Price £650,000. Kinleigh Folkard & Hayward, 020-8299 4499.

South Walsham
near Acle, Norfolk

◁ With a bit of building work, your staff and files can be accommodated in the stable block and brick and pantiled outhouse.
Pros A pretty house which once belonged to the local manor. It has a proper quota of beams, fireplaces and quarry-tiled floors. The huge third bedroom used to be two rooms and can be converted back.
Cons The stables and outhouse need renovation. The aged underfloor heating might need attention. You're on a main road that can get busy in summer.
Price £325,000. Jackson-Stops & Staff, 01603 612333.

Haselor
near Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire



△ Serious business can be conducted here since there's a boardroom and male and female loos in a self-contained office.
Pros 4,000 sq ft of striking living space. The vaulted, galleried living room has a glass wall at the back, bringing in big views of the surrounding countryside, and a stone chimney breast rears up the double height of the room. All four bedrooms have en suites. If you can't face the trek across the drive to work, you can see to unfinished business in the study. A pond with an ornamental bridge is an exciting addition to the formal gardens.
Cons There's a municipal air about the exterior.
Price £750,000. Knight Frank, 01789 297735.
Anna Tims