

Opening Remarks

His Highness the Aga Khan

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Aiglemont. Thank you for being here. Thank you for participating in this seminar. Thank you for being part of the courageous group of men and women who have agreed to face a great challenge, one that I have experienced for the last twenty years, and which leaves me in the same state of perplexity as it did two decades ago when I succeeded to the Ismaili Imamate.

The community I lead is small but widespread. It is in daily contact with a multitude of Muslim societies, nationalities and languages and with an increasingly diverse number of non-Muslim peoples and countries. It therefore experiences as wide a number of exchanges, of physical, cultural and linguistic exposures as any other Muslim community. It is as a result of my community's experience that I have been haunted by a single question: what is the future physical environment that Muslims should seek for themselves and future generations in their homelands, their institutions, their workplaces, their houses, their gardens and in their surroundings?

I am a Muslim who has been in the position to build schools, housing complexes and hospitals, for Ismailis and non-Ismailis alike. While I am confident that I can determine the type of education I wish to provide in the schools, the living standards in the housing complexes or the level of medical care in the hospitals, I find that I am unable to give clear directives to any architect for the creation of an equally soundly conceived and appropriate design solution. While each new institution has an individual purpose, as it should, there are few design objectives and even fewer solutions which could become an inspiration for others.

I have had recent practical experience with this problem in the development of a 700-bed teaching hospital in Karachi. One of my requirements was that the resulting design should reflect the spirit of Islam. By this I do not mean a soulless mimicry of past traditions of architecture, but a generation of new design, using the aesthetic and practical bases of these traditions. During the design process a dia-

logue started, both within the project organization and among other bodies, and I began to comprehend the extent to which this subject had been so badly neglected in the past. Eventually a certain design solution was approved, with full recognition that it was only one possible attempt at the problem.

From this and repeated other personal experiences, I was led to seek advice and example. In my search for advice I found simply the recognition, albeit with surprise, that a problem did exist. In looking for examples, I have found very few buildings that demonstrate objectives or solutions from which clear, consistent and comprehensible guidelines for housing the myriad activities of today's Muslims can be derived.

I believe that the contemporary Islamic world faces a fundamental and unique challenge in determining its future physical environment. Sudden affluence as well as rapid demographic growth and urbanization have resulted in an unprecedented rate of building activity. For instance, in some Muslim countries more than half the population is presently less than fifteen years old and, therefore, the next two decades will probably see a most radical, large scale transformation of their physical fabric. Many of these countries have emerged from a colonial era and are searching for an identity of their own. This identity is at the same time specific and regional, yet it must continue to share a common civilization and history with other Islamic countries.

These nations also share similar problems of rapid urbanization. Those who live in the West have already experienced and failed to solve identical problems. Although, I believe it is fair to say that the West has now taken an extensive commitment to finding solutions.

Usually when we comment on buildings, we criticize the architect and design team for the result. We seldom take into account the role the private patron, government body or planning authority has played in the realization of that project. Thus, it is not only the design professional who must be encouraged, but also the

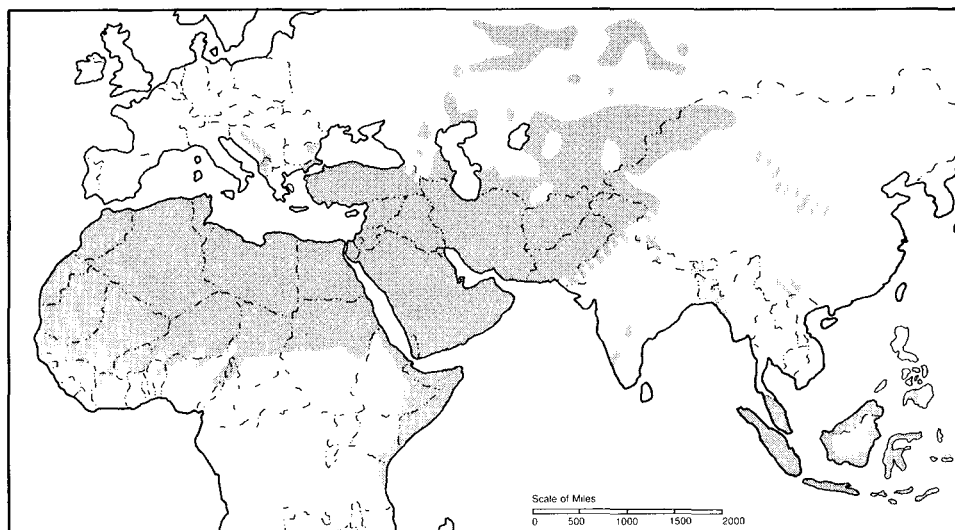
other decision makers who must seek contemporary solutions that are sensitive to the regional and cultural characteristics of the Islamic world. We may have the means, but do we have the right attitude or the taste to allow those inspired, intelligent and creative members of our Islamic world to strive for solutions? Can we be courageous or brave enough to support them when they do?

During this seminar, you will see represented not only the designers and planners whom we normally think of as being responsible for our environment, but also the patrons and eventual users. One of the long-term aims of the Award is that this process of dialogue, which we see here in miniature, should be extended to all those who are involved in development in the Islamic world.

Many of us here speak several languages, and I am sure we would agree that our ability to communicate in several tongues sometimes impedes our expressing ourselves clearly in any one of them. If our command over several languages can erode our precision of expression, I wonder how much more quickly our eyes lose their ability to discern the integrity of a visual language. The indiscriminating exposure to many different kinds of visual languages must not lead to blindness. Surely, one day we will be asked why we have done nothing to develop our own system of a physical environment rather than replacing it wholesale with a garble of other languages.

The establishment of an Award that would promote, encourage and recognize work and projects of exceptional quality and interest in the various aspects of our built environment is, I believe, a worthwhile and rewarding contribution towards solving the problem. Further, I hope many of these projects will reflect thought about the practical aspects of the economies, peoples and countries they serve by being built with the most cost-effective resources and with an eye to maintenance.

There are a number of ways in which the Award programme can further its aims. It can develop a series of lectures and sponsored research. Its office could act as a



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documentation centre, arrange seminars and exhibitions on architectural and planning themes. Also, it can develop into a centre for new Islamic environments, acting as an information exchange, funding specific research and development projects and providing a comprehensive design library. Thus, its activities could also contribute to the creation of new building processes and technologies.

These aspects are under active consideration by the Steering Committee and will continue to be until the time of the first Award. I am sure that your contribution during these three days will enable the Committee to have a better understanding of the eventual path we should take.

The process of review for nominations for the Award must have the capability of gathering many different solutions and the flexibility of recognizing bold, new and even contradictory solutions. The guiding principles and criteria for the choice constitute a continuing regard for design excellence and sensitivity to the Islamic past and present and to the requirements of the future.

It would be tempting to use the knowledge and expertise which is collected throughout this Award process to propagate a

particular type of design solution, but this idea we have absolutely rejected. Similarly, it is not our intention to institute any chair of architecture or to found a particular school of architectural thought. You may rest assured, however, that the Award is permanent. I have created a Foundation with no limit in time to ensure the Award's continuity. Although it is our aim to extend the areas of award still further to include such fields as arts and science, we have not yet decided when this would take place. I hope to be able to learn from our experience in the Award for Architecture before doing so.

I would like to take this opportunity to express publicly my appreciation of the considerable amount of work that the Steering Committee has done to provide the guidelines for this undertaking. I have been fortunate in finding eminent specialists who are prepared to share with me their experience and wisdom. Were it not for them, it is true to say that the Award would still remain a concept debated with interest among a privileged few, instead of a firm proposal receiving consideration from the experts I see here today.

The aim of this seminar is to review and consider the most important issues in-

involved in the creation of a newly built environment throughout the Islamic world. It is our hope that out of this seminar will come an identification of the real problems we face today, and perhaps a number of possible solutions. We intend to hold four more seminars around the world before the first Award is made in 1980.

I am extremely grateful that the speakers have been able to provide advance texts of their papers. I have studied these with interest and, not unexpectedly, they have prompted as many questions as they have answered. I hope that I and the members of the Steering Committee will be able to raise these with all the participants in either formal or informal sessions.

Finally, I would like to thank you once again for coming and pooling our information. We can work toward a common goal and perhaps reach an agreement on criteria and categories for the Award. We shall recognize outstanding effort in the entire range of building activity from rural to urban, from single dwelling to housing schemes, from brand-new to restored and reused.

By inaugurating this seminar I would like to think that we are sharing a challenge or an opportunity—an opportunity to take stock of where we are today, how we arrived there and where we are going. With these aims our efforts can be combined to provide an environment which future generations of Muslims will recognize as their own.