Celebrating Islamic Tradition: Looking Ahead

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The Aga Khan Awards for Architecture have become a cultural institution of great importance not only to Muslims but to the whole world. They were started in 1977 and are selected every three years by distinguished international juries. They are intended, as the first prospectus said, to “awaken the cultural consciousness of Muslims and to sensitise those who would build in the Muslim world to the unique heritage of Muslim art and architecture”. The aim remains to “nurture within the architectural profession and related disciplines a heightened awareness of the roots and essence of Muslim culture, and a deeper commitment to finding meaningful expressions of the spirit of Islam within modern life and technology.” “Consideration will be given,” said the founding statement, “particularly to those projects which use local initiatives and resources creatively which meet both the functional and cultural needs of their users and have the potential to stimulate related developments elsewhere in the Muslim world.”

Over the years, the Awards have maintained these principles and so have taught us all a very great deal. By embracing the whole of Islamic culture, the Awards have opened the eyes of the world to the extraordinary diversity of the Muslim achievement. They have made us aware of the rich heritages ranging from Central Africa in the south to Central Asia in the north, from Morocco in the west to Indonesia in the east. By celebrating conservation of buildings from the past as well as new work, the Award scheme has made us all recognise the wonderfully rich interwoven tapestry of the climates of the Muslim world: climates which are cultural as well as physical, conceptual as well as contextual. The architectures celebrated are largely urban in the widest sense, because it is in cities, which the Award has rightly interpreted to range from small settlements to large and ancient centres of habitation, that civilisation rises. (Indeed, the very word “civilisation” in English is derived from the Latin word for person who lives in cities. There must be similar constructions in other languages and cultures.) Incidentally, this celebration of the diversity of Muslim civilisation has made us aware of the extremely deep roots of Islamic architecture, which draws on the best aspects of pre-Muslim cultures to generate appropriate buildings, towns and cities.

As a westerner, I was of course aware of the influence of Byzantine architecture on that of the Islamic Eastern Mediterranean, but the ways in which, for instance, the traditional buildings of the...
The diversity of work recognised by the Awards is multiplied by their explicit understanding of the economic imperative, and the Award scheme reveals great praise for accepting that architecture is for all rich and poor alike. I was very surprised when I saw that, in the first cycle of Awards, many improvements in South East Asia were celebrated at the same time as modern buildings like large hotels and posh villas, along with restorations of fine ancient monuments and beautiful old towns. I was wrong to be so. Improvement of life for the poorest must be treated as vital in any decent society as catering for the needs of the more affluent. By sometimes (indeed often) focusing on work for some of the very poorest people in the world, the Award scheme has shown that architectural intelligence can radically affect the ways in which we use our environment, and that everyone, in any part of the world, must take account of its great potential in this regard.

I am very grateful to the Award for what it has allowed me to share with you, both through the Award itself and through the 'Dialogues' series. I have been able to share with you how to design a house in Morocco or Indonesia, or how to design the thoroughfares of Cairo or Istanbul. If God had desired to give people specific instructions on how to build structures that are economically, socially and culturally vital, so is geographical communication between the peoples living on the planet today. Instead of accepting the assumption (common in both the Muslim world and the West) that the poor must learn only from the rich and try to ape what has happened in developed (often overdeveloped) countries, the Award scheme has set the dialogue between affluent and disadvantaged. It is becoming clear that, in living with limited resources, we all have much to learn from each other. The architectural and indeed the economy and culture of the affluent has much to gain from lessons that are natural in much of the poorer parts of the world. For instance, by maximising ambient energy of radiant heat from the sun, the cooling power of the oceans, the ground and the winds; lessons about economic use of space; by understanding how to local resources to most efficient effect. In short, by learning about how to try to live in creative harmony with the planet.

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ization movements from countryside to suburban areas. For the foreseeable future, such migrations are inevitable. Humankind, it seems, is irrevocably bound to urban species, and in doing so to deal with the exploding cities of this world. It is doubtful that the most important political and social problem facing us today. We need creative responses. The Aga Khan Awards have shown how the effects of such migrations, normally so humanity and environmentally destructive, can be greatly mitigated by sensitive and thoughtful initiatives. Such schemes not only reduce the harmful results of mass urban immigration but, by involving the dynamics of the people who are moving, they set positive models for development of all kinds. Many (but not all) such initiatives recognized by the Awards have been put in train not only by architects and planners, but by people different as bankers and bureaucrats, engineers and educators, religious leaders and social reformers. In fact, whatever the source of initiative, it is not always local community that have been the sustaining force in such developments. The Awards scheme is unique in recognizing the importance of how developments are regarded by their users. No other architectural awards even try to look at such issues. Other awards are largely concerned with appearance. with flashy pictures and presentation, not existen
tial reality, not with what it is really like to live and work in the projects. The Aga Khan Awards explore such matters by sending assessors to examine the buildings after at least one year of use. Such careful assessment ensures that permitted projects are potentially sustainable, and have won the approval of their inhabitants. Suha Ozkam has called the process the search of “democratisation of the environment”, and I think he is right. If only other prizes had the resolution and resources to pursue such an approach, rather than chasing easy headlines, we might begin to make a huge change in the quality of architecture and planning, and their potential for improving the lot of humanity.

A Aga Khan Award-winning work offers robust examples that others can learn from, and the magnificent archive of the Awards is a testimony to what has been achieved and a reference source for all who want to study contemporary Islamic architecture, conservation and the structures of the developing world. One of the most important aspects of the Awards is their long-term vision. Buildings take such a long time to create, and their effects on people are so hard to assess, that only long-term investment in thorough research can ensure that an award system is likely to improve the practice of architecture and planning. So, even after a quarter of a century, it is still too early to judge what the results of the Aga Khan Awards will be. Subjectively I feel that there has been a gradual movement towards many of the ideas that the Awards have been striving to promote: sustainability, understanding of tradition and history, democracy (or participation), and resistance to homogenisation and promoting regionalism. When the Awards were born, these issues were scarcely on the periphery of architectural consciousness. But now, as Suha Ozkam has said: “The well-being of mankind and the environment have become our top priorities, in great contrast to the immediate past’s focus on economic development as the left unchecked, caused damage that may prove irremediable.” He is right, but progress has often been slow, and there have been some discouraging setbacks. For instance, twenty years ago, regionalism was thought to be the most important way of combating the endless spread of international cultural schlock, making architecture more responsive to local physical conditions and creating buildings and cities that could help us interpret our particular cultural inheritance to our children, positioning us as the hinge in the cultural continuum between past and future. But the horrendous Balkan and Central A
ican wars of the 1990s made many of us think again about regionalism. What had seemed to be ideals which would enrich and provide human focus in the ever expanding anomie and human indifference of the international post-modern capitalist system seemed suddenly to be soaked in blood. What had been hoped for as a means of establishing individual and communal identity could become a justification for violence and intolerance. What had been supposed to be a proposal for living in harmony with the planet seemed to be unleashing untamed destruction. Yet it is time to reconsider the notion of regionalism. We need a sense of place in the world, not least to counter the proliferation of environmentally destructive mediocrity. We need to evolve architectures that are not just temporary and shallow, but, to stop the absurd and catastrophically wasteful practice of creating identical buildings from the Equator to the Arctic. We need to understand and master the wonderful but potentially destructive powers of modern global technology and communications, and how to adapt them appropriately to particular circumstances. Because the Aga Khan Awards have continued to promote the founding values of celebrating “local initiatives and resources”, they have shown us how new and richer ideas of regionalism and urbanism can be attempted. They have consistently celebrated courage, imagination, tenderness and nobility in the creation of the human-made environment of the Islamic world. So they have shown us how architects can better human life and enrich our relationship to the planet. Long may they continue to inspire us.

For projects that have won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, the reader is referred to pls. 1-9, 12, 16, 41-42, 44-46, 57, 72, 74, 87, 90, 92, 102, and 103.
1. Italian Institute for the Middle and East Asia (Eugenio Galdieri) and the National Organisation for the Conservation of Historic Monuments of Iran (Bagher Shirazi), restoration of Hasht Behesht, Chehel Sutun, and Ali Qapu, Isfahan, Iran, 1977.

Projects:
1. Hasht Behesht (1699), Isfahan, Iran, restored in 1977.
2. Chehel Sutun (1667), Isfahan, Iran, restored in 1977.


10. Amir Chakhmagh Complex (17th century), Yazd, Iran.
11. Masjid Jami' (14th century) in the background, Yazd, Iran.
13. Badgirs (wind catchers), Yazd, Iran.
15. Masjid Jame' (14th century), Yazd, Iran.
16. Iranian Cultural Heritage Organisation (ICHO) and the Urban Development and Revitalisation Corporation (UDRC), New Life for Old Structures programme, Hammam Khan (19th century), Yazd, Iran, restored in 1997.
17. A general view of Yazd, Iran.
18. The courtyard of Masjid Jame' (14th century), Yazd, Iran.
37. Suq al-Qattaneen, Old City, Jerusalem

38. Al Madrasa al-Ashrafiyyah, Old City, Jerusalem

39. The Dome of the Rock (7th century), Jerusalem

40. Dar al-Aytam Complex, Old City, Jerusalem

41. Al-Aqsa Mosque (9th century), Jerusalem

42. The Old City, Jerusalem
42-43. Association for Safeguarding the Medina (ASM), reconstruction of the Hafsia Quarter, Tunis, Tunisia, 1986.
49. Restoration Institute of Uzbekistan and Restoration Office of the Municipality of Bukhara, the restoration of Bukhara Old City completed in 1995.

50. Kalyan Mosque Complex (1127), Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

51. Divan Begi Madrasa (1535/1556), Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

52. 53. Abdul Aziz Khan Madrasa (1651/1652), Bukhara, Uzbekistan.
54-55. Kalyan Mosque Complex (1127), Bukhara, Uzbekistan.
56. Char-Minar Madrasa (1477), Bukhara, Uzbekistan.
57. Mir-i Arab-Madrasa (1398/1399), Bukhara, Uzbekistan.
73. Turgut Cansever, Emine Ögün, Mehmet Ögün and Fegza Cansever, Demir Holiday Village, Bodrum, Turkey, 1987.

87. Saleh Lamei Mostafa, Great Omar Mosque (late 13th century), Sidon, Lebanon, restored in 1986.

88. Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO; Eugenio Galdieri) and the National Organization for the Conservation of Historic Monuments of Iran (NOCHMI; Bagher Shirazi), Ali Qapu (1660), Isfahan, Iran, restored in 1977.

89. Isam Awwad and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), Al-Aqsa Mosque (14th-century paintwork), Jerusalem, restored in 1983.
92. Awqaf Department, Tomb of Shah Rukn-i Alam (14th century), Multan, Pakistan, restored in 1977.


95. Drawing by Ken Yeang.


98. Drawing by Ken Yeang.
98. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Hajj Terminal, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1981.
100. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Hajj Terminal, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1981.
Grameen Bank Housing Project, various rural areas, Bangladesh, 1984-ongoing.

Zlatko Ugljen, Sherefuddin's White Mosque, Visoko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1980.

106. ADAUA/Fabrizio Carola, Kaedi Hospital, Kaedi, Mauritania, 1989.
