The Aga Khan Award for Architecture has had a powerful effect on the lives of many people. Attention has correctly focused on the benefits for those who use or live in the buildings that have won an award. As an architect, though, I was interested in the award’s effect on the architects’ lives and careers, and in particular its effect on the younger architects. So I wrote to Han Tümertekin and Francis Kéré, who were winners during the 2004 cycle when I was a juror. Both of these architects won awards for relatively small but deeply thoughtful and beautifully executed buildings that could be recognised as significant contributions to the quality of architecture in the Muslim world.

Han Tümertekin’s B2 house is a hillside house for two brothers that builds on and reimagines the vernacular stone houses of northern Turkey. It sits easily in its village surroundings but simultaneously proclaims a new vision.

Francis Kéré brought to his village in Burkina Faso the knowledge that he had gained studying in Germany. His work embraces traditional building techniques – formed mud bricks and simple steel welding – to create a new primary school that is at once elegant, environmentally correct and deeply humane.

I asked three questions:

What was the best thing and the worst thing about winning this award?
Has winning the award affected your practice and if so, how?
What are you working on now that really interests you?

I wrote with some concern, because huge attention relatively early in one’s career can often become a burden.

This answer came from Han.

The best thing about winning the award was entering an international network of people who are passionate about their work.

The award has not affected my personal approach to architecture, but it has transformed others’ interest in my work into trust. I had already started being involved in more commissions, in large-scale and international projects. Winning the award accelerated this process. It led to the extensive publication of my work, which heightened interest in what I was doing.

The Aga Khan Award’s networking structure enabled me to lecture, to be a visiting critic and jury member in distinguished academic institutions and circles of architecture.

Right now we are doing some interesting large-scale urban projects and individual houses. One project is about renovating a part of the city centre, and there are two shopping malls, one in the heart of the city, the other on the periphery. We are involved in a housing development in Bodrum where we’re collaborating with international architects and I’m also building an individual house in an olive grove on the Aegean coast, as well as some houses in Geneva.

This answer came from Francis.

There is no question that winning the Aga Khan Award has changed my life in ways I never imagined possible. After the press review I was confronted with a flood of emails asking for information about the school building.

Students from all over the world – from the USA and Canada to Europe and South Africa – were looking at the building as an example of contemporary African architecture, of sustainable architecture and design. And all of them were looking to me in order to get more information.

Because of the award I moved swiftly from being an unknown person to being a sought-after professional. It is an unbelievable story.
But this story will only have a happy ending when I can tap all the positive impact of winning the award and make more projects for the benefit of the people of my home village.

It is clear that the award has had a great effect on the lives and careers of both of these architects. It has brought them into a larger world and given them a voice that will be listened to. Even if their future work does not directly touch the Muslim world, they will forever be connected to this award, and their success will bring added lustre to it.

This connection of the award to the larger architectural world is crucial because it speaks of the marriage of ‘high’ design with ethics. Too often, good intentions are realised in the form of mediocre architecture. There’s a general attitude that says that it doesn’t have to be so good if it’s for a good cause.

We must demand that good intentions are expressed by the highest level of design. In this way, the quality of the aspiration can be matched by the quality of the built work. This, for me, is the basis of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. It is what I believe in, and it is why it has been an honour and a challenge to have been involved.

Billie Tsien