A Manifesto Of Design

BUILDING FACTS

DESIGN

Architect: Maki and Associates, Tokyo
Architect of record: Moriyama and Teshima Architects, Toronto
Landscape architect: Vladimir Djurovic
Landscape Architecture, Lebanon
Museography: Studio Adrien Gardère, Paris

KEY FIGURES

The site: 6.8 hectares
Museum gross floor area: 10,500 square metres
Size of galleries: 1,800 square metres
Size of collections storage: 620 square metres
Seats in auditorium: 350
Height of auditorium roof: 19.8 metres
Period from design to completion: 2004 to 2014

Text | Maria Aslam-Hyder
Photography | Gary Otte & Janet Kimber
On the highway, short of Don Valley Parkway, a glimpse of the new addition of a Museum in Toronto is clearly visible. Situated away from the downtown area—a major district of Museums and academia—itself is a statement and with such an iconic contemporary architecture amongst nondescript entities of sky-rises; it’s the distance and the distinction from its surroundings that reinforces its massive appeal in the design conundrums. In today’s sprawling cityscapes the addition of any museum is distinctly urban and urbane—especially Toronto—that boasts of a number of Museums equally designed by Star architects hence The Aga Khan Museum, the very first North America’s monument to Islamic art and founded by The Aga Khan renowned world over as an architecture aficionado, who was involved in the project from concept to materialization, it is known to all that His Highness himself selected the iridescent granite cubes that adorn the façade; is set to make a statement both in architecture and culture. The Museum a white gleaming Brazilian granite masterpiece adds to its distinction from its surroundings and creates an oasis of history, learning and entertainment; an oasis that once you enter, you leave the world behind.

With the lush gardens and the five reflective pools outside its front door and its inner-sanctum, open-air courtyard—entered from inside the building and ringed by walls of glass and wooden latticework so that light from outside projects dancing shadows into the museum over the course of the day—it is clear that this is a labour of love. But that is not all; The Ismaili Centre, Toronto is situated, together with the Aga Khan Museum, within a 6.8-hectare landscaped park, a new space for the public that showcases the work of three renowned architects. Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki designed the Aga Khan Museum, while Indian architect Charles Correa designed the Ismaili Centre and architect Vladimir Djurovic of Lebanon designed the Park, which features a formal garden. The Canadian firm Moriyama & Teshima are the architects for the entire project and responsible for integrating all aspects of the project.
Following the same pattern of Ismaili Centres scattered in other parts of the world such as London, Dushanbe, Lisbon, Dubai and Vancouver, Toronto Ismaili Centre continues a tradition of hosting programs that stimulate the intellect, encourage dialogue, and celebrate cultural diversity. Through programmes ranging from lectures, seminars and exhibitions, to cultural and social events, the Centre creates an understanding of the values, ethics, culture and heritage of Ismaili Muslims, and of the work of the Aga Khan Development Network.

In designing the Aga Khan Museum, Fumihiko Maki, winner of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, used light as his inspiration. Light is a constant element in the Museum design, the seasons, the weather; night or day illuminate the building in a myriad of ways. The angle of the external walls, the inner glazed courtyard with the filigree sandwiched in as a layer is a constant feature that resonates into the interior of the building casting shadows, throwing patterns on the exterior and interior walls illuminating a dynamic and continuously changing environ. The building’s compact footprint; 81 metres long and 54 metres wide contains an impressive variety of spaces, including two exhibition galleries, areas for art conservation and storage, a 350-seat theatre, and two classrooms. Within an unmistakably contemporary design, Maki incorporates historical elements originating in Islamic cultures, building bridges between eras as well as civilizations.

The 11,000 square-metre Museum is laid out on three floors: two floors above grade and one below for parking and reserves. Parking is housed primarily under the elaborate landscape showcasing a fantastical view of the complex as one drives in or gets dropped. The tunnel as is conveyed by the Museum staff that heralds one from the basement to the upper levels is painstakingly created to enhance ones sense of surprise. The two floors above ground contain 1800 square metres of gallery space for temporary and permanent exhibitions, a multi-purpose auditorium, a restaurant, private reception spaces, and educational areas consisting of classrooms and a library. The singular symmetrical dome corresponds to the museum giving it an added height and from the outside signals the presence of the Museum in its surroundings. Both the buildings sit harmoniously hugging the site within a landscape that is shared by both.

As for the overall character of the building, Fumihiko Maki states: “Contained within a simple rectilinear footprint, the primary functions will revolve around a central courtyard, which will act as the heart of the building and will integrate the differing functions into a cohesive whole while allowing each space to maintain its independence, privacy and character.”

The Courtyard is surrounded by 13-metre-tall double-glass walls etched with mashrabiya patterns; its floor features an intricate tri-colour mosaic comprised of construction-grade lapis from Namibia, limestone from France, and the same white Brazilian granite found on the Museum’s exterior cladding.

Museums today are commercial developments that invoke, exhibitions, screenings, dining and shopping. Today the word conjures its image akin to a mall culture with a focus on education and entertainment.

Sir Nicholas Pevsner claimed that Museum Architecture had not developed any significant new types since World War II, “Infact” he wrote, no new principles have turned up, except that the ideal of the museum as a monument in its own right has been replaced by the ideal of the Museum as the perfect place to show, enjoy, and study works of art (or of history or of science) Pevsner 1976: 136
The implication of the aforementioned statement is that art Museums were central to building typology in architecture with a basic function; enjoyment and study. The same notion still prevails, though The Museum’s architectural articulation is here seen to oscillate between two paradigms: monument and instrument. These also define complete relationship of content and container played out in the dialogue between functional and aesthetic consideration that is crucial to an understanding of museum architecture.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the museum became increasingly popular and diverse. Its architecture explored a range of stylistic modes and social roles, attracting the attention of urban planners and star architects alike and spawning a gargantuan literature. But soon follows a transition that plays a significant role in art fuelled by the constant growing demand for art; - the artists needs to take into account the market contrivances and feature art as a successful cultural mechanism. Seldom has a Museum Director described the role of art today more frankly then Frans Haks; who in his address as the Founding Director of Groningen Museum Island in 1991 said:

“It may look like a somewhat bizarre bird paradise among the latest Museum Buildings with its variegated collections low and high, old and contemporary arts, built as it was

by for internationally famous designer Architects: Alessandro Mendini, Michele Lucchi, Philippe Starck and Coop Himmelblau. Nevertheless it’s a fine example of new generation of Museums. These are virtuoso worlds, stage sets for experience and happenings which try to appeal to all the senses of the public even more then the works of art on display in them, their architecture clamors for attention. Seldom are these buildings satisfied with a secondary role serving as a backdrop for art they are themselves the focus attention. They reflect a playful approach of art works and offer visitors a moment of communicative pleasure.”

With these hyperbole in mind the visit to The Aga Khan Museum on a chilly December day landed me in an oasis that is set to change the perceptions of Art and Architecture, Science, Astronomy and many other fields that were initiated by Islamic rulers and cultures, set in a western paradigm; the first of its kind in the Americas, The Aga Khan Museum heralds the education of the masses towards Islam and its rich history in the warped, disfigured understanding of Islam as a religion and culture in the rich ethnic city of Toronto.

Four central issues played prominent in the siting, the design, and the aloofness from its neighbors, the corporal entity:

**THE EMERGENCE OF THE MUSEUM AS MONUMENT:**
Till the late nineteenth century the museum buildings constructed bore a close relationship between the content and the container. The symbolic language of their architecture was in tune with the collections on the premise that history of art was not subjected to revisions and
The museum from object to experience making:
The Aga Khan Museum, precisely positioned at 45 degrees solar north so that every surface receives sunlight over the course of the day as the project has been conceived on the Ephemeral miracle of light, boasts a facade that is gridded in exact metre-long blocks of Brazilian granite from top to bottom. Though its counterpart sharing the same site; the Ismaili Centre faces Mecca, but both buildings harmoniously share the same space that belies the functional aspects of the two buildings. The primary entrance and axis of the Museum is aligned with the Ismaili Centre, which provides a subtle relationship between the two buildings, emphasizing the unity of the complex. The Aga Khan Museum is the first museum in North America dedicated to the arts of Muslim civilizations. The Ismaili Centre incorporates spaces for social and cultural gatherings, intellectual engagement, and spiritual reflection. Together, these global institutions contribute to a better understanding among different communities and cultures. The establishment of these institutions in Toronto as a vibrant international city, reflects the Aga Khan’s longstanding relationship with Canada and his appreciation for the country’s commitment to pluralism and cultural diversity.

The Museum is a space within a space and the interior functions the same way. The design is centered around a courtyard, intended as ‘a symbolic space, protected from the outside world,’ with an ‘inherent link to traditional Islamic architecture.’ The exterior of the Museum is inspired by the forms and shapes of precious stones and with walls inclined at two distinct angles to accentuate the play of light on the surfaces, this angular facade is able to refract natural light in quite an interesting way both in the interior and exterior. A fort that fortifies inherent cultural experience, with individual underpinnings of quieter spaces for contemplation.

The central courtyard holds the corresponding exhibition spaces, ancillary facilities and the auditorium, the entire working of the Museum revolves around the courtyard that is the well of light, (conceptually and truly) casting immeasurable shadows all around. A concept of life captured architecturally in the most subliminal of ways, even having a coffee is an experience. The exhibition spaces are connected to the main well of knowledge through the renderings of light filtered through sky or jharokas. The container and the contained intrinsically linked with the New Media acting as a bridge for a complete enhancement of an experience.

In many ways, the architecture is really about the pluralistic experiences planned for the visitor is the Museum’s true function and not so much the display of art as it is education as universal, chronological and progressive. The architecture of the museum underscored the institutions function as a monument to culture. The museum as monument extended to encompass the display of both culture and nature and architecture has contributed as a dramatic change to people’s perception of a museum. Museum today are drivers of social and economic regeneration, hence the deviation from the traditional forms and often spectacular architectural statement from star architects. Museums as a display entity; as iconic architecture can place the city or town on the tourism global map at all times. It has the capacity of profiling that particular city and proclaims an economic and cultural boom; Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao being the best contemporary example. It can add enormously to the learning factor, cross cultural dialogue, intellectual engagements, visual treat and sense of occasion that is rarely witnessed in other building types. The Aga Khan Museum, a symbolic statement at once civic and educational, together the collection and building were conceived as a monument, a permanence and yet flexible and adaptable. The Museum with its challenge of cultural manifestos underlines changes with a global phenomenon and hence a study after five years is imperative to determine the pattern of change.

The Museum as an instrument:
Its true, the charge that the Museum undertakes, the pluralistic approach that the Aga Khan Museum holds towards the display, towards the commitment of showcasing Islamic cultures spread as an architectural feat that cannot be missed or goes unnoticed, a contemporary fort, a symbolic container that both illustrates and embodies the display. The challenge is to achieve this alongside the consideration of site and context, architecture and exhibitions. Though today wanting to make a statement museum building design are a three pronged design solution that interpretations with the outcome that the display spaces were fixed. Instead it was presented to a better understanding among different communities and cultures. The establishment of these institutions in Toronto as a vibrant international city, reflects the Aga Khan’s longstanding relationship with Canada and his appreciation for the country’s commitment to pluralism and cultural diversity.

The Museum is a space within a space and the interior functions the same way. The design is centered around a courtyard, intended as ‘a symbolic space, protected from the outside world,’ with an ‘inherent link to traditional Islamic architecture.’ The exterior of the Museum is inspired by the forms and shapes of precious stones and with walls inclined at two distinct angles to accentuate the play of light on the surfaces, this angular facade is able to refract natural light in quite an interesting way both in the interior and exterior. A fort that fortifies inherent cultural experience, with individual underpinnings of quieter spaces for contemplation.

The central courtyard holds the corresponding exhibition spaces, ancillary facilities and the auditorium, the entire working of the Museum revolves around the courtyard that is the well of light, (conceptually and truly) casting immeasurable shadows all around. A concept of life captured architecturally in the most subliminal of ways, even having a coffee is an experience. The exhibition spaces are connected to the main well of knowledge through the renderings of light filtered through sky or jharokas. The container and the contained intrinsically linked with the New Media acting as a bridge for a complete enhancement of an experience.

In many ways, the architecture is really about the pluralistic experiences planned for the visitor is the Museum’s true function and not so much the display of art as it is education as universal, chronological and progressive. The architecture of the museum underscored the institutions function as a monument to culture. The museum as monument extended to encompass the display of both culture and nature and architecture has contributed as a dramatic change to people’s perception of a museum. Museum today are drivers of social and economic regeneration, hence the deviation from the traditional forms and often spectacular architectural statement from star architects. Museums as a display entity; as iconic architecture can place the city or town on the tourism global map at all times. It has the capacity of profiling that particular city and proclaims an economic and cultural boom; Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao being the best contemporary example. It can add enormously to the learning factor, cross cultural dialogue, intellectual engagements, visual treat and sense of occasion that is rarely witnessed in other building types. The Aga Khan Museum, a symbolic statement at once civic and educational, together the collection and building were conceived as a monument, a permanence and yet flexible and adaptable. The Museum with its challenge of cultural manifestos underlines changes with a global phenomenon and hence a study after five years is imperative to determine the pattern of change.

The Museum as an instrument:
Its true, the charge that the Museum undertakes, the pluralistic approach that the Aga Khan Museum holds towards the display, towards the commitment of showcasing Islamic cultures spread as an architectural feat that cannot be missed or goes unnoticed, a contemporary fort, a symbolic container that both illustrates and embodies the display. The challenge is to achieve this alongside the consideration of site and context, architecture and exhibitions. Though today wanting to make a statement museum building design are a three pronged design solution that interpretations with the outcome that the display spaces were fixed. Instead it was presented as universal, chronological and progressive. The architecture of the museum underscored the institutions function as a monument to culture. The museum as monument extended to encompass the display of both culture and nature and architecture has contributed as a dramatic change to people’s perception of a museum. Museum today are drivers of social and economic regeneration, hence the deviation from the traditional forms and often spectacular architectural statement from star architects. Museums as a display entity; as iconic architecture can place the city or town on the tourism global map at all times. It has the capacity of profiling that particular city and proclaims an economic and cultural boom; Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao being the best contemporary example. It can add enormously to the learning factor, cross cultural dialogue, intellectual engagements, visual treat and sense of occasion that is rarely witnessed in other building types. The Aga Khan Museum, a symbolic statement at once civic and educational, together the collection and building were conceived as a monument, a permanence and yet flexible and adaptable. The Museum with its challenge of cultural manifestos underlines changes with a global phenomenon and hence a study after five years is imperative to determine the pattern of change.
The Museum as a Torpedo Through Time:
The Museum’s architecture interprets and frames the exhibition narratives eliciting both intellectual and physical responses from the visitor. Through its permanent collection, performing arts and educational programmes and roster of temporary exhibitions, the Aga Khan Museum will welcome the full spectrum of public engagement and serve as a vibrant educational institution. The Museum pedagogy as a flexible space, open to change, responsive to visitors needs and recipient towards contemporary issues and agendas are issues that have been amalgamated in the Aga Khan Museum. Museums have slowly and languidly grown from permanency to a system of changeable modules enabling more than sixty percent of the display on a constant and continuous change, making space for new media and art forms, of reshaping Museum spaces point to some of the sophisticated techniques that the advancement of technology now permits being utilized in a range of exhibitions in the present times displays.

The current focus on today’s Muslim cultures it is a gigantic task; The focus of the Museum: celebrating art from Muslim history, an especially crucial task at a time when news cycles are dominated with war scenes and upheaval in the Middle East; teaching non-Muslims about the oft-hidden nuances of Islam and its rich, diverse history – is the main focus. The challenge, then, is to accurately reflect Muslim cultures, when there is no single, simple experience. Since the Museum is in Toronto that boasts of a hybrid, ethnic population of diverse religions, beliefs and culture, living cohesively is unprecedented and yet a great opportunity to disseminate information of various cultures to a diverse audience. Hence the Museum plans to focus community by community, starting with Pakistani contemporary art, heading into China then Mughal India then Iran, among others, cycling through these places and cultures every three or four months so that all communities are represented within five years—a hyperactive pace in comparison to the languorous, nearly year-long exhibition rate espoused by most museums.

Another strategy is to make the collection relevant through the performing arts, with the goal of hosting concerts and festivals showcasing Muslim-Canadian artists, as well as an artist residency program for young Muslims. Indeed, while the building is something of a beautiful monolith—all smooth-edged and minimalist—it cannot be a monolith in its core mission: bringing the diversity of Islam and its oft-under seen artwork to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

“In a museum that comes from the Aga Khan Developmental Network—a network that believes in pluralism and peace amongst nations and amongst people—I think our collections reflect that,” said Linda Milrod, the head of exhibitions. “There’s going to be a lot of people in Toronto who will see themselves in this museum in a way they have not been able to see themselves in other museums before. And that’s going to feel really good.”

At no other times have the design of museum gone through radical reshaping as in the recent decades. Challenges to create inclusive
and accessible spaces open to appropriation and responsive to contemporary agendas have resulted in diverse architectural and spatial themes. The space of museum today is increasingly recognized as an environment created through a complex system of practices and systems of knowledge. The constitutive character and transformative possibilities are key issues that are in consideration during the complex design pattern. Museum space is now recognized as a space with a history of its own, a space active in the making of meaning and most importantly an inclusive space of change.

Hence these new international buildings challenge the traditional concepts and are far more than the physical structure and exhibition hardware. These new museum buildings are repositioning themselves as harbingers of change; they are working to reposition both collection and visitors, to generate new spatial forms not necessarily having a large footprint especially the case with the Aga Khan Museum that truly has a compact footprint. The idea is to inculcate creating spaces for lifelong learning, spaces of mutuality and inclusive spaces where physical, intellectual, cultural barriers to access and usability are overcome.

Though power-play is involved in the making of museum architecture, the representational core is sidelined to a greater manifesto of the Museum’s focus, which is aptly described:

“Let me conclude by saying that if I were looking for a single word to sum up my intention and hope for the Aga Khan Museum, it would be the word “enlightenment”. It is a word, which has both cultural and spiritual significance. The history of the thought and the creations of man can perhaps be said to be a long path from one period of enlightenment to another. I would hope that this Museum will contribute to a new period of enlightenment, helping visitors from around the world to rediscover the common symbols that unite us all across the globe, across all civilisations, across time.” *Prince Amyn Aga Khan

The Aga Khan Museum represents a non western model of museums and exhibits curated in cross cultural perspectives, architecture, space and media in a westernized yet ethnic society wanting to formulate a universal language of peace and harmony through the understandings of various beliefs and cultures. The light, His Highness, The Aga Khan refers to crossovers through civilizations and religions – it is the source of life and art, the two forces being brought together in the walls of the Aga Khan Museum. The ultimate message of pluralism and tolerance conveyed by His Highness the Aga Khan might best be summed up in this instance by his own references to the two sources of light, “natural light emanating from God’s creation,” and “light ... which emanates from human sources, in the form of art, culture and well-inspired human knowledge.”

References:

A companion to Museum Studies edited by Sharon MacDonald

Reshaping Museum spaces by Suzanne Macleod

Press releases and Media Kits, The Aga Khan Museum

www.archnet.org

www.akdn.org

www.theagakhanmuseum.org

www.theismaili.org

Endnotes:


Pevsner Nikolaus; History of Building types 36

Published 1976 by Princeton University Press in Princeton, NJ

Macleaod, Suzanne; Reshaping Museum Spaces

Routledge; New Ed edition (May 31, 2005)

http://www.akdn.org/Content/1290/Speech-by-Prince-Agna-

Aga Khan at the Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in

Toronto

http://www.akdn.org/Content/1290/Speech-by-Prince-Agna-

Aga Khan at the Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in

Toronto

http://www.archnet.org/Content/1290/Speech-by-Prince-Agna-

Aga Khan at the Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in

Toronto

http://www.archnet.org/Content/1290/Speech-by-Prince-Agna-

Aga Khan at the Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in

Toronto

http://www.archnet.org/Content/1290/Speech-by-Prince-Agna-

Aga Khan at the Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in

Toronto

http://www.archnet.org/Content/1290/Speech-by-Prince-Agna-

Aga Khan at the Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in

Toronto

http://www.archnet.org/Content/1290/Speech-by-Prince-Agna-

Aga Khan at the Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in

Toronto