The Aga Khan Award for Architecture is based on a premise – a belief that architecture has the capacity to transform life. The pursuit of this conviction in many ways makes the Award unique within the growing landscape of architectural awards and prizes.

Throughout the history of the Award there has been an emphasis on socially transformative projects. This cycle of the Award is no exception. Premiated as well as shortlisted projects provide the framework for a host of activities. How these projects function is enhanced by the quality, the design and the materials of architecture.

The duality between architecture and life is not limited to the programme or the intentions of a project. Rather, it is the specific manner in which a project’s aspirations are conceived and constructed that provides the critical basis for evaluation and judgment. This approach seeks innovative solutions that transcend local norms and practices. In doing so, the Award recognises past achievements while promoting and articulating the circumstances for best practice for the future.

One of the unique features of the Award is the tripartite relationship between the Steering Committee of the Award with the Master Jury and the On-Site Reviewers. Each group has its own domain of responsibilities with certain overlaps between the Steering Committee and the Master Jury, and between the Master Jury and the On-Site Reviewers. The Steering Committee works closely with His Highness the Aga Khan and the directorate of the Award to establish the broader context, including the themes, for each cycle of the Award. They select the Master Jury and address the impact of the Award’s series of events, seminars, lectures, films and publications through each cycle.

The discussions between the Steering Committee and the Master Jury safeguard the thematic continuity and concerns of the Award.
Another component of the decision-making process is the broader physical impact of the project. The on-site visits by the reviewers also provide indispensable evidence of how a project is used by and benefits its constituency of users. The combinatory effect of this process, the establishment of an overall intellectual context by the Steering Committee, the deliberations of the Master jury informed by the first-hand expert evidence of the On-Site Reviewers, are all part of a process that is intended to protect the integrity of the Award. One of the intentional consequences of this process is the attention given to modest as well as more complex design projects. Specifically, it is the visits by the on-site reviewers that furnish the Master jury with the appropriate information to make decisions that are not simply based on photographic documentation of the submitted projects.

During the last cycle of the Award in 2010, the shortlisted projects were presented under five separate categories. These included environment, institution, industry, dwelling and conservation. In the current cycle, based on the decisions of the Master jury, the categories have evolved into such topics as infrastructure, conservation, dwelling, craft and resilience – introducing changes while allowing for continuities. It is important to mention that none of these thematic clusters are purely exclusive. Rather, there is a certain fluidity between them. The intent is to highlight the value of the specific theme and to point out ways in which other projects might benefit from the knowledge gained. Perhaps due to the lack of large-scale environmental projects like the Wadi Hanifa Wetlands in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in the last cycle, there has been more emphasis on the topic of infrastructure during the 2013 cycle of the Award. But in this case, infrastructure is not just limited to the description of a technical artefact. The Master Jury has been specific in designating a wider role for the topic of infrastructure, at times incorporating larger environmental concerns. The category

For example, recently there has been a concerted effort to consider the role and importance of alternative and productive methods of planning and to debate and document both the history as well as the emergent conditions of spaces of work. This evolved from discussions of the Steering Committee and subsequently led to a conference in Istanbul; the outcome of which has been produced as a book on the subject. The primary purpose of these efforts is to advance our knowledge of specific sectors of the design field and in the process to reveal the necessity for greater stress on a chosen topic of significance. In this case, it was the question concerning current and future models of spaces of work, such as offices, workshops and factories.

The latest cycle of the Award builds on its history of innovative typological and thematic categories pertaining to the built environment. These groupings are invariably contingent on the diversity and range of projects submitted by the participants in a particular cycle of the Award. The Master Jury then shortlists a number of projects that they consider worthy of further investigation. These projects are visited and subjected to careful evaluation by a member of the On-Site Review group. The methodical on-site investigation of each project, its programme, design and execution, forms an important component of the Master Jury’s decision-making process.

Equally important is the post-occupancy evaluation of each project – its conditions of construction and use. The utility of each project forms a partial description of its life as a building, landscape or artefact. Hence the premiated projects are those that in the opinion of the Master Jury – through debate, disagreement and dialogue – best articulate the multiple criteria of design excellence and responsive and innovative use of materials and construction.
carried out in the city of Birzeit, there is an overlap between conservation, infrastructure and craft. Those involved in this project have been particularly clear about seeing the conservation of the historic, former university town not as an end in itself but as the provision of an infrastructure for the revitalisation of the town and of its intangible heritage. The process of implementation of the project also necessitated the reliance on traditional crafts and a deeper understanding of the way things are made. Ultimately the project is a manifestation of the political will of the citizens to transform their community.

In the case of the hospital, a cardiac surgery unit near Khartoum, Sudan, the 95 shipping containers that were used to send material to the site were deployed as one of its building blocks. These elements, together with a double insulation system, form part of the project’s multiple sustainability strategies. In fact, the focus on sustainability is one of the principal elements that helps shape many of the shortlisted and premiated projects. Another example is the use of wind-assisted chimneys and retractable awnings in the Lycée Français Charles de Gaulle building in Damascus, Syria.

The specific attention given to craft, or rather the craft of making things, is not a mere consequence of dealing with conservation projects. In many parts of the Muslim world, the tools and techniques of construction have not kept pace with developments in other parts of the world. This has positive as well as negative consequences. The complexities and lack of industrialised building processes in many areas place more emphasis on small- and medium-scale operations for building construction. In some cases, conservation projects help keep certain techniques or crafts related to building construction alive. In many cases, the existing building acts as a palimpsest – a manual for how things were made in the past – and as a device for learning. The importance of this process should not be underestimated. The recovery of certain traditions provides the basis for new forms of knowledge that can be modified and used in other contexts in the future.
The contemporary apartment and retail building in the ancient town of Mahallat, Iran, is a modern edifice, one that would not be out of place in a European city. However, the use of recycled stone from a nearby quarry has resulted in the design of a building that combines contemporary design with an understanding of local materials. The architect used different colour stones of the same thickness to create a variegated stone facade. The contemporaneity of the project was balanced in the context of a conservative community through the use of local materials and the narrative of using “worthless” recycled stone. The construction and crafting of this building is at once modern and rooted. It is particular in ways that remind one of the site-specific Stone Walls of the British artist Andy Goldsworthy.

This cycle also sees an emphasis on the crucial topics of risk and resilience. This category can potentially include projects that deal with climate change to those that deal with the after-effects of earthquakes and tsunamis. It can also address the impact of human devastation, as is the case with the Nahr el-Bared Refugee Camp in Akkar, Lebanon. In this and other projects, the lines between risk mitigation, rebuilding and activism become blurred. In the case of the Camp, it would probably have been easier for the architects to build new shelters for the inhabitants. But, in their view, that would have returned the inhabitants to the status of living on a campsite. Instead, they opted for rebuilding on the ruins of the old camp and, in the process, incorporating its many layers of history and public spaces. Similarly, the refusal to build an emergency shelter is also evident in the Post-Tsunami Housing in Kirinda, Sri Lanka. Here the team emphasised their commitment to the community by designing and building houses that respond to the cultural needs of the users as well as to the climate and local materials. This approach departs from seeing architecture as neutral, devoid of local specificities and contingencies.

Each of the projects shortlisted or premiated by the 2013 Aga Khan Award for Architecture exhibits ideas that make a contribution to our understanding of what design can do. Each, in turn, also provides the framework – the infrastructure – for human activity. It is in the manner in which these activities or events have been inscribed, albeit implicitly, that the Award makes such a strong case for architecture as the setting for life, and hence the dictum and the title of this book, *Architecture Is Life*. 
REVITALISATION OF BIRZEIT HISTORIC CENTRE, PALESTINE
2013 AWARD RECIPIENT

REHABILITATION OF TABRIZ BAZAAR, IRAN