Since its commencement in 1977, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has espoused originality and innovation in the diverse projects it sought to reward. As a jury member of its 2010 cycle, I had the fortune to witness first-hand the plurality of projects considered by the committee. A readiness to explore new frontiers of architecture of the Muslim world was apparent, and the inclusive vision of the Award serves as a powerful testament to the awareness of the multiplicity and diversity of Muslim societies. Undoubtedly this recognition was instrumental for grasping the nuances of spatiality and temporality, and their bearing on matters that surpass narrow national frontiers. The obvious attentiveness to both the complexity and dynamism of the Muslim world was the primary rationale undergirding the jury’s deliberations. Several projects aiming at fulfilling the double tasks of preserving and revitalising architectural heritage—associated with the colonial period in several Muslim countries—have been considered in this current cycle. The inclusion of such wide-ranging projects is commendable, as it succeeded in foregrounding the central role of urban centres in former European colonies in North Africa, alongside other parts of the Islamic world, as sites of experimentation for Western modernist architects. It is common knowledge today that those early experimentations played a foundational role in the blossoming of these architects’ careers.

As Mustafa Bayoumi reminds us, “The European colonial city was also a kind of ‘virgin’ space for European planners and architects, who took advantage of the opportunity to produce an entirely new built environment to test novel forms of urban planning linked to modern flows of colonial capital and goods, along with the allure of tourism and colonial migration”.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the critical role that colonial modernity has played in shaping the colonial city, and how colonial urban policy was topographically reproduced as a de facto apartheid system of segregated spaces in which the modern European sector stands as the “rational” model of planning in contrast to the “irrational” old Casbah (qasbah in Arabic), where the natives reside. Works by scholars such as Gwendolyn Wright, in addition to recent interventions such as the exhibition “In the Desert of Modernity” and its companion book, Colonial Modern, illustrated how urban centres in colonial North Africa served since the 1930s as a laboratory for European modernists’ utopianism and fantasies.

A case in point was the city of Casablanca in Morocco. Casablanca was viewed as a test case for the “city of tomorrow” and a blueprint for European urban planning. The careers of modernist architects (such as Le Corbusier) and the housing projects on the outskirts of several European metropolises (such as Paris) could not have been possible without the colonial experimentation in North Africa. French as well as British architecture and urban design in the colonies evolved over time as a series of adaptations that accompanied specific processes and patterns borne out of the metamorphosis of colonial policies. This phenomenon can be seen in the move from architectural styles imported directly from the European metropolis to newer ones that incorporated local architectural elements. The blueprint for such a move was written in earlier 19th-century Orientalists’ visual and written texts that mimicked and documented local styles of the “Orient”. Such semi-localised and hybrid architectural styles were later superseded by the introduction of a more modernist International Style during the last phase of colonial practices and power politics.

The common denominator in these fluctuating adaptive policies, as Gwendolyn Wright has explained—especially in the case of preserving local and traditional architectural elements in colonial urban design—was to maintain as well as buttress the superimposed colonial order of things. In some cases, the urge to include such local elements was a direct
answer by colonial architects to resistance from locals to the new imposed forms and their longings for familiarity in a built environment they venerated.6

Resonances of this line of argument persist today as we ponder an Award recipient, the Revitalisation of the Hypercentre of Tunis. This project, as well as several shortlisted projects of the 2010 Award cycle, have been considered for their contributions to “promoting civil initiatives which are sensitive to issues of funding, the revitalisation of local economies, and their role in providing opportunities for local employment and training.” As the jury citation reads, the significance of these projects also lies in the centrality of colonialism and its palpable role in shaping the urban built environment in North Africa, among other former colonies in the Muslim world. Some time has passed since the dawn of independence from colonial rule, and the significant transformations that followed have allowed spaces for critique and contemplative practices to assess, reflect and move forward.

As a jury member, I was struck by how colonial situations had helped engender a reconsideration of modernity and modernism. These categories have typically been constructed and studied without the critical discourse needed to evaluate their consequences for both theory and praxis. It is important at this juncture to invoke the work of Gwendolyn Wright again for its profound impact on the topic of colonialism. For instance, she reminds us that “Western” modernism came into being in a world framed by colonialism, where visions for improvement and innovation overlapped with often caused brutal destruction. In the colonial world, as elsewhere, modernism was, and remains, at once a universal ambition, a transnational operation and myriad local variations”.7 Along with Wright, scholars such as Zeynep Çelik have ventured to offer useful insights into the intersections of colonialism and postcolonial memory. Çelik ably extended the French historian Pierre Nora’s concept of lieu de mémoire —originally used in the context of French history—to the former French colonies in North Africa. The symbolic, functional and material significance of colonial sites, including architectural ones, was thoroughly explored. Mindful of how these sites act as “catalyst(s) in the imposition of a power structure, as well as the definition and endurance of identity in a colonial context”, Çelik states that “the symbolic sites for the colonizer culture continued to maintain their significance in the postcolonial era as their capacity to change and acquire new meanings allowed them to act also as places of memory for the colonized”.8 The intersection of memory and history has been crucial in shaping how the colonised subject relates to past colonial sites and their evocation in the postcolonial present. As Çelik astutely pointed out, colonial sites have emerged as useful platforms for critiques of postcolonial realities.9

These realities prompt us to ask a series of questions about colonial modernity and postcolonial memory that are crucial as we probe the issue of modernity in light of pervasive postcolonial critiques. For example: How can one counter what seems to be the standard idea, which has privileged modernity as the West, but paradoxically also posited it as universal? What do we make of the inextricable link between colonialism and modernist utopias? What do we make of the colonial modernist projects given events and visions of decolonisation in North Africa and other parts of the Muslim world? And finally, what is the impact of such events in relation to the West itself, which has become more significantly multicultural than ever before in the context of recent Muslim diasporas in Europe and North America?

Postcolonial theory offers powerful critiques of modernity by showing how the terms of the debate are necessarily Eurocentric. Although modernity is better seen as irreducibly plural and fully global, standard theorisations of modernity and modernism, emphasising Western social transformations and artistic experiments, characterise social developments and artistic expressions of other regions as belated and secondary. In the same vein, Western hegemony has made us overlook that Western modernism and the unfolding of its history, from the Renaissance to the present, stands on the shoulders of other cultures and civilisations.10 This glaring oversight has taken long to acknowledge,
especially with regard to the artistic and literary contributions of decolonisation and opposition to imperialism. On a positive note, recent scholarship on artistic and literary practices in the West has elucidated the increased epistemological uncertainty with which one must regard the contributions of non-Western and Muslim immigrant writers and artists to their host countries in the West. Rather than locating their production in a liminal space of “in between-ness”, as has been the norm in European circles of art and literary criticism, new studies have called for a fresh understanding of contemporary European culture and cultural labor, and a serious rethinking of its spatial configuration.

A most urgent issue is the current condition of the Muslim world in global politics. Post–September 11 developments have certainly heightened awareness of the interconnectedness and disjuncture between the “West” and the “Muslim” world. This is evident in the rise of Islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiments and legislation. Muslims, and more specifically those who are citizens of the West, found their loyalties to their countries being questioned. We are suddenly faced with dichotomous thinking: “bad” Muslims, who practice terrorism and supposedly hate freedom and modernity (and oppress women), and “good” Muslims, who are modern, secular and support the policies of Western countries. As Mahmood Mamdani has argued, this premise is based on a culturalist approach to “Islam” that turns the latter into a transcendent category. Accordingly, it is culture (modernity) that is said to be the dividing line between those in favour of a peaceful, civic existence and those inclined to terror. In this view, our world is split between those who are modern and those who are premodern. Yet “Islam” is far from a homogeneous body of ritual and belief, and not all Muslims speak with the same voice. The dichotomy is both reductive and ahistorical: Not only does it absolve the West from having created the category of “bad” Muslims, but it also glosses over the multi-religious and multi-ethnic composition of the many regions in which Muslims live. Furthermore, it conceals a more complex history of indigenous modernist movements and anticolonial struggles augmented by indefatigable efforts by post-independence secular movements for democratisation, human rights, gender equality and sustainable development.

The continued effort of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture becomes even more crucial in highlighting the existence of such diverse strands and promoting a grounded vision for peaceful and prosperous coexistence and fruitful intellectual exchange.

Notes
3 Ibid.
5 See Wright, Colonial Modern.
14 Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, the period since 9/11 has also witnessed a renewed interest in modern art movements and contemporary artists of both Muslim and Arab backgrounds and of Middle Eastern and North African origins.
Revitalisation of the Hypercentre of Tunis, Tunisia